Aeschylus' *Oresteia*:
Dialectical Inheritance

Thus the act, once committed, passes into the structure of the world itself, leaves its traces . . . and returns to confront the second and third generations as an objective situation to which they are not free not to react.

—Fredric Jameson

*Marxism and Form*

The move from Pindar to Aeschylus takes us from a world of hegemonic oligarchs and tyrants to one recast by the invention of democracy, from the celebration of inherited excellence to the dissection of inherited evil, from the form of choral lyric to the form of tragedy and—even more decisive—of trilogy.

The Politics of the Tragic Form

We have seen that the invention of the epinician during the sixth century involved the transformation and adaptation of communal prayers celebrating gods and heroes into a form memorializing aristocratic athletic victors. The impulse for such a gesture was undoubtedly complex, but, as I have attempted to show, certainly the sense that the political and ideological hegemony of the aristocracy was in jeopardy was significant. Yet the overwhelming impression we get from the surviving visual and written evidence of the Archaic period (taking the term broadly) is of the successful domination of cultural forms by the aristocracy. Aristocratic values and lifestyle proclaim their hegemony in the commemorative statues of young men (*kouroi*), the vase paintings so dominated by scenes of symposia and heroic myth, the epics and lyrics that celebrate unique heroism in the past and loves and hates of aristocrats in the present. We have attempted to demonstrate how the alleged univocality of this tradition needs to be reevaluated, how the voices of potentially counterhegemonic elements—traders,
colonists, hoplites, women, and bards—emerge in some of these texts, how a growing self-consciousness about the constitutive power of text production itself opened a significant gap in the apparently seamless fabric of aristocratic hegemony. Nonetheless, it remains true that the tragedies of Aeschylus have struck many readers as the first and in some respects only surviving frontal assault on that hegemony. Without foreclosing the possibility that the impression of such readers is simply false, I wish to inquire into the conditions of possibility of the emergence of this new cultural form and explore its relation to the surviving texts of Aeschylus.

Tyranny, as I have argued in the preceding chapter, is best understood as a consequence of the hoplite revolution. Newly empowered peasants were able to assert their power only indirectly through a champion, who himself was usually of the aristocratic class, but was prepared to check the worst abuses of the aristocracy in the name of some newly broadened conception of the political community (the polis). It is no accident that we are best informed about the domestic policies of Peisistratos in Athens. He may have been typical or simply exemplary of the aristocrats’ worst fears. He unquestionably infringed on the juridical, economic, and political powers of the aristocracy to the advantage of peasants and the urban demos (Ath. Pol. 16, with Rhodes’s commentary ad loc.). But as Murray has pointed out, “In the age of the Peisistratidai, Athens was still a strongly aristocratic state” (1980: 253).

Tragedy arose in Athens from the uniquely imaginative struggle of the Peisistratids for hegemony on the cultural level (Else 1965: 49–50, 68–69; Andrewes 1956: 107–115). Why should a modest peasant ritual, devoted to a god who was either ignored or treated with condescension in aristocratic cultural productions (Guthrie 1954: 160) except in their exclusive symposia (Murray 1980: 199–200), become the most important state festival of Athens? Why in particular should it become the major vehicle for extending the influence of heroic, substantially aristocratic, myth? Any answer is at best a tissue of relatively fragile probabilities, but the question deserves at least as much serious attention as the exploration of the possible relevance of Chukchi sacrificial rituals of skull and thighbone offerings of Siberian hunters.  


2 This is not to dismiss much of the exciting use of anthropology in recent work on the origins of tragedy. But I note the profoundly ahistorical or antihistorical bias that informs much of this work. An example from one of the brightest of this group: “The tra-
In analyzing Peisistratid cultural policy, the contradictory character of the solution chosen suggests the specific dangers of the initial problem confronting Peisistratos. Solon’s achievement in ending debt-slavery and hekteme rage for Athenian peasants had serious long-term implications for relations between classes in Athens (Murray 1980: 173–91; Wood 1989: 93–101). It seems plausible that these measures, combined with political changes—especially a council (boule) independent of the aristocratic Areiopagos council—gave Athenian peasants a new and possibly unique sense of participation in the Athenian state and, for those who had land, a sense of independence profoundly linked with that ownership. At the same time, in the short run, bringing back to Attica ex-slaves who had lost their land and removing debts without a radical redivision of the land may well have exacerbated the sense of the gulf between rich and poor, particularly for the perhaps already numerous landless poor. The fact of Peisistratos’ two failed attempts at a tyranny before his final success certainly suggests that deep discontent remained. The fact that he succeeded only after gaining

dition of goat-sacrifice deserves to be taken seriously; it leads back into the depths of prehistoric human development, as well as into the center of tragedy. . . . It may be that the sublimation and transformation performed by the Greek poets are so fundamental as to reduce to nothingness any crude ‘origins.’ Or do the greatest poets only provide sublime expression of what already existed at the most primitive stages of human development? Human existence face to face with death—that is the kernel of tragoidia” (Burkert 1966: 121). This is the conclusion of Burkert’s article. Whatever the merits of his research—and it is impressive indeed—one consequence is to offer instant relevance at the price of a reductionism that collapses as merely adventitious the difference between primitive hunting bands, fifth-century Athens, and contemporary Western capitalist societies. I suggest that a different sort of relevance, no less important, requires a precise consideration of those differences. The use of anthropological arguments about the origin of tragedy in Girard 1977, with its crypto-religious apologetics, strikes me as far less worthy of serious consideration than Burkert’s. See the excellent critique of Girard by Suzuki, who concludes: “By claiming that acts of sacrifice and scapegoating are the crucial ‘things hidden since the beginning of the world’ and by purporting to reveal this secret, Girard’s theory implicitly allies itself with religious revelation, at the same time privileging Christianity as the one religion aware of this secret” (1989: 7).

3A major problem with E. M. Wood’s otherwise impressive analysis of property relations in democratic Athens is her almost exclusive focus on land-owning peasants, whom she regularly refers to as “the bulk of Athenian citizenry” (e.g., 1989: 138). Yet her own note 68 (193) cites with approval an estimate (from A. H. M. Jones 1957: 8–9, 76–83) that thetês constituted 66 percent of the citizen population in the early fifth century B.C. and about 57 percent in 322 B.C. Even granting with Jones that the 20-minae cutoff point for thetês implies that some owned five acres or less of land, this still constitutes a substantial proportion of land-poor citizens. Jones may be right that “the great majority, from rich landowners to peasants working a tiny allotment, derived most of their wealth from the land” (1957: 90), but both he and Wood seem in general to downplay those who rowed the ships—for the “Old Oligarch” the essence of the democracy (pseudo-Xenophon, Ath. Pol. 2). Most of the rowers may have owned a tiny plot; but given the extraordinary amount of campaigning at sea during most of the period from 480 to 404 B.C., one would like to know if a majority really supported themselves primarily by farming.
access to substantial new capital in Thrace (Ath. Pol. 15.2, with Rhodes’s commentary ad loc.) suggests the extent of the residual economic distress. Solon had articulated his attempted solution in essentially negative terms, to “check” or “restrain” (Solon 4.33–39, 9.5, 36.22, 37.6 West) both the aristocracy and the demos, eschewing, at least in the surviving fragments of his own account, any positive goal of a fundamental restructuring of society in favor of the demos. The only positive goal was to create a harmonious polis in which the class divisions were maintained with the minimum of friction.4 Thus, on the one hand, the quest for an effective counterbalance to aristocratic cultural hegemony seems to explain the elevation of a specifically peasant festival devoted to a god respected by the aristocracy only in their cups. Indeed, to the extent that Dionysos blurs all hierarchical distinctions, including those of class, he emerges as ideally suited to the goal of building a sense of communal solidarity between all classes.5 At the same time, one needs to explain the curious violation of the light-hearted, irreverent spirit associated with Dionysiac worship. The vast learning expended on the thesis that killing a goat (tragos) is inherently tragic significantly glosses over this problem. The addition of the satyr play and probably of comedy as well are probably best understood as concessions to the demos’ sense that the new form with all its heroic legends had nothing to do with Dionysos (Else 1965: 18, 80). To be sure, the choice and handling of those legends may, as has been argued, illustrate a concerted effort to stress sacrificial elements (Burkert 1966: 116–20). But the form and content of Greek tragedy as far as we can reconstruct it for the sixth century and know it from the fifth involve a significant departure from Dionysiac celebration.6

Else’s effort to understand the motive for this change by attempting to envision the affective dimensions of early tragedy is for me compelling. He raises the right question: what purposes are served by an art form that surrounds a single figure at the pinnacle of the social and political hierarchy with a chorus of ordinary citizens whose chief

4I do not question that the measures of both Solon and Peisistratos contributed to the development of democracy, but I do think it is important to stress that there is no evidence that either had any intention of altering fundamental property relations. As indicated earlier, I am persuaded by Murray 1980 and Wood 1989 that Solon in particular initiated both economic and political changes with decisive, if unforeseen, consequences. As Ste. Croix (1981: 96) points out, shifts on the political level can affect the economic relations between classes; democracy did so to the extent that it offered a partial defense against exploitation and even, through liturgies, achieved some generalized redistribution.

5Detienne 1979 has eloquently stated the case for Dionysos as transgression and scandal, but I am arguing here that his very liminality also made him a convenient figure to employ as social cement.

action is sympathizing with him at the moment of his downfall? The single power figure is presented in his most accessibly human aspects, when the vastness of his power seems least enviable. The chorus is bound to him on terms that suggest the undesirability of such power for "mere" mortals. Moreover, the dramatization of the heroic myths most cherished by the aristocracy in a form that insists on their general human relevance enhances the collapse of class frictions which emerges as the primary goal of Peisistratos' cultural politics. Indeed, it is perhaps not too much to say that the will to humanize, to universalize the sufferings specific to a ruling elite is the founding ideological gesture of the new tragic form. Failure to recognize this quest for the essentially human and universal as profoundly ideological lies at the core of most discussions of the politics of Greek tragedy (e.g., Macleod 1982: 131).

The addition of the second actor is seen by Else as simply facilitating the same goal. The second actor, he argues, would most often be a messenger whose capacity to bring information from outside would enable the interaction of king and chorus to pass through more emotionally engrossing stages as the true dimensions of his pathos become only gradually clear (Else 1965: 57, 86–87). Yet, even if we grant these advantages, the addition of another voice, by breaking the seamless dominance of discourse by the king figure, opens the possibility of a more critical distance toward the perspective of the ruler. It is surely not irrelevant then that this formal innovation is attributed to Aeschylus and occurs in a period after the fall of the Peisistratid tyranny. In the only purely two-actor tragedies we have (Aeschylus’ Persians, Suppliant Women, and Seven against Thebes) the second actor does more than bring decisive information from the world outside the ken of the chorus and ruler. In the Persians the messenger’s news constitutes the critical reality that gives the lie to the dazzling catalogue of Persian forces (16–57) and confirms the worst anxieties of chorus and queen. The ghost of Darius levels a scathing criticism of the absent ruler Xerxes. The messenger in the Seven against Thebes gives scope for Eteocles to demonstrate not only the general moral superiority of his cause but also the strain of madness that vitiates his leadership (Winnington-Ingram 1977: 7–13). In the Suppliant Women Danaos adds a male figure to support the position of the female chorus to which the king must react.

There is an undeniable element of circularity in this argument. In the absence of direct sixth-century evidence of Peisistratid intentions, we deduce them from scattered, debatable, later data; then, looking at the resulting configuration, we find a kind of confirmation of the initial speculation. Obviously one would prefer harder evidence. But I submit that there is at least as much plausibility to this thesis as to all those elaborate interpretations that ignore historical evidence in favor of anthropological parallels.
The messenger in the same play does engage in direct conflict with the king, the first *agon* of two individuals in extant drama.

But despite attempts to view the *agon* of two individuals as the essence of Greek tragedy (e.g., Girard 1977: esp. 44), Aeschylus rarely uses two actors in this way in the six plays securely attributed to him. More politically suggestive in the light of Else’s speculations about the Peisistratid form of tragedy is the fact that the agonistic element is overwhelmingly represented by the chorus in conflict with figures of authority—Eteocles, Pelasgos, Klytemnestra, Aigisthos, Apollo, Athena. We might tentatively conclude that the invention of the second actor amounted to an indirect subversion of the authoritarian pattern of a chorus dominated by their sovereign. By bringing new perspectives to bear on the pathos of the ruler, the second actor facilitated the transformation of the chorus, normally the representative of the demos, from a sympathetic appendage swept up in the suffering of the ruler to an oppositional voice, deferentially questioning or openly challenging the ruler’s version of reality. Conversely, the sympathizing role of the chorus could then be freely transferred, where appropriate, from the ruler to the ruler’s victims—Iphigenia, Cassandra, Orestes, and Electra.

The third actor, Sophokles’ invention according to Aristotle (*Poetics* 4.16–17), represents a shift in the conception of tragedy best examined in discussing Sophokles. In any case, as Knox (1979: 39–55) and others have pointed out, Aeschylus’ rare uses of this innovation exploit its shock value rather than its potential for dynamic individual confrontation. What is worth noticing here is that Sophokles’ shift in focus from the dynamic interaction of chorus (primarily as meditative singers-dancers) and powerful actors (primarily as speaker-agents in iambic trimeter) toward a dominant focus on interactions of increasingly isolated individuals represents a political shift as well as an artistic choice.

Ascribing the invention of the trilogy form to Aeschylus is a speculation of which one must say, *se non è vero, è ben trovato*. But recent scholarship seems generally less excited by the trilogy form than an earlier

---

8I am troubled by the arguments in Griffith 1977 against the authenticity of the *Prometheus Bound* but have not yet made up my mind. An impressive paper by Thomas Hubbard at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association (December 1990) seems to meet a key metrical argument of Griffith’s. I do not mean in any case to deny the great power of such scenes as the confrontation of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra or Pelasgos and the messenger. I wish here only to emphasize the relative rarity of such individual *agônes* in extant Aeschylean drama compared to the importance of confrontations between chorus and an individual. For an analysis of the theoretical role attributed to conflict in tragedy, see Gellrich 1988.

9Like most cliches, this one has a solid basis in experience but requires so much caution and qualification in application that nothing can be predicted about any particular play on the basis of it.
generation. The issue is ignored or encompassed in an ahistorical, idealist formula. Older, more sympathetic views of the trilogy are summarized in the most negative terms and denounced along lines that seem to leave little room for taking the trilogy form to imply anything relevant to the interpretation of the three dramas considered as a unity. One scholar suggests in passing that “the sense of balance... may have been a reason for Aeschylus’ apparent fondness for writing connected trilogies, where the reciprocal action and reaction of the first two plays could somehow be resolved in a final equilibrium in the third play” (Gagarin 1976: 59). But more characteristic of our historical moment is the open attack on views strongly associated with a progressive conception of the trilogy form. Thus Lloyd-Jones, for example, proclaims, “the cliché we have heard repeated all our lives, that the Eumenides depicts the transition from the vendetta to the rule of law, is utterly misleading” (1971: 94). This view is cited enthusiastically by another scholar as “forcefully” expressing his own “impatience” with the “nebulous allegorizing” he attributes to George Thomson (Vickers 1979: 435–36). A scholar who confines his lengthy discussion to a few lines of the Agamemnon nonetheless begins his study by donning armor to “combat the now popular imposition on Aeschylus of particular philosophies he did not hold (Hegelian historical optimism and a quasi-Christian regard for the redemptive powers of suffering)” (Peter Smith 1980: 9–10).

Although I have no stake in defending George Thomson at his worst or in shouldering the cross for a Christian reading of the Oresteia, I think it is quite inadequate to imply—as several modern scholars do—that it is simply naive to see any historical optimism in Aeschylus’ choice and handling of the trilogy form. The trilogy form insists on meaningful movement in time. The Septem, the final play of a trilogy, suggests that this movement was by no means necessarily such as to

10 As I suggested in my introduction, the work of George Thomson, especially Aeschylus and Athens, weighs painfully on anyone who would attempt today to convince readers of the classics that Marxism has a valuable contribution to make to the understanding of the literature of ancient Greece. His slavish adherence to the anthropology of Morgan—compelling at the time Engels embraced it, but dated and utterly misleading in the præcrustean form in which Thomson attempted to impose it on recalcitrant or nonexistent data—has done much to discredit Marxism. His readiness to find totemism, Orphism, or Pythagoreanism lurking behind every line has little indeed to do with Marx but has tended in the same direction. Finally, as Ste. Croix (1981: 41) has recently pointed out, Thomson’s interest in and knowledge of history were inadequate to his chosen path. Yet, when all is said and done, Thomson too deserves to be seen in his historical moment—a moment when the ferocious hostility of the Right tended to reinforce the dogmatism of the Left. His egregious errors should be weighed against his impressive learning, indefatigable humanism, and a few valuable insights not accidentally related to his study of Marx.
inspire optimism in any glib sense of the term; but it does imply a kind of historical judgment, which, as we see, is highly relevant to the more complex historical vision of the *Oresteia* (Winnington-Ingram 1977: 42–45).

The *Seven against Thebes*, when compared with the *Oresteia*, suggests that the trilogy form itself underwent an evolution. Its earlier manifestations seem to have been confined to working out a pattern of crime and punishment through three generations (cf. *Sept.* 742–44). The moral and theological interest of this theme is frequently posited as inherent and self-explanatory. Yet its political interest, especially in the light of Solon’s apparent role in articulating the theme (Lattimore 1947b: 174; Solmsen 1949: 107–23), merits some attention as well. To be sure, the generalizing tone of Solon—like virtually all Archaic poetry in the gnomic vein—offers propositions about the acquisition of wealth, divine punishment, self-delusion, and disaster which are potentially applicable to all human beings regardless of class or sex. But just as women are tacitly excluded from serious consideration, so in large measure are peasants and the urban poor.14 Solon does envision the possibility of upward mobility, but only as the correlative of the prosperous man falling “unawares into vast and grim disaster,” (13.67–70 West). He also praises himself for not giving too much to the demos lest they be corrupted by the moral pattern characteristic of the aristocracy (6; cf. 5.1–2 West). But the chief targets of his warnings about *hybris*, divine *dike* in the form of *ate*, are the scions of wealth and power. As Aristotle summed it up, “in general, he [Solon] attaches the blame for the conflict to the rich” (*Ath. Pol.* 5.3):

> Of Wealth no manifest limit is fixed among men:  
> For those of us now possessed of the greatest livelihood  
> Speed on with redoubled drive. Who could glut them all?  
> You see, it’s the immortal gods that grant profits to mortals:  
> But from profits arises the disastrous madness [*Ate*], whenever Zeus  
> Sends it as punishment; and now one, now another gets it.  
> (13.71–76 West)

Thus ends (presumably) the poem that offers at its outset dire warnings of punishment striking the unjustly rich suddenly like a violent storm (17–22). The fullest poetic force is committed to evoking this sudden and unexpected reversal of fortune for the criminals themselves. The doctrine of punishment visited on “their children, their

---

14Ste. Croix (1981: 129–30) notes that Solon 1.47–8 is the only reference we have from early Attica to the merchant and agricultural laborer.
children's children or their family thereafter" (31–32) seems tacked on—almost as a desperate afterthought to cover the manifest reality of the prosperity of the wicked. This much admired poem is too rarely related to Solon's more explicitly political indictments of the rich and powerful, whose arrogance threatens the destruction of the polis (4, 9; 33.5 West is especially interesting). To find the origin of tragedy and particularly Aeschylean trilogy in a Solonian meditation on the human condition without acknowledging that for Solon the human condition is perceived in eminently political and economic terms is to indulge in a kind of censorship (Else 1965: 34–38).

Although it is reasonable to assume that all Greeks, regardless of economic status, had a strong emotional involvement in their sons' prospects in life (concern for daughters is notoriously less obvious an inference; see Ste. Croix 1981: 101–3; Pomeroy 1975: esp. 69–70), it was the scions of the great aristocratic oikoi ("houses") who were most deeply committed to the whole ideology of inherited excellence and immortality won through continuity in the male line. Thus a doctrine that focused on the corruption inherent in wealth, that not only threatened the initial perpetrator of crimes with divine retribution but held out the prospect of disaster for his progeny, constituted a fundamental ideological attack on the aristocracy. A dramatic form that applies that doctrine to the body of myth from which the aristocracy in general and Pindar in particular draw the chief cultural support for its exalted status contains a distinctly anti-aristocratic bias. Thus, for example, a trilogy that presents the crime of Laios as a clear-cut choice of self-indulgence over the interest of the polis (Sept. 746–51), presents the crime of Oedipus as a madness (paranoia) stirring up a sea of troubles that threatens to engulf the polis (Sept. 756–61), and finally suggests that the strain of inherited madness in Eteocles threatens to vitiate all his admirable patriotic efforts and inspires fear "lest the polis perish along with its princes" (Sept. 764–65) is eminently political—whatever its other interests. Winnington-Ingram characterizes the politics here:

If Aeschylus dramatized the salvation of a city which had been endangered by a genos, he could have had in mind a political process which had been carried to completion in his own lifetime. It had been a result, if not a purpose, of the constitutional reforms of Cleisthenes to disembarrass the political life of the city-state from the dangerous influence of the gene, the clans, with their loyalties and rivalries and feuds. The clans were an archaic element in the body-politic, deeply rooted in an earlier world and in its standards of value, inimical to the order of the polis and menacing its security. The Theban legend may have offered Aeschylus the opportunity of dramatizing this process of disentanglement. . . . The genos, an archaic
relic—a family of dynasts preoccupied with their wealth and privileges—endangered the state. (1977: 43)

In the context of the decisive changes wrought by democracy in the relations between aristocrats and the demos, the trilogy form implies a historical judgment—that the period during which the so-called heroes dominated societies was not a golden age meriting universal veneration but a bad time for the people at large, one that cried out—even as Solon cried out—for fundamental institutional change.12

**Aeschylean Dialectics**

The *Oresteia* is our only complete trilogy, but it appears from at least some of the more plausibly linked titles of lost trilogies that it was not the only trilogy to step beyond an implicit indictment of aristocratic rule. The combination of the *Judgment of the Armor*, the *Thracian Women*, and the *Salaminian Women* (Lloyd-Jones 1963: 456; Jebb 1962: 7: 19–23) suggests that dramatization of the heroic world of Ajax moved on to envision the creation of a new society in Cyprus under the leadership of the bastard Teucer. The *Danaid* trilogy, which like the *Oresteia* seems to have entailed a tyranny in the second play (Zeitlin 1990: 106 and n. 8), culminates in a marriage symbolizing a new dynasty. Given the probable date of 463 and the often-noted strong indications of democracy in the extant first play, it seems quite probable that this new order would have had far more the aura of a new political constitution than simply a purified monarchy. I hesitate to ascribe the Prometheus trilogy to Aeschylus, but (pace Lloyd-Jones 1971: 95–103) the surviving play suggests how prevalent notions of human progress had become at a time certainly not far later than Aeschylus’ death.13 If it is in

---

12Zeitlin rightly describes both the *Seven against Thebes* and the *Suppliants* as “centering on the problematic which is fundamental to Aeschylean thought and dramaturgy: namely the interrelationships of the *genos* . . . and the *polis*” (1990: 104) but defines the *genos* in completely apolitical terms as “family of origin, family of procreation.” Although I agree that in the conflict of the sexes Aeschylus’ trilogies move “towards modification, moderation, and forms of compromise or alliance” (103), I think his sense of the class menace of the specifically aristocratic genos to the polis is more accurately described by Winnington-Ingram.

13Griffith (1977: 252) concludes almost grudgingly that “the balance of probabilities continues to favor the traditional theory of a Prometheus-trilogy.” He seems to prefer a date vaguely in the mid-fifth century but eschews as presumptuous any attempt to be more specific in dating the play before or after 440 B.C. (253). Dodds (1973: 5) defends an Aeschylean date for this view of progress along the same lines as Reinhardt (1949: 50–53), stressing the differences from explicitly sophistic versions of evolution. Moreover, Dodds subsequently uses the *Oresteia* as a basis for defending the evolutionary thrust of the *Prometheia* (1973: 43).
fact the last extant representative of the trilogy form, it implies that
the inner dynamic of that form lies in the movement from negation of
the old order to celebration of the new. Yet the very darkness of the
Prometheus should warn us to expect no naive, uncritical endorsement
of any order. The form qua form seems to insist only on meaningful
movement in time, a movement away from the simple violence of the
past. But whether the new order can or will realize its potential
“progress” may be a very open question.

Friedrich Solmsen long ago (1949: 126–31; see also Clay 1969) sug­
gested that the peculiar dialectic of the trilogy form manifested in the
Oresteia presupposes neither Hegel nor Marx but is available full-blown
in Hesiod’s Theogony. The forward thrust of the evolution of the cos­
mos from chaos to the reign of Zeus is envisioned as a dialectic of crime
and punishment rooted in the familial conflict of mother and son pit­
ted against father. The threat of a perpetual round of new crime and
new punishment is insisted on in Gaia’s creation of Typhoeus (Th.
820–22), in Mētis’s projected male offspring (Th. 897–98), and in
Hera’s less than satisfactory efforts at retaliatory parthenogenesis (Th.
927–29).14 The movement from chaos to the realm of Zeus is pre­
sented as comprehensive, qualitative progress from the raw brutality of
castration perpetrated by a mother-dominated son to a socially and po­
litically advanced realm symbolized primarily by the subservient
daughters of the all-powerful father: Athena, Eunomie (“Well-
Ordered Community”), Dikē (“Justice”), Eirēnē (“Peace”), and the Moi­
rai (“Fates”), “who grant to mortal men the winning of both good and
ill” (Th. 895–906; Solmsen 1949: esp. 34). The massive progress is di­
ialectical to the extent that it is not simply incremental; the movement
from castration of the father to ingestion of the children scarcely seems
promising, much less straightforward progress, yet it functions as an
essential move toward the ascendency of Zeus.

The forward thrust displays an inner logic of act and counteract in
which the stakes are both sexual and political. To win kingship is also to
win sexual potency. The resolution of the conflict in the third phase is
correspondingly both sexual and political. The female element, de­
 fined as generative and mental by the terms of the poem, is no longer
simply repressed but literally incorporated into the new order by the
ingestion of Mētis (“Cunning Intelligence”) and the extraordinary sta­
tus granted Athena. At the same time, Zeus’s new sons are all firmly
allies. The new politics of Zeus combines persuasion and cooptation
with the old final reliance on brute force. Symbolic representations of

14West rejects everything after line 900 as not part of Hesiod’s poem, but the mythic
patterns were surely known in the fifth century and associated with the Hesiodic version
of the succession story.
the hyperbolic violence of the old order, the Hundred-handers, are won over to the new regime and given a new function as prison guards, that is, as guarantors of the permanence of the victory (Brown 1953: 1–48). Moreover, the defeated figures of the old order remain part of and to some extent efficacious in the new order: Ouranos is still the sky and Typhoeus produces certain baneful winds (Th. 869–80).

In the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus adapts the Hesiodic structure to a complex vision of the working out of historical change on the political and sexual levels. The *Agamemnon* fuses together a vague image of Homeric kingship with a sharply focused analysis of aristocracy—dominance of political life by the great *oikoi*, who transmit their power through inheritance. This regime is characterized as a world in which male crimes against children and women provoke an attempted usurpation by a dominant female, remarkable for her cunning intelligence, allied with a subservient male of the younger generation. The *Libation Bearers* explores the grim world of tyranny, in which intimidation and repression breed a second round of intrigue and assassination. On the sexual level, Aeschylus in a sense departs from the Hesiodic pattern insofar as the son and daughter here are already allied with the father against the mother and her young consort as in the realm of Zeus. To this extent, Aeschylus anticipates a crucial feature of the new order in the second phase, having already used the Hesiodic motif of child murder and ingestion in his first movement through the allusions to Thyestes' banquet and the murder of Iphigeneia (Clay 1969: 4). But in another sense, Aeschylus has tightened the dialectical character of the movement by, in effect, offering homologous permutations of the familial triangles exhibited in the first play (cf. Caldwell 1970: 88–91). In the *Agamemnon* a father treats his daughter with ultimate hostility and is the object of hostility from the mother, who proclaims herself the ally (sc. the avenger) of the daughter. The mother effects her revenge by allying herself with someone of her son's generation—someone who, like her son, has grown up in exile—against the father Agamemnon. In the *Libation Bearers* we find in effect an alliance of son and daughter with the (dead) father against the living mother. The reversals may not fit our conception of progress; they are in a sense only alternative options in a family structure still conceived as the locus of violent hostility. Yet they echo the alliances of Zeus with Athena and Apollo as guarantors of the stability of the new regime of patriarchy at the same time.

Zeitlin 1978 covers much of the same ground in relation to Aeschylus' sexual politics, which I treat below. Here I am concerned primarily to demonstrate that the trilogy form as the vehicle for a progressive vision of cultural history has thoroughly Greek roots in Hesiod and that Aeschylus took full cognizance of these roots in his own handling of the form in the *Oresteia*. 
as they offer dramatic symmetry with the first play. In the third play, a
resolution is effected by what emerges as an alliance of a son figure
(Orestes) with an affect-free father figure (Apollo) and a completely
desexualized mother figure (Athena) against the collective representa­
tives of the evil aspect of the mother (the Erinyes). These in turn are
transformed by democratic persuasion into representatives of the good
(fertile, nurturing) aspect of the mother (the Eumenides).

The *Eumenides* invokes as the final political stage of history Athenian
democracy, characterized by courts of law and secret ballots of anonymous citizens. On the sexual plane, Hesiod’s own solution, to the extent
that it is represented by Athena, is the central vehicle of such resolution
as is achieved in the *Oresteia*. The incorporation through Athena’s
effective persuasion of the female and potentially threatening represen­
tatives of the old order, the Furies, parallels the cooptation in Hesiod of the Hundred-handers, whose function as guardians of the
achieved victory is analogous to the role of the Eumenides (“Kindly In­
tentioned Ones”) in preventing future *stasis* (civil discord, revolution,
factionalism) in Athens and fostering the fertility of the community.

In this rapid overview of the *Oresteia*, my limited purpose has been to
demonstrate that perceiving in the trilogy form a dialectical vision of
comprehensive, essentially positive change is not an alien imposition
on the text of Aeschylus but a plausible reading of his chosen form and
his specific, creative use of the Hesiodic model. Such a demonstration
does not foreclose exploration of areas of profound ambivalence in
the image of Athens that emerges from the trilogy as a whole. In­
deed, I believe that it opens the possibility of such an analysis on a
surer basis than glib attempts to exorcise the notions of progress and
dialectic from the text entirely. Whether the vision embedded in the
form entails a fully utopian critique or simply endorses the status
quo is another question, which I address more systematically when
my analysis is complete. But this question is in some sense present at
every step.

**Justice and Aeschylus’ Presentation of Class**

In the preceding discussion I have all but ignored the central feature
of most discussions of the trilogy form in the *Oresteia*, namely, justice.
*Dikē* is one of the first consequences and primary attributes of Zeus’s
victory in the *Theogony*, but it is at best an implicit issue in the earlier
phase of the three-stage movement of the kingship-in-heaven narra­
tive. More accurately, there is an implicit movement from raw revenge
(*teismaetha lōbēn*, Th. 165; *tisin* 210) to something like due process in the
realm of Zeus. In the Oresteia the issue of dikē—what it means to whom, what relation it bears if any to the structure of reality—is pressed to the forefront from virtually the first lines to the last lines of the trilogy. Yet the analysis of the issue of justice must be subordinated to the analysis of the political and sexual levels precisely because Aeschylus himself presents justice as a function of the political/sexual regime. Just as the kind of justice illustrated in the third play is intimately linked with the presentation of a specific image of Athenian democracy, so the kind of justice explored in the first two plays emerges as the consequence of the aristocratic, monarchic, and tyrannical forms of government, which in turn are also forms of gender politics.

The relativity of justice, the idea that it differs according to the nature of the political regime, is probably first made explicit by Plato's Thrasymachos (Rep. 338e1-3). Yet the concept is present in germ form in Hesiod's juxtaposition of his own divine conception of dikē to the dikē of the "gift-gobbling basilees" (Works and Days, 39) of his home town (Wood 1989: 167). The idea is more clearly implicit throughout Herodotus' wide-ranging meditation on differing nomoi ("customs/laws"). It has been plausibly argued that a confrontation between the notions of dikē imbedded in the traditions of heroic myth and the specific institutions of democratic Athens is built in to fifth-century tragedy (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988: 25–28). I believe such a self-conscious confrontation is fundamental to an understanding of the Oresteia.

In arguing that the trilogy represents different regimes of dikē in terms of a consistent conception of social and political class, I am most indebted to the work of non-Marxists Bernard Knox, John Peradotto, and R. P. Winnington-Ingram. John Jones's attack many years ago (1962; cf. Rosenmeyer 1982: 211–55) on the modern tendency to project uniquely conceived, fully rounded, individual characters onto the protagonists of Aeschylus merits transcoding into the language of ideology. The major obstacle to perceiving justice in class terms in the Oresteia is a contemporary class ideology focused on the fantasy of the fully formed, autonomous individual as the monadic starting point of any social aggregate. Indeed, on such terms society can only be conceived literally as an aggregate or conglomerate.

Thus, in the case of the Agamemnon most discussions of the issue of justice amount to a debate over free will versus determinism focused

---

16 Compare West's commentary at 902 apropos of Eunomien: "It implies not so much having good laws, as a condition in which the laws are observed."
17 Here I acknowledge my admiration for the rigor and subtlety of Goldhill's demonstration (1984) of the relentless focus on the "uncontrollable polysemy" (164) not only of dikē but of virtually every key term in the text. What I miss in his study is any sense of the historicity of this amply dissected crisis of meaning.
solely on the individuals Agamemnon and Klytemnestra. Indeed, one scholar has not implausibly suggested that one could predict most scholars’ entire view of the trilogy on the basis of their interpretation of the issue of Agamemnon’s guilt in the first parodos (Peradotto 1969: 237). Vernant has raised some compelling reservations about conceiving the issue in such terms at that particular moment in Greek history (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988: 49–84), and I believe that to discuss the issue of justice exclusively in terms of individual choice is to project a purely individualist question onto a problematic that is conceived and explored far more in terms of the behavior of a class vis-à-vis the rest of the community. But beyond the problem of our own possible historical biases, the very success of Aeschylus in creating vividly differentiated, memorable characters—one thinks especially of Agamemnon and Klytemnestra—has tended to obscure the strong generalizing thrust in the poet’s presentation of the drama of Argos and Troy. I would argue only that, like individualization in Homer, the uniqueness of Agamemnon or Klytemnestra emerges within the clear parameters of a limited set of typical textual elements juxtaposed, varied in intensity, and ingeniously combined.

The Lion Parable

The clearest proof of the self-conscious nature of Aeschylus’ generalization of aristocratic character and the best introduction to the methods by which it is achieved is the parable of the lion cub, so brilliantly analyzed by Knox (1952: 27–38).

18 A full doxography here is probably both unnecessary and impossible to achieve. I list some of the discussions with which I am familiar beyond those embedded in the commentaries of Denniston and Page 1957 and Fraenkel 1950; Reeves 1960, Lloyd-Jones 1962, Hammond 1965, Lesky 1966a, Peradotto 1969, Winnington-Ingram 1974, Mark Edwards 1977, and Goldhill 1984: esp. 29–33. I hope it is superfluous to add that, despite my feeling that the issue is generally conceived too narrowly by these scholars, I am still much in their debt for exploring issues of great complexity which are absolutely central to an understanding of the trilogy as a whole.

19 Easterling 1973, Vickers 1979, Winnington-Ingram 1948 and 1974: esp. 15 n. 15, and Goldhill 1984: esp. 69–74 in varying ways offer valuable qualifications to the rather mechanical efforts in J. Jones 1962 and Dawe 1963 to deny psychologically rich characterization in Aeschylus. Rosenmey er, who in general seems closer to Jones, writes disarmingly, “I hasten to confess that Klytemnestra seems to me to constitute an important exception to the standard for which we have been arguing” (1982: 235). Michelini restates and argues vigorously for Jones’s emphasis on the “moral and social norm” as determinant of dramatic character in the case of “some quite abnormal and even monstrous figures,” that is, Klytemnestra and the Erinyes (1979: 154). Focusing exclusively on these characters’ change of heart, she makes a strong case; but she says nothing of the sexual issue, where her model of gestalt psychology is less compelling.

20 Despite the strong influence of Knox’s article on my perception—long before I had made any serious study of Marx—of the Agamemnon as presenting a general indictment
story of the lion-cub is an exemplar for the trilogy as a whole” (Lebeck 1971: 51). Though the parable is introduced ostensibly as a metaphor for Helen, it implies a comprehensive statement about Agamemnon, Klytemnestra, Aigisthos, Menelaos, Paris, Helen, and even Orestes.²¹

A man once raised the son [inin] of a lion
    in his house. It was deprived of milk
    and loved the breast.
In life’s preludes it was
Gentle, adoring the children²²
And a source of delight to the older folk.
Many times one held it in the crook of his arm
Like a newborn child,
Its face bright as it fawned on his hand,
    through the belly’s necessities.

Passing through time [chronistheis] he showed forth
    the character [ethos] he had from his parents: For returning
the favor to those that nurtured him,
Unbidden, he fashioned a feast
Amid the madness [atais] of sheep slaughter.
The household [oikos] was defiled with blood,
An agony for the house dwellers they could not fight,
A great bane full of slaughter:
From god some butcher-priest of Madness [Atas]
    was reared as well in the house.

(Ag. 717–36)

The generalizing of this paradigm is achieved most obviously by the application of the lion image itself to different characters. The prophecy of Kalkhas, reported by the chorus, sees the two Atreidai, “twins in their temperament,” in the omen as the “battle-prone devourers of the [pregnant] hare” (Ag. 123–24). The emphatic first word quoted of his prophecy, “In Time” (chronōi, 126), associates their expedition with the force that reveals the true brutality of the lion cub. The seer in turn presents the goddess Artemis as kindly disposed toward the young of “raging lions” (141) in terms that seem to refer back to the Atreidai. On

of a whole class, Knox himself stops short of using the term “class” and would, I suspect, object to it. A parallel analysis of the motif of corrupted sacrifice (Zeitlin 1965) is full of useful insights but similarly ignores their political implications.

²¹Vickers’ attempt (1979: 404) to exclude Orestes from the category of “lion cubs” ignores the precision of the verbal fit between Orestes’ situation and that of the other “cubs” so clearly demonstrated by Knox. That Orestes is also quite different is not at all precluded by Knox’s analysis and is cogently demonstrated in Peradotto 1969: 258–61.

²²Knox (1979: 32 and n. 18) points out that the epithet euphilopaida is awkward of the lion and therefore often translated as “by the children loved.” But the “force of the verb in compounds of this type is generally active, and applied to Agamemnon the adjective bears its proper meaning and produces a savagely ironical effect.”
his arrival, Agamemnon himself proudly describes his triumph over Troy through this metaphor: “The lion that eats raw flesh, leaping over the tower, / Lapped up his fill of tyrants’ blood” (827–28). Cassandra in the throes of her prophesy ironically designates Aigisthos as the “strengthless lion” (1224). Subsequently, in lyric outburst, she expands the image to include both Klytemnestra and Agamemnon:

She herself, the two-footed lioness that sleeps with
A wolf in the absence of the well-born [eugenous] lion
Will kill me—poor creature that I am.

(1258–60)

In the Libation Bearers the chorus triumphantly associates the return of Orestes with Pylades to the ancestral home by linking it in strict parallel with the time-governed process that brought justice to the clan of the Primidai:

There came Justice to the Priamidai in time [chronoi],
A punishment heavy with justice.
There came to the house of Agamemnon
The twofold lion, the twofold Ares.

(Ch. [Choephorae, i.e. Libation Bearers] 935–38)

Knox (1979: 30–31), following Headlam, suggests that the impetus for this particular image came from the specific heraldic emblem of the royal family of Mycenae—still so impressive on the great monolithic lintel of the lion gate. What is indisputably clear in the language of this short parable is the redundant emphasis on words that evoke the family nexus in terms of offspring (inin, euphilopaida, teknou), nurture (ethrepsen, agalakton, philomaston, neotrophou, gastros anankais, tropeusin, daït, prosethrephthê,) and parents (leontos inin, tokeôn). Knox (1979: 27) also argues that the word proteleios (“preliminaries,” or “preludes”) strongly suggests “ceremonies previous to the consummation of marriage” and notes its striking metaphoric usage elsewhere in the play (Ag. 65–66). The central point of the parable is the inherited character (êthos) of the lion manifesting its intolerable brutality despite the generous nurture it received from those who are not of the same species. A rich variety of echoed phrases link all the major characters with the language of this parable: the language of Aeschylus shares with the language of Pindar a primary reliance on clusters of repeated images and phrases to convey its most pressing meanings.23

23Vickers’s (1979: 426) complaint about Lebeck’s exclusive focus on language, though not without some justification if one looks to the sorts of considerations raised by Taplin (1977), takes no account of the ways language works differently in different types of poetry and in different eras (see J. H. Finley 1955: 10–11; Zeitlin 1965: 463, 488–89).
There is no need, however, to spell out what Knox has so masterfully presented. Instead, I stress an implication of the parable that clarifies another crucial aspect of Aeschylus' presentation of class: that the very notion of class is inherently relational; no class exists as such except by virtue of its antagonistic relation to another class or classes. The broad implications of the lion cub parable fit the general portrayal in the plays of the relations between these aristocratic rulers and the demos of their respective communities. There is an implicit presentation of these mythic figures as representatives of a class—a class the demos supports ("nourishes"), finds initially dazzling and endearing, but in time, after suffering horrible losses at its hands, comes to recognize as unalterably savage by birth. Helen’s lionlike betrayal—the explicit point of departure for the parable—imposes "many limb-wearying wrestlings . . . on Danaans and Trojans alike" (Ag. 62–67; cf. 737–49). Menelaos’ and Agamemnon’s "lionlike" triumph over Troy is most explicitly achieved at terrible cost to the demos of Argos (428–60). The vengeance exacted by the "two-footed lioness" Klytemnestra and her "strengthless lion" lover Aigisthos is purchased at the price of tyranny imposed on the demos (1354–55). Even the salvation wrought by the "twofold" lion Orestes appears to the chorus ultimately as a potential disaster: "or should I call him a Doom [moron]?" (Ch. 1074). 

Taplin, whose work constitutes a salutary corrective to an exclusive focus on purely verbal elements, nonetheless rightly supports the view that all significant visual action is always indicated by words in the text (29–36). One almost shudders to think what Vickers would make of Goldhill’s (1984) close focus on the play of language in terms that significantly challenge the assumed clarity of the visual signs. Yet Goldhill in particular points the way toward a basis for understanding how Aeschylus’ language differs from Pindar’s: in Aeschylus the rich array of echoes and associations is shot through with ironies and ambiguities that seem more directed toward provoking anxiety than the delight of recognition. Though Goldhill seems to reject categorically any movement toward even relative clarity as posited by Lebeck, his approach, when combined with those that trace the characteristic movement of Aeschylean images from a maximum of ambivalence and perversity to a maximum of clarity and sweetness (e.g., Lattimore 1953: 15–25; Macleod 1982), can take us far in grasping the historical specificity of Aeschylus’ trilologic poetry.

The point is ably stressed by Ste. Croix (1981: esp. 43). What may strike some readers as heretical in my analysis is that I attribute some implicit recognition and use of this conception of class to Aeschylus. The major theme of Ste. Croix’s massive tome is to demonstrate both the validity of class struggle as an analytic concept in the study of ancient Greek society and, concomitantly, the compatibility of such an approach with the way the Greeks tended to view their own society.

The attempt to see the parable as a meditation focused exclusively on one particularly gruesome family, or more generally to see the trilogy as concerned with one “specific human case” (Vickers 1979: 425), breaks down because Aeschylus’ heavy use of poetic associations pushes us toward generalizing the pattern. I find particularly misleading in this connection an Aristotelian approach to the oikos which argues that "the Polis is but the family writ large" (Kitto 1956: 56; followed by Gagarin 1976: 58). There is a subtler distortion involved, I believe, in generalizing Aeschylus’ analysis of the dynamics of the heroic aristocratic families as typical of all Greek/Athenian families. As
The Constitutions

The fundamental shifts in forms of political organization during the Archaic period sparked an increasingly conscious interest that culminated ultimately in the fourth century B.C. in Aristotle's collections of *politeiai*, a word somewhat confusingly translated as "constitutions" but not necessarily implying anything more sharply focused than the so-called British constitution. Given the centrality to the *Oresteia* of the issue of forms of government, a brief excursus is in order on Aeschylus' and presumably much of his audience's conception of political constitutions. For a modern reader, there is a confusingly easy slippage in the text between language that evokes government by inherited monarchy (*basileu*, Ag. 783), oligarchic government by scions of the great *oikoi* (as in the plural patronymics *Atreidai*, e.g.: Ag. 3, 124, 310, and *Priamidai*, Ag. 747 and Ch. 935), and government by usurpers (*tyrannidios*, Ag. 1355). At times the text sharply marks the regime of Aigisthos and Klytemnestra as a true tyranny in contradistinction to the legitimate monarchy of Agamemnon (esp. 1355, 1633–52), but the term *turrannikos* is used by Agamemnon of the royal blood his lion expedition has lapped up (828). Throughout most of the *Agamemnon* the political focus is on the *oikos* itself, which is personified from virtually the opening lines and emerges as a central character (e.g., Gagarin 1976: 58). This focus tends to blur the apparently Homeric kingship of Agamemnon into the more collective oligarchy that characterized so much of the Archaic and Classical periods.

While differing dramatic and political purposes may lead Aeschylus to stress the differences between these forms from time to time, fifth-century audiences would be comfortable with the slippage I allude to above because they were so aware of the broad similarities between monarchy, tyranny, and oligarchy: all three concentrated great wealth and arbitrary power in the hands of individuals, fostered a certain mentality, and were prone to exploit and oppress the demos. Thus, in the debate on constitutions incorporated by Herodotus into his account of the rise of Darius, the attempt by one speaker to differentiate sharply between aristocracy, democracy, and monarchy is met by the argument that the endemic contentiousness and oppressiveness of oligarchs leads inevitably to the demos' choosing a protector, who then

---

Lacey points out, "poorer citizens would not be likely to belong to this sort [the pre-Kleisthentic, more aristocratic] of *oikos*, nor would other citizens who owned no real estate" (1968: 94). In the *Oresteia*, what is juxtaposed to the aristocratic *oikos* is the demos. As Dodds noted with marked understatement, "references to the demos are more frequent than we expect in a Mycenaean monarchy" (1960: 20; see also Podlecki 1986: 77–78). These insistent references belie a simple fusion of the ruling *oikos* with the inhabitants of the polis at large.
becomes monarch—in this context indistinguishable from a tyrant (Herodotus 3.81–82). Given the Athenians’ experience of embittering oppression by the collective rule of the sons of Peisistratos and their near extinction by the great king of Persia, all monarchs are perceived as bad—even if they arise in response to the intolerable acts of oligarchs. Moreover, the continuing power of the great aristocratic oikoi under Peisistratos, noted above, and under the democracy itself may have contributed to this slippage.

The Oikos of the Atreidai as Emblem of the Aristocracy

As noted above, an important study of the Oresteia has suggested that the pervasive focus on the oikos of the Atreidai constitutes that oikos as the analogue of the polis itself (Gagarin 1976: 58). Although this does seem one possible implication of the use of oikos in the lion parable, I have already suggested some of the ways that the text of the trilogy as a whole insists on an inherent antagonism between the behavior of the aristocratic oikos and the interests of the polis and demos. The watchman and chorus may express their affection for and sense of dependence on the legitimate head of the oikos, but the course of events reveals a basic conflict of interests. Here I am concerned to show that the same evidence that establishes the oikos as a character in the drama also establishes it as the emblem of aristocratic rule in general, a form of government characterized by the transmission of power and wealth through inheritance by kinship groups.

The recurrent parallels with the ruling house of Troy guarantee the broader political significance of rule by oikoi. We naturally hear more of the Atreidai (I count fourteen references), the Tantalidai (Ag. 1468), the Pleisthenidai (Ag. 1569, cf. 1603), and the Pelopidai (Ag. 1600). Indeed, there seems to be more than variatio at work in this broadening of focus for the ruling element in Greece. We have encountered the Aleuadai in Pindar. Aeschylus’ audience was all too familiar with the Peisistratidai, knew the horror tales of the Corinthian Bakkhiadai, probably had heard something of the Penthilidai of Mitilene, and no doubt felt varying degrees of ambivalence toward their own Alkmemonidai and Philiadai (Murray 1980: 132–52; Davies 1971; xvii–xxxi and endcharts). Such an audience was certainly capable of taking in the parallel between the Atreidai and the Priamidai (Ag. 537, 747; Ch. 935). In fact, this parallel is made categorically explicit in the Libation Bearers by the use of men-de:

There came, on the one hand [men], Justice [Dikē] to the Priamidai in time, A punishment heavy with Justice [barudikos].
There came, on the other hand [de], to the house of Agamemnon
A twofold lion, the twofold Ares [i.e., war, destruction].

(Ch. 935–38)

In the case of the Atreidai, a major poetic motif, noted above in passing, is the all-pervasive personification of the house itself. This repeatedly reinforces the sense of the corporate identity of the clan, regardless of the term used to designate it. The royal house, as a physical object represented in the scene before the audience, is an ever-present symbol of all the Atreidai which tends to efface individual differences between its occupants. Because oikos was the commonest Greek word for a dwelling and by metaphoric extension the commonest word for family, especially the aristocratic family, once the audience perceives the political unit of the Atreidai as synonymous with their dwelling this perception extends to the text's deployment of virtually every available Greek word for house (domos, domata, edethla, melathra, etc.). The cumulative impact of this visual and verbal assault, which begins in the watchman's speech ("the house itself, if it could find a voice," Ag. 37) and extends through the Libation Bearers, is to stress the priority and dominance of the institution of the ruling family over any particular member of the family. In the language of the first two plays, the personified house soon becomes synonymous with its "devious housekeeper, the remembering Wrath, exacting punishment for children" (Ag. 155). It is this Wrath that emerges as the real source of Artemis' demand for "some second lawless sacrifice not to be eaten, a builder of feuds . . . born in the house and grown one with it" (sumphoton, 151). The Wrath is one with the "Strife mastered by strife in the house" (E里斯 epidmatos, 1460–61), which in turn is described as the "daimon of the race" (1476–77) and indistinguishable from the chorus of Erinyes "bred in the race" (1190, with Fraenkel, ad loc.). Given the parallels cited above of other such oikoi, the indictment of the house of the Atreidai implies a general judgment extending to a whole class of oligarchs. The generalizing thrust of Aeschylus' portrait of aristocratic rulers is thus an integral aspect of the text, especially of the Agamemnon.

The Content and Ambiance of the Aristocratic Ethos

Implicit in the lion cub parable and embedded in the text of the first play's treatment of all the scions of great houses is a generalizing nexus

---

26Here I use Fraenkel's precise rendering, ad loc. I hope it is clear that I side with those scholars who view Artemis' demand not as an external determinism but as a symbolic representation and reenactment of the criminal proclivities of the house of Atreus as a whole (Peradotto 1969: 256; Vickers 1979: 351–57).

27See Fraenkel, ad loc., who rightly insists on some sort of etymological play here.
of images and associated ideas that cumulatively constitute a portrait of the ruling-class character—either a *lêma* or an *êthos* (Peradotto 1969) and the social and economic institutions that sustain it. Implicit in this portrait is an analysis and critique of the ruling class and the forms of justice associated with them. The broad outlines of this aristocratic type are familiar from Homer; there are many senses in which Aeschylus' plays may be dubbed “slices from the great banquet of Homer” (Athenaeus 8.347e). In Aeschylus, however, the elements of critique, of ambivalence toward that type found already in Homer are updated to a specifically fifth-century psychological and social analysis that amounts to radical repudiation of values imbedded in the old oral formulas.

The hallmark of Aeschylus’ presentation of the aristocratic type is his relentless focus on the dialectical interaction of material circumstances, psychology, and social practice. Fifth-century medical writers are usually given credit for first exploring the interface of climatological factors and personality (e.g., “Airs, Waters, Places,” *Hippocrates I*, Loeb). Herodotus readily comes to mind for extending these insights to an overarching concern with the role of relative poverty and wealth in affecting individual personality and general behavior in different societies (Immerwahr 1966: esp. 153–61). But the germ of this approach is already present in what may be conventional wisdom in Solon: “For abundance begets violence, whenever much wealth attends / Upon men whose minds are not fit” (*tiktei gar koros hubrin, hotan polus olbos hepētai / anthrōpois hoposois mē noos artios eĩ*, 6.3–4 West). A formulation that seems initially to posit a straightforward causal relation between wealth and criminal behavior (“abundance begets violence”) proceeds to complicate the picture considerably by invoking a prior mental configuration unsuited to handle prosperity. Violence then results from the conjunction of the inadequate mind and the excess of wealth.  

Allusions to wealth are so frequent in the *Agamemnon* that the poet’s own text might be dubbed *chrysopasta* (“gold-bespangled”). The text insistently associates virtually all the major characters with the corruption of wealth and luxury. This imagery is reinforced by the repetition throughout the play of explicit general comments on the deleterious impact of riches. Klytemnestra first attracts the attention of the chorus by the wealth of her offerings of “kingly sacrificial oil from the royal treasury” (*Ag.* 96). To Klytemnestra is given perhaps the trilogy’s most arrogant expression of confidence in inexhaustible wealth:

---

28 This interpretation accords nicely with Solon’s expression of his personal wish for wealth without injustice (13.7–8 West).

29 The word *basileioi* (kingly, royal) by its position not only modifies *pelaniōi* (sacrificial mixture of honey and oil or blood to feed the recipient) but strongly colors *muchothen* (from the innermost portion of the house); see Fraenkel, ad loc.
The sea is there. Who shall drain it dry? . . .
There is, my lord, a house\textsuperscript{30} at hand, thank god, full of these things
For us to hold. Our home knows not how to be poor.

(Ag. 958–62)

Later, with withering condescension she congratulates the captive princess Kassandra on her good luck in becoming the slave of masters with an established fortune rather than of nouveaux-riches (1042–46). She gloats over her murdered husband that she has caught him in "an evil wealth of cloth" (1383). The audience subsequently can only chuckle at her resort to euphemism when she suggests that she will be content with "a modest portion of wealth" (1574).\textsuperscript{31}

As a character, Klytemnestra may indeed be retreating from her earlier confidence, but the association of wealth with the exercise of tyrannical power is presumably strong in the mind of the audience (see Herodotus 1.61.3, 64.1) and almost immediately reinforced by her partner-in-crime, Aigisthos. It is the bluntness of his linkage of wealth and political power, not to mention brutal intimidation, that marks him as a tyrant in the narrower sense of the term:

Using this man's [Agamemnon's] money [khrēmatōn], I shall endeavor
To rule over the citizens. Whoever disobeys me,
I shall yoke with a heavy yoke, not like some trace horse
Young and barley-fed, but hateful Starvation,
A roommate for his rage, will see him softened.

(1638–42)

The chorus's penultimate taunt to this bully implies the characteristic fusion of glut and criminal behavior: "Go on, grow fat, polluting justice, since you can" (1669).

Agamemnon is the figure one thinks of first as the exemplar of the corruption associated with excessive prosperity in the broadest sense of the word (the Greek word \textit{olbos} included notions of both material wealth and more general happiness). Before he actually appears on stage we get only slight hints of his association with wealth. For him the daughter he is willing to sacrifice is the "agalma of his house" (208), a term used often of dedicatory statues and ornaments in general. Many readers seem to take Agamemnon as the most immediate referent of the chorus's general meditation on wealth at \textit{Agamemnon} 750–81. This

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{30}Retaining with Denniston and Page the \textit{oikos} of the manuscript contra Fraenkel. Vickers (1979: 366), following Goheen (1955), rightly insists on the symbolism of blood in the purple of the sea but does not seem to see the implicit linkage of wealth and crime.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{31}Douglas Young (1974) takes \textit{ekhouseito} to govern \textit{pan}—a further bit of arrogant boasting. I agree with Vickers (1979: 385) and others who argue that Klytemnestra decidedly retreats from her earlier confidence in the final scene of the play.}
passage, polyreferential like most Aeschylean general comments, follows most directly on a meditation about the wealthy city of Troy. More directly triggered by the thought of Agamemnon are the chorale broodings that follow immediately on his entrance into the house. The shakiness of the text here (see Fraenkel and Page, ad loc.) is particularly frustrating. But it is clear at least that the passage focuses on excess of wealth through a metaphor of an overladen ship that strikes on an invisible reef. Utter disaster can be avoided by jettisoning the weight of possessions (1005–14). The image forms part of an elaborate three-term comparison, a sort of climactic preamble, building to the irremediability of blood guilt. As in the Solon passage quoted above, wealth first appears as the simple and sufficient cause of criminal behavior, but an implicit qualification complicates the picture without negating the central role of wealth.

In the case of Agamemnon, Aeschylus essentially concentrates the motif of wealth in the visual and verbal climax of symbolic corruption in which Agamemnon agrees to walk on what he himself describes with a telling rhetorical figure as “wealth [plouton] and textiles purchased with silver” (949). Agamemnon’s act dramatizes spectacularly an ironic implication of Klytemnestra’s penultimate argument: “It is conspicuously fitting for those who are prosperous [olbiois] to be conquered [viz., by such temptations as these]” (941). The decision to waste wealth is presented as a natural if not inevitable function of the possession of vast wealth. Many have noted the irony of Agamemnon’s pieties before he yields to this temptation. This irony is, I believe, intensified if we recall the further irony that, on his entrance, he himself suggests the appropriateness of Troy’s fall as in part at least a consequence of its royal wealth: “The storm blasts of Disaster [Ate] are alive; and the embers, dying hard, send forth winds fat with wealth [pionas ploutou] (819–20). Once again the text forces on us the general relevance of its exploration of the relation between wealth and crime.

The wealth of Troy, as noted earlier, seems the immediate focus of the chorale meditation at Agamemnon 750–81, which attempts to clarify the relation of wealth to crime. The most striking feature of the passage as a whole (i.e., to 783)—despite many claims to the contrary—is that it does not dismiss wealth as a decisive component in crime.33

32The figure, “hendiadys” (“one through two”) entails keeping on a parallel syntactical level two elements that would, in normal discourse, require the syntactical subordination of one to the other either as an adjective or a dependent genitive case—here “rich textiles” or “wealth consisting of textiles.” The net effect, reinforced by the redundant “with silver,” is to throw the idea of wealth into prominence.

33I am not particularly concerned with the alleged originality or banality of the passage. Most would agree with Denniston and Page’s summary of the point: “The blame
Rather, as in Solon and an earlier choral comment in the *Agamemnon* (376–84), wealth is reaffirmed as the most relevant contributory factor despite insistence that it is not a sufficient cause in itself. The passage begins with an arresting formulation of the alleged traditional wisdom linking great prosperity and disaster:

An account, fashioned in speech long ago, has grown old  
Among mortals, that a man's great prosperity  
Once it reaches its prime  
Begets offspring and does not die childless:  
From fair fortune there blossoms  
For the family unquenchable suffering.

(750–56)

The speaker then insists on his own perspective as significantly different: it is the criminal act that begets more crimes, since without crime the destiny of just families (*euthudikôn oikôn*) is fortunate in its begetting (*kallipais*) (757–62). The adjective *kallipais* continues the heavily metaphorical use of reproductive imagery. Though the text concedes the possible association of a family—and we may think especially of aristocratic families—with justice, it avoids even here an explicit association of justice with wealth: prosperity is presented in terms of lovely children, a motif relevant to the imagery of the end of the trilogy.34  

The imagery of human reproduction is insisted on in the subsequent lines, to which we must return later, on the tendency of the criminal act to engender similar acts in subsequent generations. The final stanza unites the themes of wealth and just action in terms that reaffirm their general incompatibility:

Justice shines in houses  
Grimy with smoke  
And honors the righteous man.  
But gold-spangled abodes  
Smirched by criminal hands  
She leaves behind with averted eyes  
And approaches what is holy and pure,  
Showing no reverence for wealth's power—

---

34Fraenkel translates: "For the fate of the house where justice is kept straight is always a fair offspring (of its former fate)."
A thing falsely imprinted with praise:
She guides everything to its end.

(772–81)

The linkage of wealth and criminal action is even clearer in an earlier choral reflection on the guilt of Troy.\(^{35}\) The destruction of Troy is a visitation on those whose "pride exceeds what is just and whose houses team with wealth beyond imagining, beyond what is best" (375–78). Here a criminal mentality is linked with criminal wealth, and the linkage is strongly marked by alliteration, assonance, and metrical echo:

\begin{quote}
\textit{pneontôn meizon ê dikaiôs,}
\textit{phleontôn dômatôn huperpheu}
\textit{huper to beltiston.}
\end{quote}

("When they breathe more mightily than justly,
When houses are wealth-bloated beyond bounds—
Beyond what is best."

(376–78)\(^{36}\)

The indissoluble involvement of excessive wealth with criminal action is reaffirmed at the end of this strophe: “There is no defense / For a man who in consequence of Wealth's Glut\(^{37}\) / Has kicked Justice's great / Altar into obscurity” (381–84).

Finally, Helen, the fatal link of Greek and Trojan societies, comes from Greek luxury (690) and in herself constitutes the "adornment" (\textit{agalma} again; see 208) of Trojan wealth (740). Both her own crime and the crime she inspires emerge as inextricably bound up with and arising from an ambiance of extreme wealth. Thus the consistent generalization of wealth's dominant influence in the lives of ruling-class figures in both Greek and Trojan society constitutes a major attribute of the class type. In both societies, this wealth-bound \textit{êthos} is consistently associated with criminal behavior disastrous for the demos.

The criminality associated with wealth is a major aspect of the justice available under the rule of aristocrats or monarchs from great oikoi. But the most frequent occurrences of the terminology of justice in the \textit{Agamemnon} are with reference to retribution for someone

\(^{35}\)"Clarity" seems at best a relative term in dealing with Aeschylus. Here too we find the seemingly inevitable textual problems: I follow Fraenkel versus Denniston and Page.

\(^{36}\)The word \textit{pneontôn} ("breathing") echoes the Homeric formula \textit{menea pneontes} (e.g., \textit{II.} 3.8), which literally means something like "breathing martial might." As so often in the \textit{Oresteia}, evocations of traditional heroic military prowess are negative.

\(^{37}\)Taking the less stylish rendering of the genitive contra Denniston and Page, with Fraenkel.
else’s crime. This “retribution justice” associated with government by kings and princes is regularly characterized by excess. It has been frequently glossed by reference to the Old Testament phrase, “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” (e.g., Lloyd-Jones 1956: 60; Macleod 1982: 136); but the point of this much maligned phrase is insistence that the punishment be perfectly adjusted to the crime. This is precisely what aristocratic justice does not do. “Twice over have the sons of Priam paid for their crimes” (Ag. 537), proclaims the herald. The omen of the “king of birds” devouring the pregnant hare (114–20) and the king’s sacrifice of his innocent daughter Iphigeneia are best understood as symbolic doublets insisting on the inherent excessiveness of aristocratic justice, its fatal tendency to destroy the innocent along with the guilty (Peradotto 1969: 254–57; cf. J. H. Finley 1955: 252–53).

Homer repeatedly evokes the brutal amorality of heroic warfare by focusing on the “dear wives and innocent children” (e.g., Il. 6.95) who are the real stakes of the struggle. The text of the Oresteia similarly suggests the excessiveness of aristocratic justice by focusing on the innocent wives and children (Ag. 326–29), but it adds a specifically fifth-century, democratic emphasis on the cost of aristocratic justice to the polis and the demos. We have already noted this motif as an implication of the lion cub parable. The immediate consequences of the expedition is to impose “many limb-wearying wrestlings . . . on Danaans and Trojans alike” (63–67). Though Paris is the obvious criminal, Kalkhas prophesies “this expedition will hunt Priam’s city. . . . Fate will violently drain up in plunder all the people’s great wealth of cattle” (demioplethē, 126–30). Paris is like a child chasing a bird, who “imposes suffering on his city beyond endurance” (394–95). The herald later expresses the same idea in an ironic, daringly anachronistic phrase: “Neither Paris nor the city that shared his tax debt [sunтелēs] can boast an achievement greater than their suffering” (532–33). Rather than implying shared guilt, the herald’s subsequent words insist that the guilt belongs to Paris but the disaster befell the whole land:

For owing the penalty [dikēn] of rape and theft,
He both lost the booty and reaped as his harvest
The total obliteration of his father’s house and the land besides.

(534–36)39

38 Lloyd-Jones (1970: 23) has argued that the cattle of the demos in fact stand for the demos itself that will be destroyed.

39 The unique coinage autokthomon (“land-and-all”) refers not simply to the father’s private domain but to the whole territory of the Trojan people, who share in the punishment of the royal house (Ag. 537).
Helen left behind her for her own townsmen (astoisin) the stir and bustle of preparations for war and brought a “dowry of destruction for Ilion” (404–6). Menelaos’ erotic visions and longings for his departed wife in a house rich with statues are sharply juxtaposed to the sufferings imposed on every household in Argos (411–35) and the grim, material reality of “Ares, who trades gold for dead bodies” (438–44).

Critics have been prone to explain away this relentless focus on the cost to the people of the city by citations of Hesiod and generalities about Archaic Greek beliefs in the natural involvement of communities in the fate of their rulers (e.g., Vickers 1979: 420). But Aeschylus presents this phenomenon as an outrage, one that inspires the active resentment of the people. “The townpeople’s talk is heavy with resentment: it pays the debt of a curse ratified by the people” (démokrantou, 456–57). One scholar rightly calls this curse “the first step toward revolt” (Fraenkel, ad loc.). This rebellion is sufficiently credible for Klytemnestra to cite as a pretext for Orestes’ absence the danger that “the people’s shouting and lawlessness might overthrow the council” (883; Dodds 1960: 20). Hesiod’s polis may silently go down to ruin with its unjust rulers, but for Aeschylus the cost to the city entailed in aristocratic justice is grounds for popular rebellion, for seeking change.

Several other traditional features of the Homeric hero are incorporated and transformed in Aeschylus’ portrait of ruling-class figures. In every case, there is an accentuation on the negative. Cumulatively, this imagery rounds out the portrait of a type—a character formation that the lion parable sums up in the phrase “the étos it had from its parents” (Ag. 727–28).

It is tempting to pursue in detail the pervasive imagery of light, fire, and radiance as both an echo and a devastating repudiation of the traditional association—particularly in Homer (Whitman 1958: 128–53) and Pindar (J. H. Finley 1955: esp. 144)—of rulers with such language. We have already seen in passing the effective double oxymoron of Justice shining in the grime of poor houses and turning away from the gold-spangled mansions mired by crime (Ag. 772–81). So too the gleam of gold is juxtaposed to the ashes of dead bodies and the funeral fires at Troy (437–44), in a context that reflects bitterly on the pam-
pered rulers). In general, the dazzle associated with aristocrats emerges as disastrously deceptive appearance, masking the darkness of crime and paralleling the false lights that gleam so deceptively though the first play (e.g., Vickers 1979: 348–49).

Traditional daring (tolmé, thrasos), the mark of the aggressive warrior in Homer, emerges here as the unrestrained forwardness in crime of ruling-class villains. Agamemnon's decision to kill his daughter veers his mind toward complete recklessness (to pantotolmon, Ag. 221). The term is immediately echoed in a grimly alliterative use of the verb tlaô: “he dared [etla] then to become his daughter's [thugatros] destroyer” (thutêr, lit. “sacrificer,” 224–25). Helen, in going to Troy, “dared the undareable” (atlata tlasa, 408). The only context in the Agamemnon in which daring retains any positive connotation of courage is in the ironic taunt hurled by the chorus at Aigisthos, of whose thrasos Klytemnestra had boasted at 1437: “You lacked the daring [ouk etlês] to do this deed, to kill Agamemnon yourself” (1635).

We have already seen in the parable of the lion cub that the Homeric analogies of warriors to predatory beasts have been stripped of any grandeur, leaving only raw savagery. Two related points only need be added here. Vickers's influential treatment of the Oresteia, entitled “Nature versus Perversion,” contains much of value but gives the entirely erroneous impression that virtually all perversion of nature is summed up in Klytemnestra's challenges to traditional patriarchal male roles (Vickers 1979: 347–437).42 In fact, structuralist studies of the Iliad (Redfield 1975) and Sophokles (Segal 1981) have sensitized us to the ways profound ambivalence toward heroic figures is expressed in various eras by an opposition of nature (uncivilized, raw behavior) and culture (specifically the polis and its institutions). The heroes' positive contribution is to defend specifically human polis life, to make civilization possible; but the violent behavior that seems a necessary component of their martial function fosters a subhuman ferocity that constitutes a constant threat to civilization. I merely emphasize here that, in the Agamemnon, beast imagery, though frequently applied to Klytemnestra (e.g., 607, 1228, 1232), is by no means confined to her. In addition to the lion images, we find the Atreidai as vultures (49; Zeitlin 1965: 481–83), Agamemnon as a dog (896), and Aigisthos as a wolf (1259).43 The snake images of the Libation Bearers apply most


43To be sure, the image of the watchdog here and at Ag. 607 is ambiguous. But in view of the pervasive irony, I find it most unlikely that the more negative connotations would not occur to the audience. See Goldhill 1984: esp. 56–57.
dramatically to Orestes (Ch. 549) but also to Klytemnestra and Aigisthos (Ag. 1233; Ch. 248–49, 1047; Whallon 1958: 272). The cumulative impact of all these images attached to the ruling figures in conjunction with the behavior portrayed on the stage is once again to generalize the ruling-class type as a subhuman threat to the well-being of the polis and its demos.

Inherited Guilt?

Thus far in looking at Aeschylus' presentation of class I have tried to highlight a pervasive polarity between what in contemporary terms might be reduced to "nature" and "nurture." On the one hand, the burden of the lion parable and associated images falls distinctly on "the ethos he had from his parents" (Ag. 728).44 On the other, a constellation of images and explicit meditations point toward a set of social and political factors that construct that ethos, that surround individual aristocrats with the power and the seductive inducements to indulge in self-serving, violent behavior, and that provide compelling patterns of action in the crimes committed by parents.

The question remains, then, whether we can legitimately attribute to Aeschylus a doctrine of inherited guilt. Major proponents of such a doctrine are at pains to suggest the primitive otherness of the family curse (e.g., Lloyd-Jones 1962: 187; 1971: 90), invoking a version of historicism that discourages any hermeneutic translation into terms of potential contemporary interest. A parallel emphasis on inherited excellence in Pindar is readily perceived as celebration of a class ideology; but in the case of Aeschylus, the broad ideological implications of language focusing on the inherited curse, on metaphors of birth and procreation in the aetiology of crime, are rarely acknowledged (Haedick 1936: 56 is an exception). Any historical parallel can offer only partial illumination at best; but before we acquiesce too readily to an irrelevantly primitive Aeschylus, let us consider a contemporary interpretation of blood guilt as a class phenomenon:

An essential part of the inheritance of the [French] middle class, from generation to generation, is the fact of their own past violence done by their fathers and grandfathers, and it is this . . . we have called blood-guilt. This is not a theological idea but a dialectical one: the generation of 1848 decimates the workers, the workers remember and pass the memory on to

44The less developed parallel snake imagery has been seen to reflect "the incestuous adultery and the ritual child-sacrifice passed as a legacy from one generation to the next" (Whallon 1958: 271).
their sons, the new generation of factory owners must now face a sullen, resentful, and mistrustful working class which has made up its mind about them in advance. Thus the act, once committed, passes into the structure of the world itself, leaves its traces as repressive legislation on the one had and as profound suspicion on the other, and returns to confront the second and third generations as an objective situation to which they are not free not to react. (Jameson 1971: 285)45

This formulation has several features that are helpful in avoiding some of the pitfalls of past discussions of the inherited curse in the Oresteia. It is a determinism, but only in the sense in which Marx conceived of history as determined: “Human beings make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please” (MECW 11.103).46 The crime of Atreus has consequences that confront Agamemnon with “an objective situation to which he is not free not to react,” but the nature of his reaction is a more open matter. His father’s response to an infringement of his patriarchal power represents an inherited paradigm, a pattern of behavior too readily available as a response to an infringement of Agamemnon’s own power. That response entails the murder of innocent children as an acceptable cost of achieving revenge. Agamemnon has also inherited an enemy, Aigisthos, whose own paradigmatic response is seduction of his enemy’s wife. Agamemnon chooses to adopt his father’s paradigm in responding to Paris and to ignore the inherited consequences of his father’s crime. This choice is not a haphazard individual whim nor the consequence of independent calculation (cf. Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988: 71–77). The whole ethos of his class—its delight in war, its valorization of glory, deeds of daring, its characteristic insouciance vis-à-vis the interests of the demos, of women, of children, in short, all the mental reflexes of those who inherit great wealth—make this choice predictable if not inevitable. For Agamemnon inherits not a genetically impaired nor primitively polluted psyche (Haedicke 1936: 58) but a socially reinforced set of characteristic responses.

It has long been assumed that Aeschylus is essentially an Archaic theologian, but it is worth recalling that fifth-century Greece (and

---

45 Jameson is here summarizing an argument from Sartre’s Critique de la raison dialectique. If, instead of the French revolution of 1848, we substituted various nineteenth- and twentieth-century massacres of workers (e.g., Pullman strike, Ludlow, Akron), the point might become clearer to an American audience.

46 The passage continues, “they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (MECW 11: 103, emphasis added). In 1865, responding to a questionnaire presented to him by one of his daughters, Marx put next to “Favorite Poet” the names Shakespeare, Aeschylus, and Goethe (Prawer 1978: 390).
especially Athens) is the birthplace of the social sciences.\textsuperscript{47} Particularly if Aeschylus did in fact write the \textit{Prometheus Bound}, the anthropological speculations of the Presocratics clearly had a major impact on his thought. On the basis of the \textit{Oresteia}, Aeschylus may well merit the palm as the first Greek author to insist that political and social institutions, not inherited characteristics, are the chief determinants of social practice. The germ of this notion, one might reasonably argue, is present already in Hesiod’s description of Zeus’s wives and children—especially Themis, Eunomië, Dikë, and Eirêné (\textit{Th.} 901–2)—as symbolic representations of the institutional content of the new order (Solmsen 1949: 34–44). In any case, the decisive role of humanly mutable institutions is explicitly proclaimed in Solon’s \textit{Eunomië}:

\begin{quote}
Good government [\textit{Eunomië}] renders everything well-ordered and right,  
And often casts fetters about the unjust,  
The rough she grinds smooth, checks Glut [\textit{koron}]; Violence [\textit{hubrin}]  
she dims.  
She withers the flourishing flowers of Disaster [\textit{Atēs}],  
Straightens crooked judgements; deeds of towering arrogance  
She tames: she checks the deeds of dissension [\textit{dikhostasiēs}],  
Stops harsh Conflict’s wrath, and under her sway  
All things in the human sphere are right and sensible.  
\textit{Eunomië} \textsuperscript{(4.32–39 West)}
\end{quote}

\textit{Koros}, \textit{hybris}, and \textit{atē}, the triumvirate of individual crime, the mental aberrations, specific criminal acts and their disastrous consequences in class warfare (so I take \textit{dikhostasiē}) are categorically subordinated to the power of good government. That good government is conceived of as purely human creation is clear both from the opening of the poem, which explicitly denies divine responsibility for the dangers besetting Athens, and the consistently assertive first-person pronouns and verbal forms with which Solon describes and defends his own specific measures. It would not be too much to say that Aeschylus’ whole utopian vision of Athens, a vision only complete with the completion of the trilogy, is implicit in these lines of Solon (Solmsen 1949: 208).\textsuperscript{48}

The key terms in which the text of the \textit{Agamemnon} meditates on inherited guilt emerge gradually as the pattern of major crimes emerges.

\textsuperscript{47}LLoyd-Jones tells us that “Aeschylus’ politics are an extension of his theology” (1971: 94). I am suggesting that the reverse is the case.

\textsuperscript{48}Solmsen (116) argues against the notion that \textit{Eunomië} implies laws, which were called \textit{thesmoi} in the Solonian era. Yet he calls \textit{Eunomië} “the representative of a community life that is regulated by good laws and customs” (115). See also the excellent discussion by Ostwald (1969: 62–95).
These crimes are represented with widely varying degrees of explicitness in the text, which taken as a whole invites the audience to arrange them in a chronology marked by compulsive recurrence: (1) the seduction of Atreus' wife by Thyestes; (2) the murder of Thyestes' children; (3) the seduction of Helen by Paris; (4) the murder of Iphigeneia and the destruction of Troy; (5) the seduction of Klytemnestra by Aigisthos; and (6) the murder of Agamemnon and Kassandra.

As suggested in my overview of Aeschylean dialectics, the first play does not—cannot—offer a definitive answer to the moral, religious, and political issues raised by this pattern. It does, however, in a broad movement from maximum ambiguity to greater clarity point toward the resolution in the third play, where the human social and political institutions are changed and the issue of individual responsibility is subsumed in the concern for internalizing ethical behavior in the society as a whole. The most crucial passages in this movement are the chorus's narrative of Agamemnon's murder of his daughter (184–246) and the full-scale debate between Klytemnestra, the chorus, and later Aigisthos over the murder of Agamemnon and Kassandra in terms that suggest an abortive trial.

The choral narrative of the decision of Agamemnon, to which so much attention has been devoted, is hedged about with suggestive allusions to divine intervention, an inherited pattern of crime, and dynastic ambition. At line 216 there is a much debated textual crux, which, depending on the emendation one opts for, adds the factor of peer pressure (if one reads periorgoi sph' at 216) or stresses the individual fatal passion of Agamemnon (if one retains periorgos and takes Agamemnon as the implied subject of epithumein). In any case, the dramatic fascination of this passage is due in no small measure to this ambiguity.

The end of the play, however, opens for direct questioning the issues of causality and responsibility, not merely through the far fuller dramatic characterization of speakers who make their own case, but—in the most important agon of the play—through the use of open debate between the perpetrators of the crime and the chorus. This debate (1372 to the end of play) by no means arrives at a simple resolution focused on a simple cause; there are in any case two more plays to come. Yet it does, I believe, explicitly cancel some of the simpler deterministic explanations left dramatically open in the earlier focus on Agamemnon's choice.

---

49 But see, in addition to Fraenkel and Denniston and Page, ad loc., Winnington-Ingram 1974: 4–5 for the suggestion that Artemis is the referent of sph'. See also Lesky 1966a: 82.
Klytemnestra's initial speech in this episode, in which she is visually inseparable from the corpses of Agamemnon and Kassandra she has chosen to display (1379, 1404–6), confronts the audience with the decisive deed of blood which was the climax of the choral meditation on the relation of wealth to crime (1018–34). Her unalloyed delight in this deed contrasts sharply with the earlier choral portrayal of Agamemnon's agony in the face of his decision to murder his daughter (206–13). Requital of "an eye for an eye" is proffered as a defense by Klytemnestra when she brings up the murder of Iphigeneia (1414–20). But the excess, the violation of the innocent, is immediately added to the picture by her gratuitously vicious reflections on Kassandra, whose corpse is, in any case, a silent sign of excessive revenge. Sexual passion, broadly implied by Klytemnestra's daring sexual metaphors (Vickers 1979: 381–82) and allusions, emerges as a more immediately determining factor with her explicit reference to Aigisthos (1435–37) followed by his appearance. These strongly personal motives tend to undercut substantially her attribution of sole responsibility to divine Justice and the Erinys (1432–33). Retroactively, they suggest a pattern of self-serving aristocratic argument that confirms the more indirect earlier hints of self-interest in Agamemnon's decision. At the same time, the chorus is spurred by her claims of suprahuman involvement to take a longer view, to seek an additional factor in a historical chain of circumstances.

The chorus's initial citation of Helen as the first link is not as gratuitous as Klytemnestra implies, for it is inspired by the obvious role of sexual passion (erôs) in Klytemnestra's own crimes. Sexual passion is not abandoned as a factor; rather, it is seen as the vehicle of the disastrous daimôn of the race, for that daimôn "works from women" (1470, trans. Fraenkel). Klytemnestra proceeds to take their reference to a family daimôn as something totally external to herself. The chorus pauses painfully over the circular argument that Zeus as ultimate cause of everything must have some role in this act too (1487–88). But when Klytemnestra attempts to clinch the issue with too self-serving a formulation of divine intervention, the chorus retorts with an alternative that insists passionately on her responsibility while at the same time acknowledging that the deed is overdetermined:

50 Here again I think the real point is the movement from relative ambiguity to relative clarity about the aetiology of all such aristocratic crimes.

51 Douglas Young's translation of the ennômôs found in a fourteenth-century manuscript at 1472 implies a more explicit rejection of her claims of justice: "She is standing / like a dread raven above his corpse and / boasts her chanting is righteous and lawful."
That you are guiltless
Of this murder—who is the one to testify to that?
How? How? But from the father's side
There might spring an avenger as accomplice.

(1505–8)

This is essentially as far as the chorus pursues the philosophical issue of responsibility in this play, inasmuch as they now retreat in confusion at the spectacle of the “falling house” (1530–32). But paradoxical as it may seem, the more explicitly the factor of an inherited pattern of crime and punishment—the force of the Erinyes—is spelled out as the sole reason for a new crime, the more clearly it takes on the character of hollow pretext. Thus Aigisthos proclaims that he sees Agamemnon “lying in the robes woven by the Erinyes” (1580–81) and gives a circumstantial account of the horrible crime of Atreus against his father,52 but the chorus do not pause a moment over these allegedly mitigating circumstances. They declare simply that he merits death at the hands of the demos (1912–16). The tyrannical character of Aigisthos—his reliance on money, bodyguards, and threats of torture—overwhelmingly discredit what ought to be the tightest case for an inherited necessity to commit crime. Everything about his dramatic character suggests a class ethos and self-serving personal motives.

There is then a steady progression toward clarity in the play’s exploration of crime which, since it climaxes in the male Aigisthos, cannot be wholly reduced to a matter of sexual bias that paints Klytemnestra in darker colors than Agamemnon. On the contrary, this movement invites a kind of secondary revision of the initial ambiguities of Agamemnon’s situation, suggesting that he, like Klytemnestra and her lover, was equally prone to seek pretexts to mask his basely selfish motives, motives that arise far more from his ruling-class status than from a family curse. Thus in this light his final rhetorical question as he debates murdering his daughter, “How should I become the abandoner of my fleet / By losing/failing my alliance?” (212–13), places the emphasis on the sphere of his public ambitions.

One may even sum up Aeschylus’ treatment of this whole issue by saying that the family curse is the inherited privileged status of these wealthy, powerful aristocrats. In the text of the Oresteia, birth and inheritance are metaphors for a more complex vision of causality. But the specific thrust of this vision is focused on social and political institutions—aristocracy, monarchy, and tyranny—which foster and

52Vickers 1979: 386 notes Aigisthos’ suppression of Thyestes’ initial crime.
transmit from generation to generation the temperament prone to crime. In this connection, we might look again at the crucial choral pronouncements at 750–56, focusing now on the implications of its heavy metaphoricity:

An account, fashioned in speech long ago, has grown old
Among mortals, that a man's great prosperity
Once it reaches its prime
*Begets* offspring and does not die *childless*:
From fair fortune there blossoms
For the family unquenchable suffering.

The relation of vast wealth and disaster evokes metaphorically, on the one hand, the natural process of a cycle of growth, reproduction, aging, and death, and on the other, the social institution of the aristocratic family that perverts that natural process. The chorus's qualification of this traditional view insists more relentlessly on the metaphor. The factor of excess in aristocratic vengeance is described in terms of the “children” of the criminal deed:

Diverse from others, I have my own understanding.
For it is the unholy *act*
That later *engenders* offspring more numerous [than itself]
But similar in nature to its own family.
For the fate of strictly just
*Oikoi* engenders fair children ever.

(757–62)

This metaphoricity here and in the following lines ("Violence [*hubris*] characteristically [lit. "loves to"] beget," 763–71) is not simply a façon de parler; it subverts aristocratic ideology where it was most confident, the very source from which Pindar consistently drew his most celebratory images, that is, the natural processes of sexual reproduction, of birth and inheritance, by giving them the most sinister connotations. At the same time, the very fact of metaphoricity where ideologies demand the literal insists that the fate of houses depends neither on nature nor on other forces beyond human control. Aeschylus thus prepares the way for compromises to come.

As suggested above, the clearest refutation of a simple determinism of inherited guilt is imbedded in the trilogy structure itself. Orestes, the heir to all this crime, both validates and breaks decisively with his heritage. More profoundly, the third play, with its shift of scene to an essentially different world and its dramatization of a new human
Aeschylus’ Oresteia: Dialectical Inheritance

institutions for dealing with crime, removes us from the context of the aristocratic and monarchical forms of government that are the chief fosterers of the criminal ethos.

Sexual Politics and the Aristocracy

Before exploring the more explicitly political and social developments in the later plays, I examine separately the sexual dimension in the Agamemnon, a dimension which already in the Hesiodic model is an inextricable component in the dialectic of change and which we have only touched on in a schematic overview of Aeschylus dialectics. Still, any final judgment on the sexual politics of the trilogy as a whole must await our reading of the whole. What I note at this stage is the integration of the other elements of the critique of the aristocratic ethos in the Agamemnon with this representation of aristocratic sexual behavior.

Older attempts based on Bachofen (1973 [1861]) to present the sexual issues in the Oresteia in terms of an opposition of matriarchy to patriarchy have rightly been rejected (Zeitlin 1978: 150–60; cf. Pembroke 1967; Beauvoir 1989 [1953]: 79). It would be more accurate to speak of a “myth of matriarchy” in which an attempt to establish female political dominance is decisively defeated. This myth would seem to be a significant element in the consciousness of Aeschylus’ audience. The extraordinary popularity of the battle between men and Amazons in the literature and iconography of fifth-century Greece, especially Athens, amply attests to the affective investment in this myth (duBois 1982). But patriarchy was not at all a myth, and the most trenchant aspects of Aeschylus’ handling of the sexual dimension from the beginning to the end of the trilogy are his insights into the dynamics of aristocratic patriarchy.

The relevant components of this patriarchy are the concentration of political, economic, social, and sexual power in the male pater familias (Greek kurios) over all members of the aristocratic household, which included not just biological relations but the whole nexus of slaves (both war-won and home-raised), retainers, and subordinated peasants (Lacey 1968; Ste. Croix 1981: 211). Over all these the father exercised nearly unlimited power. Much of the irony of Plato’s Euthyphro derives from the assumption that it is bizarre, though legally imaginable, for a son (or anyone?) to call the patriarch to account for the death of a slave. Certainly the widespread use of exposure of female children implies the father’s power of life and death. The patriarch also substantially controlled the sex lives of those in the oikos, prescribing husbands for his daughters and imposing his own sexual priorities on wife and slaves
222 Sons of the Gods, Children of Earth

alike. In the sphere of the aristocratic oikos, the individual aristocratic father is analogous to the monarch or tyrant in the political sphere.

We are far less informed about the functioning of non-aristocratic families. Although it seems plausible that attitudes and behaviors associated with male dominance would be widespread through all classes, it is not clear, for example, that in poor peasant and landless families the fathers imposed marriage partners on their daughters. In general, the more property involved, the less freedom for the women.53 Virtually the whole nonslave citizenry were, until the reforms of Solon (Ath. Pol. 5–12), Peisistratos (Ath. Pol. 16.5), and Kleisthenes (Ath. Pol. 21), juridically, economically, religiously, and militarily subordinated to the various aristocratic patriarchs through hereditary phratries and priesthoods (Forrest 1966; Arnheim 1977; Wood 1989). Before the abolition of hektemorage (owing a sixth of one’s harvest) and debt-slavery, before the establishment of independent people’s courts, councils, and assemblies, before citizenship was based on locale rather than kinship, the modern separation of the familial and political spheres—rightly questioned in our era—is particularly inappropriate to the ancient Greek context. Ste. Croix (1981: 102) and Wood (1989: 116) have recently argued that the relative liberation of the male peasant’s property in Athens entailed a marked contraction of women’s relation to property. The stringent laws forbidding heiresses from ownership of property, laws that even prescribed divorce for a male relative so that he could marry an heiress in his family to preserve the property, seem to date back to Solon’s reforms (Ath. Pol. 9.2; Plutarch Sol. 20. ii–iv) .54

In the Agamemnon the sexual patriarchal power of aristocratic males is on a par with wealth, inherited status, and a criminal heritage as a corrupting influence. For these male “heroes,” women and children emerge as little more than pawns in their dynastic competitions. Thyestes seduced his brother’s wife. Atreus killed his own nephews and fed them to his brother. Paris seduced his host’s wife. Agamemnon killed his own daughter. Having defeated the city of his sister-in-law’s seducer, he enslaved the king’s daughter and brought her back home as his mistress to live under the same roof with his legal wife. Aigisthos seduced

53Lacey assumes quite arbitrarily that women in the highest social class “have always had markedly more independence than among the bulk of the population” and that women whose fathers could not come up with an adequate dowry simply did not marry (1968: 107–9). The orators on whom he bases this argument are by definition speaking only of those who have enough property to fight over. If, as argued earlier, as many as 60 percent of the citizens had little or no property, such sweeping conclusions seem unjustified.

54Arthur (1973: 27–37) offers a more nuanced account of the pluses and minuses of Solon’s provisions in relation to women—even though her account is marred by an excessive adherence to the notion of “bourgeois” Athens.
his first cousin's wife. Due to the rich web of allusions throughout the play, none of these patriarchal crimes can be declared "outside the drama." On the contrary, they are vividly and relentlessly before us together with a broad array of violent war crimes presented as characteristic of the aristocratic class.

I emphasize here the extent to which Aeschylus chooses to insist on the sexual motive in a context of excessive sexual dominance, where it is males who are in the best position to act on their whims regardless of the consequences. Klytemnestra, whom we consider below, is marked immediately as an exception among women—the absence of her *kurios* has permitted her to emerge as "male-in-her-planning" (*androboulous*, *Ag. 11*). We have already had occasion to note the textual crux in the final lines of the choral report of Agamemnon's own explanation of his decision to sacrifice his daughter. Does he claim that it is religiously proper (*themis*) for himself to desire passionately this sacrifice, or for the army to desire it, or most neutrally that one should desire it? Whatever the correct reading, it is clear that Aeschylus has chosen to present the sacrifice as the consequence of a desire that is linguistically marked as excessive: the doubling of *orgai periorgoi* or *periorgos* as modifiers of the verb meaning to "desire" (*epithumein*, lit. "to have a passion for," 215–18) insists with characteristic Aeschylean irony on the sickness of the passion even as the speaker attempts to justify it.

The erotic motive for the war, both in the crime of Paris (385–402) and the longings of Menelaos (410–26), we have already touched on. It is striking that the first occurrence in the play of the word *erōs* is in Klytemnestra's hypocritical wish that the conquering army commit no excesses that might endanger their return: "May no passionate desire [erōs] first fall upon/attack the army / To sack what they ought not, conquered by profits" (341–42). The bold paradox of a victorious army attacked (*emptiptei*) and conquered (*nikomenous*) by lust and greed effectively generalizes the corrupt desires of the ruling protagonists to the whole male army.

Klytemnestra again uses erotic language to generalize the crimes of the Átreidai as a corporate group. Her words to the chorus recall Agamemnon's justification of blood lust (215–17) most unpleasantly:

Now have you righted your tongue's judgment,  
Naming the thrice-glutted  
*Daimón* of this family:

55See note 49 above. Winnington-Ingram's suggestion, if correct, would invalidate my point. Certainty is impossible, but why should the poet give such heavy stress here to divine wrath when the rest of the play is so focused on human passion?
For from that source the blood-licking lust [\textit{erōs}]
Is nourished in the belly.

(1475–79)

The fusion of oral and sexual desire, mythically embedded in the Hesiodic model in which Kronos devours his children and Zeus devours his wife Mētis, is peculiarly appropriate to the crimes of the child-devouring Atreidai. It is most significant that this desire is attributed to males; however biased the source of the attribution, the text of the play as a whole bears it out. The heavily metaphoric description ("begets," "engenders") of the aetiology of crime at lines 750–62 strongly suggests the male role in sexual reproduction.56

The priority of male criminal \textit{erōs} and reproductive activity in the \textit{Agamemnon} and their connection with other aspects of a pervasive indictment of the aristocracy is worth stressing. This priority posits a homology between the disastrous consequences of economic, political, and juridical tyranny exercised by the aristocratic class over the demos and the absolute power of patriarchs exercised over women. It is also an important corrective to analyses (e.g., Vickers) that suggest that the association of crime and sex in the \textit{Oresteia} is confined to women. The text represents misogynistic attitudes to be sure, but the framework within which they are represented is itself marked as the criminally distorted excess of aristocratic patriarchal power.

One of the special fascinations of Aeschylus' trilogy is that the dialectical form seems here to conflict with the multiplicity of levels on which the drama operates. The historical realities and ideological conflicts to which it responds and which it seeks to mold vary strikingly in their amenability to the logic of the trilogy form. Most obvious, it is easier to dramatize dialectical change on the political and juridical levels; here the experience of the audience must compel assent at least to the fact of significant change, if not necessarily acceptance of the implicit value judgments on these changes. But on the levels of sexuality and the politics of the family there appears to have been so little movement, let alone progress, that a dialectical negation of male sexual dominance corresponding to the negation of aristocratic economic, political, and juridical dominance seems peculiarly short-circuited. Just as feminist

56\textit{Teknōō} (754) is ambiguous: \textit{LSJ} s.v. II, "in Act. commonly of the man. . . . Med. of the female." Yet \textit{olbon} (753) is masculine and the fear of dying childless is more suggestive of males in a society where such strong legal injunctions keep property exclusively male. \textit{Tiktō} (759, 763) is also used of either sex, but again the concern that offspring resemble the parents seems more likely to express a male fear in a society obsessed with the fact that \textit{mater certa, pater incertus}; cf. Hesiod \textit{Works and Days} 182. The association of maternity with the visually observable and paternity with greater abstraction plays a key role in Goldhill's interpretation of the sexual politics of the whole trilogy (e.g., 1984: 174, 194).
scholarship has challenged the view that women advanced along with men during the Renaissance and argued that, on the contrary, women experienced some distinct losses (Kelly 1984: 19–50), there are, as noted above, grounds for arguing that Athenian women suffered significant losses with the growth of democracy. In passing, we should note that even on the economic plane there is a somewhat parallel lack of resolution envisioned in the text of the *Agamemnon*. The negation of wealth is simply juxtaposed to the valorization of poverty as conducive to virtue (cf. *Ag.* 772–80). If, as we have already noted, democracy permitted the demos to protect itself better from aristocratic exploitation, the fundamental economic divisions remained intact (Ste. Croix 1981: esp. 72–73).  

In the sexual sphere in the *Oresteia* we find an ancient analogue of the contemporary impasse over the priority of class or gender (e.g., Saffioti 1978; Eisenstein 1979: 5–55). Aeschylus’ attempt to combine a relatively straightforward class analysis of political change with a vision of social change in which sexual conflict is decisive results in a text that is provocatively ambiguous to a modern sensibility.  

One is accordingly tempted to separate the elements too starkly—pronouncing the dialectical movement of the text politically and juridically progressive but sexually retrograde, a monument to misogyny. Though the levels operate as it were at different velocities and involve different sorts of ideological investments, both the politico-juridical and the sexual levels require a double hermeneutic—a careful unraveling of the respects in which the work functions in the service of entrenched class and sexual interests and at the same time projects a utopian vision that significantly

---

57 As noted earlier, Wood (1989) is in general far more sanguine than Ste. Croix in emphasizing the economic independence of the Athenian peasant after Solon, but she seems to me to neglect the implications of the apparently high proportion of citizens who had very little or no property.  

58 In this connection I cannot resist alluding to the Cuban film *Lucia*, directed by Humberto Solás (1968). There too the trilogy form seems almost dictated as the vehicle for conveying a dialectical process of change extending beyond the scope of a single lifetime. The central focus on the role of women and sexual conflict dictates too that the third section confront the gap between massive progress on the political and economic level and the profound intransigence of traditional male expectations and biases.  

59 Zeitlin (1978: 150) actually goes farther than this. She argues that the breadth of Aeschylus’ creative vision in the trilogy, “by integrating the issue [misogyny] into a coherent system of new values, by formulating it in new abstract terms, and by shifting to a new mode of argumentation. . . . provides the decisive model for the future of legitimation of this [misogynistic] attitude in Western thought.” I happen to have read Zeitlin’s article before reading Vickers’s (1979 [1973]) long chapter on the *Oresteia*. I could not help but be struck by the parallels between their readings and the absolute disparity of their perspectives (Vickers regularly seems to endorse what he explicates). At the same time, I have encountered no discussion of the *Oresteia* which comes close to Zeitlin’s in its appreciation of the complexity and pitfalls of attempting to treat the ideological implications of a literary masterpiece.
negates the alleged necessities of the status quo by opening a realm of relative freedom.

In focusing exclusively on misogynistic elements in the Oresteia, one is in danger of castigating the text for a failure to resolve adequately the largely unconscious sexual attitudes that it is this text’s special distinction to have raised consciously as a problem. Hartsock, for example, summarizes Aeschylus’ account of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia in these terms: “The glories to be had in combat and the willingness to pay almost any price for them is a recurring theme in both the heroic poems and the political ideals whose birth they attend” (1983: 190). This comment suggests a simple endorsement by the text of the Oresteia of a Homeric perspective that is in fact profoundly problematized in the trilogy. The Oresteia, by its deployment of the unique resources of the dramatic and trilologic form, forces on the audience with painful immediacy what are usually unquestioned presumptions of Greek patriarchal ideology. To echo Vernant’s fine formulation: “although tragedy, more than any other genre of literature, thus appears rooted in social reality, that does not mean that it is a reflection of it. It does not reflect that reality, but calls it into question. By depicting it rent and divided against itself, it turns it into a problem” (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988: 33). The text confronts us with such questions as these. How could a father kill his own daughter? How could male rulers resort to war and the destruction of a whole society just to punish adultery between consenting adults? What are the human consequences for the war-captive mistress and the legal wife of traditional male sexual privileges? Why should intellectually mediocre males automatically take precedence over women of great intelligence? Should a male god, one especially associated with patriarchal privilege, use his divine powers to punish and persecute a woman who failed to gratify his sexual interest in her? It seems to me that the Agamemnon goes even farther: it confronts as inadequate the misogynistic reflexes with which Greek males traditionally, from Homer on, seek to explain away all their troubles as the fault of women and, more specifically, as due to the destructiveness of insatiable female sexuality.60

We have perhaps commented enough already on Agamemnon’s murder of Iphigeneia and the full horror of the deed evoked by the chorus. The harsh choral comments on Helen and Paris certainly do not condone adultery, but they do unambiguously imply her willing participation. Thus, not unlike the dour Persian authorities cited by

---

60It should be obvious to everyone familiar with Winnington-Ingram’s thoughtful essay of 1948 how deeply indebted I am to his approach, even if I carry some of his arguments to unrecognizable conclusions.
Herodotus apropos of the same issue (1.4.2–3), the chorus accordingly reserves its harshest condemnation for the excessive response of the Atreidai, who impose war on their own people and destroy all of Troy all “on account of an adulterous woman” (Ag. 62–67; cf. 445–55, 799–804).

Despite the repeated harsh comments on the destructiveness of Helen (esp. 681–715), which clearly express and reinforce traditional fears of female sexuality, the debate between Klytemnestra and the chorus confronts us with the inadequacy of this male attempt to attribute all human suffering to the desires and desirability of women. Dramatic dialogue breaks the male monopoly of discourse. Klytemnestra’s arguments force the chorus itself to shift from woman as cause (1453–61) to women as instruments of divine ferocity (1468–74) to a momentary aporia at the ultimate responsibility of Zeus (1485–88).

Though, as we have noted earlier, it goes on to insist on Klytemnestra’s personal responsibility (1505–8), insofar as the sexual politics of the first play are concerned, we should acknowledge the specifically dramatic transformation of knee-jerk misogyny into a problematic issue.

Moreover, we cannot ignore in this connection the extraordinary dramatic space devoted to Kassandra. One of Aeschylus’ great silent characters (Aristophanes, Frogs 911–20), she is before the audience for nearly a third of the play (782–1330) and the center of dramatic interest for almost half that time (1072–1330; Taplin 1977: 318–22). Iphigeneia we see only reflected through choral narrative as the silent victim of patriarchal power. In Kassandra the victim talks back. To be sure, her loyalty to the ruler responsible for destroying her home and enslaving her person, when combined with her corresponding ferocity toward Klytemnestra, significantly enlists her on the side of patriarchy. But before she even speaks, Kassandra bears mute visual testimony to the brute obtuseness of her captor, the inherent pathos of the victim, and the signal insult to the legal wife which characterize the sexual politics of Greek warfare.

Her first words and initial dialogue call patriarchy into question at a higher level; she confronts the audience, using all the intensity of dramatic lyric verse, with the criminal sexuality of the god who is the chief dramatic representative of patriarchy in the final play of the trilogy, Apollo. Her initial blasphemy and her revelation of the god’s sexual attentions and his perverse use of his divine powers to punish her failure to satisfy his lust form an indelible and highly negative impression. Those who wish to deny the relevance of this impression in the final play must explain why Aeschylus chooses to focus so insistently on it here. The cruelty of the god’s punishment in denying credibility to her prophecies is not merely something narrated about her past at Troy. It
is relentlessly dramatized before our eyes in the incapacity of the chorus to grasp her most explicit attempts to predict the imminent murder of Agamemnon and herself.

A further function of that long dramatic exchange which is relevant to the sexual politics of the play is the presentation for a second time in the same play of a woman who not only has privileged access to the reality of the situation but must endure the condescending incredulity of males who are clearly her intellectual inferiors (Knox 1979: 46). Whereas Klytemnestra's obvious intelligence has been interpreted as a masculine trait (Winnington-Ingram 1948: 131), and there is much dramatically reinforced sympathy for the chorus's resistance to her, Kassandra is an unambiguously sympathetic character without a hint of masculininity. Indeed there is a haunting pathos in her recollection of the insults she endured at Troy—"as if a wandering priestess in quest of gifts—'beggar', 'pathetic creature', 'starveling'" (1272–73). The passage evokes sympathies reaching beyond the dramatic situation for women whose intelligence ill accords with their humiliating status. The trajectory of her interactions on stage seems emblematic of the struggle of the silenced intelligent women of Athens, analogous in tragedy to what is dramatized comically in the Lysistrata (esp. 430–529). Kassandra is first assumed to be incapable of meaningful discourse, "like some newly captured wild beast" (1063; cf. 1050–51). Her lyric lament of her personal sufferings is immediately pronounced inappropriate speech (1075, 1079). Her lyric account of past horrors is attributed to divine inspiration (1083), but her revelations of what is really happening and what is about to happen are not grasped. Abandoning lyric for the public discourse of iambics, she metaphorically comes out of the wild zone of a purely female stereotype (see Showalter 1985: 262–63):

All right then. My prophecy shall no longer be peeping
Out of veils like a newly wed bride,
But radiant-bright it is fit to dart forth
Blowing against the sun's risings, so that like a wave
A greater agony than this one shall dash
Against the rays of light. No longer shall I reason through riddles.

(1178–83)

For all their resistance to her knowledge, the chorus is at the end compelled to pay tribute to her courage (1302).

The characterization of Klytemnestra is of course decisive to any assessment of the sexual politics of the Agamemnon and crucial for the trilogy as a whole, though I have tried to show that an exclusive focus on Klytemnestra involves serious distortions. The complexity of her character, unsurpassed in surviving Greek drama, should itself be
warning against simple categorizations. We have noted already that as an aristocrat she displays in uncommon measure the common features of the super-rich—arrogance, bestial ferocity, criminal daring, and a self-serving conception of justice. As a woman, her chief characteristics are intelligence and guile, maternal love, and a keen interest in sex.

I have stated these characteristics in terms that reflect the Greek male ambivalence toward females, an ambivalence one might easily illustrate from Homer, Hesiod, and other Archaic poets. Males confront contradictions that are the consequences of the terms on which their dominance is exercised. Male reliance on physical force in the subjugation of women tends to develop mental powers in women that remain merely potential in most men (bards would be an exception). The exercise of intelligence from a position of unequal power is necessarily guile from the point of view of the male—plotting and verbal deceit.61 Male imposition on women of total responsibility for the nurture and rearing of children in general valorizes maternal affection but involves the threat of a far stronger bond between mother and child than between fathers and their children. Limitation of the female sexual role to the production of legitimate heirs renders particularly threatening the sexuality involved in procreation. The question remains whether Aeschylus, in his portrayal of Klytemnestra, passively reflects these traditional grounds of Greek misogyny or presents them as a problem.

I have already expressed my adherence to the latter alternative, but it is worth making some distinctions about the relative weight of Aeschylus' treatment of various aspects of Klytemnestra's personality. I agree, for example, with Winnington-Ingram (1948) that the full dramatization of her superior intelligence in her exchanges with the chorus, with Agamemnon, and implicitly with Aigisthos confront the audience with a problem that the Athenians themselves had not solved—the disparity between the degraded role assigned to women and their actual capacity for political power, their capacity for effective analysis, long-range planning, and persuasive discourse. No emphasis on her frightening criminality can completely efface the dramatic presentation of her real, effective superiority to the males who seek to dominate her and to whom the whole weight of aristocratic social structure assigns the dominant role.

At the same time, even on this level the Greek dramatic convention that grants the audience so much greater knowledge of the reality of the situation on stage than is possessed by the most intelligent protagonists does certainly render Klytemnestra's powers of discourse

61. Detienne and Vernant (1978) do not give a specifically class or gender focus to their analysis of cunning intelligence, but Brown (1969), whose work they seem not to know, brings out most effectively the correlation between powerlessness and cunning.
frightening as well as impressive. We know the truth of her marital infidelity and murderous intentions. We are thus invited to feel shock and horror at the grossness of her lies and the sinister intent of her verbal manipulation of the herald.

That the audience is invited to impute to Klytemnestra's character sincere maternal love for Iphigeneia as a component in her hatred of Agamemnon is reasonably clear. But this potentially positive, sympathetic motive is all but canceled by her unnatural treatment of Orestes—already adumbrated in the Agamemnon (877–85)—and of Electra (Zeitlin 1978: 157–58). Moreover, this blocking of maternal feeling is presented as a direct consequence of that frightening sexuality that males must grudgingly acknowledge is a precondition of the maternal function socially assigned to women.

As suggested above, Klytemnestra's criminal sexuality should not be seen in isolation from the general association of aristocratic crime with excessive vulnerability to eros. At the same time, it must be granted that in the Agamemnon Klytemnestra's sexuality receives such extraordinary dramatic heightening that it emerges almost sui generis—or more accurately, sui sexus. We have already glanced at one aspect of that dramatic heightening. The audience is invited by virtue of its privileged knowledge of her liaison with Aigisthos to understand her gross guile and hypocrisy toward Agamemnon and the chorus as largely inspired by her enthusiasm for adulterous sex. The other aspect involves a similar epistemological flattery of the audience—Klytemnestra's penchant for sexual metaphor, particularly metaphors that evoke perverse sexual pleasures. Describing rather gleefully her murder of her husband, she concludes:

So he fell, gasped out his life,
And breathing out a swift wound [stream] of blood,
Struck me with black raindrops of gory dew.
I felt joy at the Zeus-given liquid in the bud's birth pangs.

(1388–92)

The traditional metaphors of the procreative female as a field for sowing, of male fertilization as rain from Zeus (cf. Lloyd-Jones 1963: Frag. 25; duBois 1988: esp. 39–85), are grotesquely fused with a literal sprinkling of blood, itself transformed by a daring metaphor: whatever inspires sexual desire is itself a wound. In any case, her pleasure at

---

62Fraenkel finds the metaphor too bold and marks the passage corrupt. Denniston and Page defend it with a parallel from Euripides' Rhesus. The wounding metaphor is present in the first line of the Danaid fragment cited in the text (trōsa). Recall the cliche
the literal wound she has inflicted suggests what a later age would call sadism. The combination of this emotion with imagery normally evocative of the Greek male’s favored image of the female’s sexuality, as a happily passive field for his seed, must tap deep fears indeed.

Sadism is again suggested by Klytemnestra’s description of her emotional response to her murder of Cassandra: “For me she brought on / An added dessert [paropsonêma] to the luxury of my bed” (1446–47). The fusion here of sadism with the enthusiastic oral metaphor for her sexual activity gives a heightened perversity to the generalized aristocratic criminality evoked by the mention of luxury (khêdêi, 1447).

Klytemnestra’s allusion in this same speech to her sexual partner, “as long as Aigisthos kindles the fire on my hearth” (1435–36), is a less daring metaphor. It does, however, continue into the sexual sphere the reversal of traditional aristocratic associations with brilliance and fire imagery noted earlier. In this connection, it is striking that Klytemnestra’s first words in the play associate this imagery not with her sexuality as an independent woman but with her productivity as mother, a role in which she is completely ill-fated: “May Dawn be a bringer of good news, following the proverb, / Since, as child of Night, she should take after her kindly mother” (264–65). The masculine-formed adjective euangelos (“bringer of good news”) turns out to modify a feminine noun (Eôs, “dawn”). This facilitates a hint of both Orestes and Iphigeneia in the image of the radiance of dawn. But the epithet “kindly” for Klytemnestra as mother applies legitimately only for Iphigeneia at best. Taken ironically, it looks forward to the utter hostility of the mother-son relationship in the second play, unforgottably symbolized in Klytemnestra’s dream that she has given birth to a snake. The metaphorical play with the notion of inherited moral character—taking after one’s “kindly” mother—is two-edged. By insisting on the continuity between mother and son, it undercuts Apollo’s later attempt to deny the bond of kinship between mother and child, yet it here suggests as proof of the bond as a negative trait; Klytemnestra’s children are like her precisely to the extent that they are not kind. Even so, the reminder in this image of a mother whose daughter is murdered by her husband and who is herself murdered by her son is not without a certain ironic pathos.

The ambivalences in Klytemnestra’s portrayal reflect the broader dualities of the Agamemnon’s treatment of male-female relations. She is the prime candidate for woman as monster in both her intellectual and her sexual femininity. But even as deceiver she commands admiration,
while as mother she elicits some sympathy. Finally, even her frightening sexuality is presented as an extreme instance of a vulnerability to perverse passion characteristic of her class and most often illustrated by males, whose passions destroy whole societies. Once again, where Pindar drew his most confident images Aeschylus presents us with aristocratic sexuality and reproduction as sick, monstrous, and deadly.

Politics in the *Libation Bearers*

We must of necessity be briefer in dealing with the two following segments of the trilogy. Although neither is a simple text, the major issues are laid out with the richest range of ambiguities in the first play; and the movement of the trilogy as a whole is toward relative clarity.

The political regime of Klytemnestra and Aigisthos is described in the *Agamemnon* as a tyranny. Dependent on money and the power of hired bodyguards rather than legitimate inheritance and the military service of the demos, tyranny survives by intimidation. The trilogy opens with a haunting characterization of a fearful retainer forced to resort to riddling indirection, for a “great ox has stepped on my tongue” (*Ag.* 36–37). The second play makes the atmosphere of fear a keynote of life under tyranny. The *Agamemnon* hinted at significant institutional differences between the old monarchy and the new tyranny. Agamemnon, however authoritarian his rule, at least interacts with all the people in full assembly (*Ag.* 844–46) and seems to tolerate a certain freedom of speech in taking counsel (799–804). The second play displays what is often seen as an uncritical nostalgia for the old order of Agamemnon. It would be more accurate to say that it reflects in the chorus the traditional Greek disposition to see all change as bad. More profoundly, the second play embodies the dialectical perception built into the trilogy form that progress is not linear; insofar as tyranny is the negation of monarchy, it is worse; but, within the schema of the trilogy, it has made a decisive break with the past, thus transforming the conditions of possibility for positive change.63 Kingship is in fact viewed with a sense of distance which implies a historical judgment on the consciousness it fostered:

63Here again I cannot resist the parallel to the Cuban film trilogy *Lucía*. The second segment, exploring life under the neocolonialist puppet Machado, reflects the blackest despair as compared with the exultation following the defeat and punishment of Spain’s representatives. In the final scene of the second segment, the heroine heads for the river with the clear intention of committing suicide.
The religious awe [sebas]—once undisputed, indomitable, invincible—
Pervading the people's [damias] 
Talk and their minds, 
Now stands aside, and one lives 
In fear [phobeitai].

(Ch. 55–59)\(^64\)

Awed subservience to inherited authority with its aura of divinely sanctioned status (all this is suggested in the term sebas) may seem preferable to life under a regime of terror (phobos), but neither—to anticipate the third play—is preferable to the internalized and self-policing fear (deos, to deinon) of the law-abiding citizen of a democracy (cf. Eu. 517, 522).

Apart from this telling, if brief focus on the consciousness of the demos or the polis, both entities are conspicuous by their absence in comparison with the other two plays. Aeschylus has chosen a chorus of foreign-born slave women. They take for granted that Orestes' victory would be a boon to the city (Ch. 824) and restore “rule by the law of citizens” (864, trans. Douglas Young). They declare that by killing the tyrants Orestes has in fact “liberated the entire community [polin] of the Argives” (1046). But their status as foreigners reinforces the mood of alienation under the tyranny. As literal slave women, they are a concrete correlative of the metaphorical slavery imposed by the tyrants. Electra declares that she is “the equivalent of a slave” (135). Orestes complains that he was “shamelessly sold, though born of a free father” (915). In this context, an Athenian audience would hear specific connotations of liberation from the slavery of tyranny.

The chorus of helpless old men in the Agamemnon bravely threaten the tyrants with the people's punishment, and in the final crisis they are ready themselves to fight against the usurpers. In the Libation Bearers the tyranny appears securely established, and the chorus accordingly see themselves as a stasis (458), a subversive faction. For all their savagery in urging on the protagonists, when the assassination plot hangs on the edge they prepare themselves to play trimmers in the event that the plot should fail (871–74). This differentiation seems far more a comment on the changed consciousness under a tyranny than on the often presumed relative cowardice of women.

The critique of the aristocratic êthos so pervasive in the first play is not forgotten. Yet the components of the aristocratic nexus are significantly altered. There is still the pressure of aristocratic crime and its

\(^{64}\) Smyth (1926) brings out the specific political connotations of sebas: “the awe of majesty.” Douglas Young (1974) is explicit to the point of matter-of-fact banality: “Royalty once was viewed with respect by the people, / and the majesty of rulers.”
characteristic revenge/justice. In this sense the threatening Erinys continue to be synonymous with the inherited evil of the oikos. After the pained broodings of the Agamemnon chorus, this chorus seems unambiguously enthusiastic about the simple mechanism of murder breeding murder:

But it is custom/law [nomos] that drops of gore
Spilt on the ground demand other
Blood. For death shouts aloud, summoning the Erinys,
Who, from those slain before, brings
Disaster following on disaster.

(400–404)

Though they are full of lamentation for the “suffering bred in the family” (engenēs, 466), they take apparent satisfaction in the fact that the circle of blood remains institutionalized all in the family, that the only cure can come from “within the house” (471–75). For them, Justice is indistinguishable from the family’s revengeful daimōn:

The foundation of Justice is firm fixed.
Fate the swordmaker forges her weapon in advance.
The glorious Erinys that broods in secret
Is bringing the son home [domois]
To punish in time the pollution
Of blood spilled long ago.

(646–51)

The motif of the inherited ēthos is prominent. Though Electra prays to be more temperate than her mother (140–41), both brother and sister, as they prepare themselves for the monstrous crime they feel compelled to perpetrate, invoke the predatory beasts of the heroic tradition in terms that insist on an inherited ēthos from both parents. They are the “eagle’s nestlings bereft of their father” (247, cf. 256, 259, 501), who has been killed by a snake (249). Orestes again calls Klytemnestra a snake (994), and the chorus asserts that both tyrants were snakes (1048). But Orestes, in the climactic recognition scene of the play, adopts for himself the snake paradigm of Klytemnestra’s dream (540–50). A central irony of this hideous dream is that the human mother who gives birth to and attempts to nurse a snake is herself a metaphorical snake. Thus Orestes accepts more than a paradigm: he affirms his inherited snake nature from his mother. As in the key parable of the lion cub (Ag. 717–36), he “displays in time the ēthos he had from his parents” (Ag. 728) and pays back for his nurture with slaughter. So too
Electra in preparation for the confrontation insists that she (or both she and Orestes) has “a spirit from my mother like a wolf that lives on raw flesh” (*Ch. 421–22*). This language seems to insist that Electra and Orestes literally inherit the violence-prone natures of both their “heroic” parents. But that Aeschylus essentially considers this beast-like ferocity the mark of a class rather than the consequence of a specific genetic inheritance is suggested by the almost casual application of the key lion metaphor to both Pylades and Orestes. Indeed, the unusual collective singular, “a twofold lion” (938), insists on the absolute similarity of their natures.

So too with the linguistic emphasis on “daring” (*tolmē, tlaō*, etc.), which is easy to take narrowly as confirming the specific genetic continuity between parents and offspring but, like the association with predatory beasts, betokens also the continuity of the aristocratic *ēthos*. Electra indicts her “all-daring mother . . . who dared [pantolme mater . . . etlas] exclude citizens from a king’s burial resembling an enemy’s” (430–33). The words recall Agamemnon’s “all-daring mind,” he who “dared to become his daughter’s sacrificer” (*Ag. 221–25*). Yet Orestes, who in a similar tone alludes to the daring of his mother (*tolmēs, Ch. 996*), himself had to display a daring to return at all (*etolmēsen, 179*). When he confronts the full horror of his action, he attributes to Apollo the “seductive drugs” that inspired his daring (*philtra tolmes tēsde, 1028*). But that *tolmē* is a general characteristic is implied in a passage we have occasion to examine closely below (594–601).

In any case, alongside these indications of a relatively simple determinism of aristocratic inherited criminal *ēthos*, counterforces in the *Libation Bearers* lay the foundation for a way out. The aristocratic *trophe*, the coddling nurture bestowed on the lion cub, the corrupting luxury of extreme wealth are denied these two scions of the ruling *oikos*. Electra, as noted, lives like a slave, and Orestes is exiled from his father’s wealth (*Ch. 135–36*). Some of the odium of extreme privilege is thus lifted from them at the outset of the play, and the determinism of inherited evil is significantly qualified by this decisive removal from the luxurious atmosphere in which criminal tendencies are fostered. In the case of Orestes, the point is further emphasized by the insistence that the nurse Kilissa acted the role of his mother (Peradotto 1969: 260–61). Aeschylus here seems to anticipate the valorization by some of the Sophists of environment over heredity—as we later see, a crucial point of ideological struggle in the attempt to forge a democratic theory of society and human nature.

65 Cf. The plural verbs *tukhoimen . . . pathoimen*. Lloyd-Jones (1970) unjustifiably narrows the focus exclusively to Orestes.
The Politics of Aeschylean Religion

To analyze the role of Apollo, the major counterforce in the *Libation Bearers* to the apparent reinforcement of a mechanical determinism of ineluctable and ever-escalating aristocratic vendetta, I turn to a topic I have thus far barely touched on, a topic that until fairly recently has been the central focus of most discussions of the trilogy, namely, the presentation of the gods. The sheer wealth of argumentation threatens like a lodestone to draw all other aspects of the play into the religious nexus. At the risk of seeming baldly dogmatic, I argue that Aeschylus, just as he historicizes politics and sexual conflict—albeit in differing degrees—presents an essentially historicizing vision of relations between human beings and divinities (Kitto 1956: 69). Bluntly stated, he presents as characteristic of the heroic, patriarchal aristocrats in the first play a readiness to assume that the gods and most especially Zeus—the highest male god, the patriarch of the gods (cf. Calhoun 1935)—are on their side. This presentation is both a reflection of Homeric, especially Iliadic, practice and a critique of it. The readiness, most obvious in the case of Agamemnon, to project onto the city's gods his own ambitions and to claim validation from the same source (e.g., Ag. 811) is part of the aristocratic arrogance and self-delusion that dooms him. So too, in a less-developed form, Aigisthos and Klytemnestra claim divine support for their criminal acts (Ag. 973–74, 1432, 1580). The chorus, as nonactors, as mediating figures, do not simply reflect this aristocratic view so familiar in Aeschylus' contemporary Pindar; they are the chief vehicle for transforming an ideological given of the ruling class into something profoundly problematic.

We come thus to the famous “Hymn to Zeus” at *Agamemnon* 160–83. The chorus confront the horror of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter as an apparent implication of Zeus's role as guarantor that such crimes as Paris's will not go unpunished. Whereas the aristocratic figures appeal confidently to such a Zeus, indeed find in him a ready patent for their own ambitions, the chorus see Zeus himself as a question, as the locus of the apparently irresolvable “contradiction of an unspeakable crime committed in a righteous cause” (Peter Smith 1980: 41). There is more than religious deference in their recourse to Zeus as

---

66Peter Smith's book, which devotes ninety-one pages to the twenty-two lines of the “Hymn to Zeus” (Ag. 160–83), is symptomatic. It will be clear to anyone who has read Smith's painstaking study how profoundly at odds I am with much of his argument. At the same time, I wish to record my appreciation for the rigor and precision of his discussion, which must fill with trepidation anyone who attempts to cover briefly ground he has so thoroughly tilled.
a problem: “Zeus, whoever he is, if it is pleasing / To him to be called by this name, / In this way do I address him” (Ag. 160–62). Zeus is not a solace to which they turn in grief, but the very source of their mental anguish. There is an intellectually and morally paralyzing contradiction for them between, on the one hand, his status as patent for royal privilege, royal crime, child murder, and a hideously destructive war and, on the other, his role as the recourse of the oppressed, as their ultimate hope that the crimes of the oppressors will not go unchecked—despite the oppressors’ apparent monopoly of power. It is a contradiction between the Zeus of the *Iliad* and the Zeus who figures in the prayers and hopes of the humble and oppressed of the *Odyssey* and in the poems of Hesiod. This is above all the Zeus whose victory in the *Theogony* is the only counterforce to the downward cycle of intensified injustice, the oppression of the peasants by the *basilées* (Vernant 1965: 19–47). I can only express my amazement at those scholars who ignore the force of the Hesiodic allusion in the antistrophe of this nonprayer:

Not only is this stanza the poet’s self-reflexive gesture toward the Hesiodic source of his own dialectical trilogy form; the three stanzas of the hymn are themselves dialectical. The first, as noted above, addresses Zeus as problem. It identifies him as both the source and the potential

67Although I do not see the same evidence of a “more sublime religious feeling” which Fraenkel (100) finds in these words, I agree with him that “for all their apparent conventionality, [they] make ready beforehand for the conclusion that crowns the whole, the idea which is central in the poet’s thought.” I take that “idea” to be the historical relativity of Zeus.

68Peter Smith (1980: 15) nicely points out that the chorus “do not succeed in addressing Zeus in the second person. The ‘Hymn to Zeus’ approaches the form of a hymn but never reaches it.” On the other hand, I find Smith’s dismissal of Clay’s and other attempts to make sense of the passage (60–61, he omits any reference to Solmsen here) unsatisfactory. That we have here merely a rhetorical “process of elimination” (19) strikes me as quite inadequate.

69Fraenkel, ad loc., nicely defends an allusion to the pancration in the word *pammachôi*, but I think its broader connotation of pure aggressiveness is more important for my purposes.
escape from intolerable mental anguish, the god who both favors the powerful and upholds justice for the powerless. The second stanza negates this contradiction by evoking the essential optimism of the Hesiodic evolution as an unambiguous victory over the aggressive daring (thrasus) of the past. The third stanza aims toward, adumbrates in highly abstract and ambiguous language, a resolution that incorporates both the full agony of the process and the decisive triumph of a movement forward:

Zeus, who fixed the path to wisdom for
Mortals by laying down that learning through suffering
Should hold authoritative sway.
There drips instead of sleep, pain-remembering
Suffering at the heart: and to those who are
Unwilling there comes the wisdom of self-restraint.
I imagine there is a blessing from the gods, but a violent one—
They that sit on the ship bench that commands respect.

(Ag. 177–84)

Two features here point toward the democratic resolution of the third play. The powerful image of internalized anxiety as the source of self-restraint anticipates the emphasis in the third play on internalized fear (to deinon, deos) as the essential psychological correlative of an effective government of laws. Scholars have been at pains to tell us how meaningless is the famous phrase pathei mathos, for none of the protagonists learns much from his or her suffering. What is inadequately appreciated is that the language of the passage itself establishes a homology between the authority of the principle pathei mathos and the attainment of self-restraint (sophronein), a correlation that is by no means inherent in the traditional associations of the phrase. In the context of the trilogy, I find it impossible not to hear an echo of this passage in the choral song of the Eumenides in which the Erinyes shift decisively toward articulation of the democratic defense of government by law:

70I read the nominative form biasos with Denniston and Page contra Fraenkel, who defends the adverbial form found in the codices.


72Dodds (1960: 29–31) offers a sympathetic view of the relevance of pathei mathos to sophronun and of the development of the trilogy as a whole but does not relate it to democratic theory as such. See Macleod 1982: 135–136; for all his eagerness to downgrade a political focus, Macleod is perceptive about political evidence. For the range of meanings and the centrality of the concept of sophronun in Greek ethics and politics, see North 1966.
There is a place where Fear [to deinon] is well
And must remain seated as watchman over the wits.
It is beneficial
To exercise self-restraint under duress [sóphronein hupo stenei].

(Eu. 517–21)

It has long been recognized that Athena’s direct address to the Athenian people, urging the preservation of their form of government, closely echoes this chorus and thus prepares the way for the eventual reconciliation (cf. Eu. 681–706). Insistence that fear of legally imposed punishment keeps citizens of a democracy reasonable, or self-restrained, seems to have been a topos of fifth-century democratic theory. Thus the argument that pathei mathos cannot have a paradigmatic force, that it can be relevant only to the criminal who suffers (Gagarin 1976: 212 n. 24), weakens unnecessarily the force of kuriōs ekhein (“to hold authoritative sway”). If the point is the establishment of the principle that all criminals will learn a lesson, then it is legitimate to see adumbrated here a democratic society in which discipline and liability to punishment are equally in force for all. The outstanding characteristic of the aristocratic criminals is their blindness, in the very moment of demanding punishment for the crimes of their enemies, to their own liability. A similar, key message of the whole trilogy for the Athenian people is summed up explicitly in the farewell of the transformed Erinyes to the “Attic host . . . acquiring self-restraint in time [sóphronountes en khronōi]” (Eu. 997–1000).

73 Thus I cannot agree that Zeitlin’s (1978: 67) characterization of the Erinyes (“they champion a justice which is blind, archaic, barbaric, and regressive”), though justified by the earlier part of the play, represents the whole story.

74 Thucydides 2.37.3 (the Funeral Oration): “Though we associate in our private affairs without nastiness, we do not transgress the law [paranomoumen] in our public life [ta démosia] most of all because of fear [deos], by consistent hearkening [akroësēi, i.e., obedience] both to those in authority and to the laws.” See references in Headlam and Thomson 1966 (1938) on Eu. 517. Democritos B41 goes a step farther, but clearly within the context of the same debate in political theory: “Not through fear [phobos], but through what is needed [to deon] refrain from crimes.” Indeed, I suspect a pun between to deon and deos, the more commonly used term for “fear” in such debates.

75 Although I admire the subtlety of Goldhill’s demonstration of Aeschylus confronting his audience with an epistemological crisis of accepted key terms and the processes of human communication (1984), I remain unconvinced that radical skepticism is the central or even a major thrust of Aeschylus’ intellectual and political enterprise. More immediately here, I would argue that the paradigmatic correlation of pathei mathos and sóphrousunê does not seem far removed from the democratic praise of forethought, of discussion and debate prior to action. I resist the temptation to cite Prometheus Bound and call attention instead to Democritos B66: “It is better to deliberate before action than to repent afterwards” (trans. Freeman) and Thucydides 2.40.2–3 (again the Funeral Oration): “For we do not consider the discussions [logous] constitute harm to accomplishments [ergois], but on the contrary, the real harm comes from rushing to needed action
The second feature of this final stanza of the Hymn to Zeus which suggests democratic discipline is the image in the last line of a ship bench, which, as Fraenkel has so painstakingly established, is the seat of the helmsman. What better image for bringing home to a nation of democratic sailors the idea of authority that demands absolute obedience yet, for all its severity, is a “blessing”? Both adherents and enemies of the democracy were well aware of the decisive role of its highly trained navy. Thus, the chorus here, while locked into the contradictions of aristocratic justice, point in highly abstract terms toward a vision of justice which is given explicit and concrete embodiment in the Athens of the final play. That their initial despair and final hope are associated with Zeus is not a Christian imposition (Gagarin 1976: 149) but a virtually inevitable consequence of the poet’s perception of the contradiction inherent in the historically differing class roles of Zeus. The Zeus near whom sit the self-restrained Attic hosts (Eu. 997–1000) is distinctly changed from the Zeus who validates the Atreidai’s throne and scepter (Ag. 43) and sends them against Troy “over a polygamous woman” (Ag. 60–63; cf. Macleod 1982: 133–38).

In the Libation Bearers there is a clearly marked difference between, on the one hand, the direct orders (backed by threats for noncompliance) given Orestes by Apollo through his oracle at Delphi and, on the other, the ambiguity of bird signs, their interpretation by Kalkhas, and the readiness of ruling-class figures in the Agamemnon to assume that Zeus is on the side of wealth and power. If Agamemnon “finds fault with not a single seer” (Ag. 186), we nonetheless are invited along with the chorus to view him most unfavorably for following such signs (Ag. 799–804). The difficulty lies in defining with any precision the nature of the difference in the religion of the Libation Bearers and interpreting it in the larger context of the movement of the trilogy.

Given the frequent collapse of the distinction between monarchy, aristocracy, and tyranny noted earlier, it would be futile to look for a specifically tyrannical form of religious experience. An Athenian

[epi ha dei ergoi elthein] without being instructed in advance by discussion [me prodidithenai mallon logois].”

Thucydides focuses repeatedly on the decisive role of long practice and technique in naval warfare. So, for example, Perikles points out that “naval competence is a matter of technē,” which in turn implies constant practice (1.142.10). The Spartans had no monopoly on discipline.

It would be tempting to trace the role of Delphi in the history of tyranny. Gyges seems in no small measure to have owed his successful coup to effective bribing of Delphi (Herodotus 1.13–14), whereas the bribes of the Alcmaeonidai lead Delphi to acquire great credit in the liberation of Athens from her tyrants (Herodotus 5.62–63). Winnington-Ingram (1948: 142) reminds us of Delphi’s siding with the Persians in the great war, something that just might lead some of the audience to question the claims of Apollo to absolute truth.
Aeschylus' Oresteia: Dialectical Inheritance

The audience might well feel a special appropriateness in the involvement of Delphi in the putting down of a tyranny, but the deeper meaning of the religious language in the Libation Bearers must be sought in relation to the clearer polarity between the religious assumptions of the heroic rulers in the Agamemnon and the religious implications of Athena and the transformed "Kindly Goddesses" of the final play.

As we have seen, that polarity rests in part at least on a historical opposition already present between the Iliad on the one hand and the Odyssey and Hesiod on the other. Insofar as Electra and Orestes are reduced to slaves and exiled from the wealth and station they would normally have inherited, they approach the status of the oppressed in the Odyssey or Hesiod, and their relation to divinity is thereby transformed. They appeal for divine redress against criminal power that seems to have total control of the situation.

But Orestes is also heir to the throne of Agros and all its wealth. Unlike Agamemnon, Klytemnestra, and Aigisthos, however, Orestes never uses alleged divine injunctions as a pretext for relatively base personal motives. On the contrary, he is careful to distinguish his personal and political motives from the orders of the god (Ch. 300–304), which implies a relatively greater sophistication about motives that points toward the court's consideration of motive (e.g., Eu. 426–28).

Whereas the aristocratic criminals of the first play infer divine validation of their behavior either from signs or from their sense of the logic of the situation, there is no hint in the Agamemnon of divine punishment if they fail to carry out the alleged injunctions of the gods. Yet this element is given great emphasis and vividness in Orestes' account of Apollo's behests (Ch. 271–85). Moreover, the gods in the Agamemnon are never represented as offering to protect the agents of their justice from its consequences, most obviously because Agamemnon and Aigisthos are too obtuse to recognize that the justice they exact involves them in injustice. But even Klytemnestra, who initially attempts to deny personal complicity, is eventually forced to acknowledge the chorus's demonstration of the logic of further punishment. Her hopes of forming a pact with and perhaps bribing the daimôn of the house may seem pathetically naive, but she never claims that her role as agent entitles her to divine protection.78

Orestes, on the other hand, is given specific pledges of protection and purification by Apollo (Ch. 1030–32). The very offer implies a recognition that following the god's commands will involve not only physical danger but moral danger as well. This fact is explicitly

---

78 The idea of bribing the daimôn I find only in Douglas Young's translation: "To offer the Demon a share of our wealth is little to me, who possess it all."
acknowledged by Orestes (Vickers 1979: 392–93). Before the murder, he wishes only for death should he succeed in killing his mother (437). Confronted by her self-defense, he retorts: “You did what you ought not to have done, now you will suffer what you ought not to suffer” (930), a formulation that acknowledges the criminality of exacting so horrible a vengeance (Goldhill 1984: 183). Once his mother is dead, he does not boast of his accomplishment so much as acknowledge that his “victory” entails “unenviable pollutions” (1017). In short, there is a correlation between the explicitness of the divinity and the greater honesty of the hero. I believe that this emphasis prepares the way for government by law, according to which correct behavior is seen as the consequence of specific injunctions and specific threats and individual motivation is not merely a matter of unthinking whim but something held accountable in court.

Apollo, then, to this extent represents the progressive moment in the religious experience of the Libation Bearers and is clearly an improvement over the vindictive, patriarchal, would-be rapist of the Agamemnon. But his injunctions are nonetheless in harmony with the self-consciously primitive invocations of Agamemnon’s ghost which take up so much of the dramatic time of the play. This is not to deny that Aeschylus or his audience may have believed in ghosts. Various references, not least significant those in Herodotus, suggest quite the opposite. What is primitive here in relation to the framework of ideas available in the trilogy itself is the invocation of Agamemnon’s aid in the perpetuation of specifically aristocratic vengeance, where laws, courts, and political institutions are irrelevant. As we see below, the text of the trilogy as a whole is far from repudiating the irrational aspects of the moral authority of ghosts; but insofar as there is forward movement at all, it is toward a vision of society in which rational institutions are in harmony with the moral stirrings provoked by angry ghosts.

Patriarchy and Misogyny in the Libation Bearers

The Agamemnon contains a significant implicit indictment of aristocratic patriarchy and, despite strongly negative elements in the portrayal of Klytemnestra, an extensive and sympathetic focus on women not only as victims of that patriarchy but also as full human beings possessed of superior intellectual qualities. The mutilated prologue of the Libation Bearers heavily marks a dialectical shift to valorization of paternal power which builds throughout the play to the climax in mother murder: “Hermes of the Underworld, thou who watchest over powers
inherited from fathers” (patrōi’ . . . kratē, Ch. 1; cf. patri, 4; pater, 8; patri, 14; patros, 19). It would be tiresome and pointless to cite the almost obsessive emphasis on the enduring power of the dead father, the formal invocation of which takes up nearly a fifth of the play (315–509) and hovers over most of it (Goldhill 1984: 99–207). The ending of this long invocation suggests, on the principle qui s’excuse s’accuse, the poet’s own consciousness of this extraordinary emphasis: “Surely the two of you drew out this discourse to a length none could fault” (510).79

One might expect that the Libation Bearers, with a chorus composed of women slaves and containing repeated laments by an oppressed daughter, echoes the indictment of male power in the Agamemnon—except for the fact that so much of the blame and hostility are directed at the queen’s role in this oppression. The dramatically specific focus on the hatefulness of Klytemnestra is generalized by the chorus into a seemingly categorical indictment of the whole female gender, or at least of female sexuality:

Many are the fearful pangs of terrors
That the earth nourishes,
And the embraces of the sea team with monsters
Hostile to mortals. Harm too comes from meteors—
Torch in mid-air.
Both flying creatures and those that move on the ground
Might tell the stormy rage of whirlwinds.

But who could give an account
Of the over daring man’s mind
And bold-minded woman’s
All-daring passions [erōtas] that
Share pastures with disasters for mortals?
Love passion that is not love [aperōtos erōs],
Overwhelming the female, wins a perverse victory
Over the yoked together unions
Both of beasts and mortals.

(585–601)

This sweeping rhetorical structure, a true priamel (Bundy 1962: 4–5), juxtaposes as foil the sources of danger in the physical cosmos and

79 In the Agamemnon a self-reflexive comment on the length of a speech is unmistakably ironic (Ag. 916). I do not mean here to imply that Aeschylus disapproves of his own artistic choice in devoting so much dramatic time to this invocation, but I think it is legitimate to see the choral comment as insisting—in the face of potential criticism—on the validity of this choice. Vickers (1979: 388) suggests plausibly that the point is to stress the religious propriety of this threnos, which had earlier been impiously denied the murdered father.
contrasts them to those arising from human passion, climaxing in female passion. The inclusion of male passion (cf. andros, 594-95) is usually ignored, but it constitutes a significant reminder. Although the emphasis has decisively shifted to the female, the indictment of male passion in the first play is not negated completely. Indeed the verbal play of aperōtōs ērōs parallels the verbal play of orgai periorgōi (or periorgōs) in the earlier evocation of the hideous destructiveness of male passion (Ag. 214-17). There is a significant parallel too between, on the one hand, the verbal play on ērōs that wins a perverse victory (paranikai) for the females it has conquered (thēlukratēs) and, on the other, the ērōs Klytemnestra envisions attacking the victorious Greek army at Troy so that they are defeated (nikōmenous) by hope of profits (Ag. 341-42). The redundant emphasis on daring (tol-, tlē-, -tol-) likewise echoes the relentless focus on the destructive daring of both male and female criminals in the Agamemnon. Finally, the broadly anthropological sweep of this passage confronts the grim paradox that the greatest threats to human civilization derive not from hostile phenomena external to it but from the passions of human beings themselves. This perspective is implicit in the wide range of bestial imagery applied in the Agamemnon to all the representatives of aristocratic criminality.

This is by no means to deny the intense misogyny of this choral ode, but merely to situate it in the broader context of the first play with which it is in dialectical tension—to insist that the indictment of female passion is not dramatically or ideologically gratuitous or devoid of links to the more obvious class-based indictment of aristocratic male and female passion. We may also note that the only lines in this chorus which explicitly qualify a seemingly categorical attack on the whole female gender use language highly suggestive of this dialectical tension. The chorus interrupts its lurid catalogue of mythic female crimes to comment: “I honor a home’s hearth devoid of passion’s heat / And a woman’s spearpoint [aichma, i.e., spirit] devoid of daring [atolmon]” (Ch. 629-30). Each of these two lines contains an oxymoron (cold hearth, unadventurous fighting spirit) that defines the acceptable female as the antithesis of the fire and martial aggressiveness traditionally associated with the heroic aristocratic male and scathingly criticized in the first play. Although a contemporary feminist may view this as an oppressively limiting vision of female options, these lines do strike a distinctly different note from the ferocious misogyny of the rest of the ode. On the contrary, this note is parallel to the valorization in the Ag-

---

86 This metaphorical extension of the word for spearpoint to mean an aggressive, martial spirit is normally applied to males. It occurs of a female elsewhere only at Ag. 483, where the chorus applies it sarcastically to Klytemnestra.
amemnon of the dusky dwellings of the humble in contrast with the gold-spangled mansions of the rich (Ag. 772–81)—a contrast which, we may note in passing, is vividly dramatized in the juxtaposition of the good mother figure, the nurturing and loving serving-woman Kilissa (Ch. 731–65), to the evil mother figure, Queen Klytemnestra, who abandons and rejects her children.

The climax of this choral ode, the goal toward which its misogyny aims, is the insistence—just after Orestes has accepted the paradigm of the snake child (Ch. 540–50) and just before he first confronts his mother face-to-face—that the anticipated murder is justice pure and simple. Self-consciously the chorus insists on the justice of their mythic exempla, then vividly evokes the murder thrust as itself the act of Justice:

Which of these [myths] do I not justly [endikōs] rouse up?
The sword near the breast
Drives its sharp point right through
At the agency of Justice [dias Dikas].

As a dramatic character, this chorus is marked throughout by its own ferocity and penchant for oversimplification. To characterize women in this way entails a common negative stereotype. But the dramatic function of this tirade is to contrast the chorus's moral simplicity with the intolerable moral complexity of Orestes' murder of his mother.

One's assessment of the misogyny of the second play turns finally on whether one feels that the play as a whole, not to mention the trilogy as a whole, invites the audience to accept comfortably the killing of Klytemnestra that the virulent arguments of this choral ode seem intended to justify. Taken at face value, the misogynistic perspective ought to sweep aside any lingering qualms about mother murder. Yet here, more obviously than in the Agamemnon, there is a striking countermovement that insists on the problematic character of this murder. Where Homer before him simply suppresses any hint of a difficulty (Od. 3.309–10) and Sophokles after him arranges the plot in such a way as to minimize the murder of Klytemnestra, Aeschylus uses all the resources of his art to evoke the full horror of the confrontation and the hideous consequences of Orestes' act.

Orestes initially hopes to encounter Aigisthos seated on his father's throne (Ch. 571–76) but finds he has first to deceive his mother. There is no dramatic confrontation on stage with the morally uninteresting Aigisthos, who is dispatched first. But the confrontation with Klytemnestra is truly climactic. By a dazzling coup de theatre (Kitto 1956: 55;
Knox 1979: 42), the apparent nonspeaking supernumerary Pylades must emerge from silence to counter the daring and paralyzing exposure of the maternal breast (896–98). Instead of triumph and jubilation after the deed, the audience is confronted by the psychological collapse of the “hero” and his self-imposed exile as he races off stage from his internal nightmare. I cite this familiar evidence specifically in relation to the sexual politics of the play. The play emerges as dialectical in presenting the contradiction between hatred of women and the disastrous consequences of the most extreme attempt to defy the female. The unique distinction of Aeschylus’ treatment is that the dialectic of political change is inextricably meshed with the dialectic of sexual conflict. The possibilities of resolution on both levels are thus the most fundamental subject of the final play. But more immediately it must be acknowledged that the whole final play stands as a dramatic demonstration that the justice of mother murder was in fact neither pure nor simple.

Democracy in the *Eumenides*

We come at last to the final play. On the political level, we have already alluded to the *Eumenides* as representing Athenian democracy. But now one has to ask, democracy in what sense? What specific elements beyond the shift of scene to Athens evoke democracy in a form recognizable for a contemporary audience? Dodds (1960: 20) calls attention to the absence of King Theseus, an absence unique in surviving dramatic presentations of mythic Athens. On a more fundamental level, I argue that the Athenian audience is invited to infer their democracy from the new institution established during the play, the court of the Areiopagos.

Such an interpretation, though not new, may seem strange in view of the history of the council (*boule*) of the Areiopagos (“Hill of Ares”), an outcropping of rock at the front of the Athenian acropolis where traditionally the council met. Rhodes suggests that “perhaps it [the council] was thought to have been founded by Theseus when he created the

81 Vickers (1979: 403–5) is at pains to stress how the full characterization of the nurse’s role as true nurturer undercuts Klytemnestra’s gesture here. He has a point. Goldhill (1984: 169–70) argues more subtly that the introduction of the nurse contributes to the separation of the maternal function from the biological parent and thus prepares for Apollo’s separation of the mother from generation itself. Yet the whole impact of this scene depends on the enduring power, so hideously evoked in Klytemnestra’s dream of nursing a serpent, of the breast as symbol of the intimate bond between mother and child. That it echoes a famous appeal in Homer (*Il. 22.79–83*) only adds to its power.
Eupatrid order” (1985: 79), but others (Hignett 1958: 79–82) thought Solon created it. It is more likely that Solon transformed what had been a self-constituting council of the heads of the most powerful families into a council of ex-archons, thus a council at least indirectly integrated with the voting power of the demos. The archon, elected annually from the highest income class by a vote of the whole citizenry, was the chief executive of Athens until 501/500, when the board of ten annually elected generals seems to have begun to assume the executive role. Until Solon’s time the council of the Areiopagos seems to have functioned as the chief vehicle of aristocratic domination. Solon’s creation of a separate *boulē* of four hundred to prepare the agenda of the people’s assembly presumably entailed a significant curtailment of its prior absolute authority, but *Athenaion Politeia* is quite clear in specifying that the Areiopagos “had oversight of the laws . . . kept close watch over the majority of and the most important of political matters” (8.4). Kleisthenes, in creating a new five-hundred member council for the people’s assembly, created in principle a substantial counterforce to the sweeping powers of the old Areiopagos council. But it is possible, even likely, that Kleisthenes as an exarchon was himself a member of this council (Hignett 1958: 128 n. 3) and left its traditional prerogatives formally untouched. Only with the introduction in 487–86 B.C. of choosing archons by lot rather than by election was its prestige doomed and the exclusive executive role of the board of ten generals consolidated. The reforms of Ephialtes in 462 B.C., often called a revolution (Davies 1978: 63–75; Hignett 1958: 193–213), definitively swept away all the powers of the Areiopagos except jurisdiction over murder trials, the function they have in the *Eumenides*. I believe that Aeschylus, in making the Areiopagos in this role emblematic of the new democracy, is engaging in just the sort of political tact, or cooptation, that Athena engages in when she transforms the hostile Erinyes into the supportive Eumenides. Tactical ambiguity is the essential feature of this strategy.

Athena declares that she will choose members of the first court from her best citizens (*Eu. 487*). Given the elite character of the Areiopagos, especially before 487–86 B.C. (Hignett 1958: 188), it is easy to take this phrase in strictly class terms. The terminology, however, is ambiguous. She does not use a form of *aristos*, which since Homer had connoted membership in the ruling class. The abstract plural *ta beltata* with a dependent genitive leaves open whether a moral or a class sense is uppermost, though *LSJ* indicates that *beltistos* is not used to designate an aristocrat before Xenophon.82 Perhaps the most unambiguously democratic feature of these first judges is their anonymity. It is at least

82See Thucydides 6.39.1 or 8.108.4.
arguable that Aeschylus could have included a dazzling catalogue of old Attic names if he had wished to insist on the heroic character of the early jury, but arguments from silence are dubious at best. What is clear from repeated addresses and references throughout the play (Eu. 566, 638, 681, 807, 854, 911, 927, 948, 997, 1010) is that the judges are consistently represented as the whole people of Athens (Taplin 1977: 390; Macleod 1982: 127). In particular, the responses of the litigants—on the one hand, gratitude and the promise of an alliance (762–77), on the other, bitter threats to pollute the land (782–87)—insist that the court stands directly for the whole Athenian people.

Athena’s extensive charge to the jury (681–710) adds to the ambiguity of the court’s political character. Her wording suggests to some the unique and sweeping constitutional powers of the Areiopagos before the radical reforms of 462 B.C., a position that has had its defenders, despite its awkward consequences (Dover 1957: 234; Davies 1978: 74–75). I believe on the contrary that the court of the Areiopagos is intended to stand metaphorically for the whole set of Athenian legal institutions (Macleod 1982: 127–29). The ambiguity is then deliberate, a strategy consonant with the quest for resolution of threatening political tensions in Athens. But I also believe that the primary thrust of Athena’s speech is made unmistakably clear by her insistence on the absolute uniqueness of her new court: “You would have a bulwark of the land and salvation of the city / Such as no other human beings have— / Neither among the Scythians nor in Pelops’s territory” (701–3). One may doubt that the average Athenian at this period knew much about the social and political institutions of the Scythians; indeed, they probably evoked the anarchy against which Athena had just warned (696). But virtually every Athenian had some notion of the tight oligarchic control exercised in Sparta by the gerousia (council of elders) and/or the ephors, who were both a court and, as their name implies, supervisors of the constitution.83 To Athenians the reference to Sparta may well have suggested the alternative of despotism in Athena’s warning (696). In any case, the claim of uniqueness would be severely

83A. H. M. Jones acknowledges that ancient authors like Isocrates and Demosthenes represented the gerousia as “virtually the governing body of Sparta” (1967: 18), but goes on to note, “in the historical record it is conspicuous by its absence” (18). Forrest concludes that for the early period at least, “it controlled virtually everything” (1968: 47). In any case, it was a pretty typical oligarchic council. The ephorate is, to be sure, more complicated. Within the tight oligarchy of true Spartans, it could be argued that it was the most democratic aspect of the Spartan constitution, since its members were elected annually from the Spartan citizenry without regard to class (Forrest 1968: 76; Andrewes 1966: 8–10). In practice, however, and presumably from the point of view of the putative average Athenian (i.e., non-aristocrats), it probably seemed the decisive Spartan institution for maintaining the dominance of the few over the many inhabitants of the “territory of Pelops.”
undercut if the audience conceived of the new court as also fundamentally oligarchic. Athenian pride in the uniqueness of her democracy as a whole is well attested in later sources. In fact, the terms in which Athena in the *Eumenides* explains her decision to avoid a unilateral decision by forming this court (470–88) closely parallel a speech from an earlier tragedy (*Suppliant Women*) long recognized as strikingly democratic. Davies cites and translates Aeschylus' words from before the revolution of 462 as a good instance of the projective force of art:

The language which he gives in 464–3 to the Argive king... could serve as a programme for much that was done in the next ten years:

You are not suppliants at my own hearth;
If the city in common incurs pollution,
In common let the people work a cure.
But I would make no promise until
I share with all my citizens.

Or again:

Judgement is not easy to give; choose me not as judge.
I said it previously too, that without the people
I should not take this step, even if I have the power, lest
The people say
'You honoured strangers and destroyed the city.'

(*Suppliant Women* 365–69 and 397–401)

(Davies 1978: 71–72)

Apart from Aeschylus' own texts, the earliest description of Greek democracy which has come down to us, the constitutional debate in Herodotus (3.80–83), gives pride of place to legal institutions:84 “[Whereas] the monarch/tyrant [*mounarchon ... andra ge turannon*] disturbs the inherited laws, rapes women and puts people to death without a trial... the rule of the majority [*plēthos archon*] has in the first place, the loveliest of all names, *isonomie* [equality before the law]” (3.80.5–6).85

To be sure, Herodotus also cites offices by lot, power subject to scrutiny (*hypeuthunos*), and public deliberation of all decisions (3.80.6). None of these is explicitly alluded to in the third play of the *Oresteia*,
but the trilogy as a whole focuses on justice as emblematic of whole political systems, character types, and the relation of the sexes. Thus Aeschylus’ view may not be so far from that of the author of the Aristototelian Constitution of Athens: “When the people have a right to vote in the courts, they become the masters of the state” (Ath. Pol. 9).

The reference in Herodotus to rape of women suggests that ideologically at least, whatever the reality, democratic males prided themselves on their relatively more respectful treatment of women. It is arguable that this perspective is implicit in Aeschylus’ plot choice in the Suppliant Women according to which women’s right to choose or reject their husbands is judged worth a war to defend. Moreover, the entire analysis in the Agamemnon of aristocratic criminality could reasonably be summed up in Herodotus’ characterization of the tyrant/monarch as “not subject to scrutiny” (aneuthunoi, 3.80.3). In the Eumenides, Aeschylus has chosen to stress not simply the external restraints of a government of laws but the internal, psychological inhibitions fostered by such a society. The principle of open public debate and even, as Dodds notes (1960: 20), a boulê (advisory council) is taken for granted as a feature of Agamemnon’s inherited monarchy as differentiated from the closed tyranny of Klytemnestra and Aigisthos. Moreover, the grounds for Athena’s refusal to decide the case herself (alluded to earlier) clearly imply the fundamental assumption of specifically democratic decision making: “The matter is greater than any mortal is minded / To judge it. Nor indeed is it right for me / To decide a murder case fraught with bitter wrath” (Eu. 470–73). The inadequacy of a single judge, human or divine, is offered as the basis for a group decision, and the chief advantage of such a decision is precisely that it diffuses the hostility provoked by unilateral decisions. Thus, despite some ambiguities surrounding the description of the court, it nonetheless emerges as the symbolic representation of Athenian democracy insofar as it implies the rule of law, the participation of anonymous citizens, and group decision making.

The specific ethos of Athenian democracy emerges more clearly by contrast to the aristocratic ethos delineated in the Agamemnon and the tyrannical atmosphere evoked especially in the Libation Bearers. As we have already seen, the aristocratic ethos was characterized by its corrupt relation to wealth (olbos, ploutos, etc.), manifested in daring (tolma), in

86Podlecki (1966a: 115) objects to an association of anti-aristocratic feeling with an anti-tyrannical sentiment on the grounds that aristocrats were inevitably the tyrant’s bitterest enemies. The situation was not always so clear as that; but, even granting common hostility between them, it does not follow that from the point of view of the demos both could not share similar faults of character. As noted earlier, aristocrats seem to have retained considerable power under Peisistratos.
perverted passion (*erōs*) for glory and gain achieved through destruction of innocents, and finally in its consistent underevaluation of women. Justice, which for aristocrats is always excessive revenge, is legitimated by a self-serving assumption of divine sanction. The whole nexus of mutually reinforcing factors bears the stamp of inherited evil, though its real origins in patriarchy and aristocracy are clear. The political atmosphere of tyranny—already largely assumed in the *Agamemnon*—is characterized by profound fear and anxiety, imposed silences, indirection, factions, plots, deceit. In the *Eumenides*, prosperity (*olbos*) is presented, in lines that clearly echo the meditation on excessive wealth and the inheritance principle in the *Agamemnon* (see 750–71), as the "offspring [tekos] of a healthy mind" (*Eu.* 534–37). The transformed Erinys, no longer synonymous with inherited evil, promise to the Attic people wealth (*ploutos*) "bestowed by fate" and "decent" (both meanings of *aisimos*, see *Eu.* 996). This wealth is not associated with gold and luxury but with the fertility of the land; it is peasant, agricultural wealth. Even the color purple, the symbol of blood-stained aristocratic arrogance in the *Agamemnon*, and the imagery of radiant fire, earlier so heavily associated with the deceptive brilliance of heroic individualism, are in the *Eumenides* reappropriated as manifestations of specifically civic honor (*timē*) and decorum (1028–31). In Athenian society there is no place for the bad kind of daring, which is now explicitly associated with the destructiveness of internecine war and a bestial temperament (861–63). But there is still room for the metaphorical association of *erōs* and the ambitions of war. The disastrous passions of the *Agamemnon* are not simply negated and suppressed; they are incorporated in a heroism potentially available to the humblest Athenian sailor. As the price of banishing civil strike, Athena declares: "Let there be foreign war, all too ready at hand, / In which there shall be a certain terrible passion for glory [deinos eukleias *erōs*]" (864–65). Not only does the grammatical construction leave somewhat ambiguous whose *erōs* is intended (Lattimore even takes it to mean "against the man who has fallen horribly in love with high renown"); even on the assumption that it is attributed to the Athenians, it is still called *deinos*, terror-inspiring like the hostile elements in the physical cosmos (see *Ch.* 586).87 One may be tempted to dismiss as ridiculous the notion that Aeschylus, Aristophanes’ paradigm of the old martial spirit, could have expressed antiwar sentiments. These lines in the *Eumenides* might even be cited to counteract

---

87 As congenial as Lattimore’s version would be to my views, I do not think the dative can possibly have such a force. Douglas Young’s interpretation of *en hōi* to mean *en hōi khronoί* (“while”) is, however, possible Greek. This reading would leave open the suggestion that the ready availability of foreign war is due to foreigners’ terrible passion for glory.
the impression of the passionate indictment of the Trojan War in the *Agamemnon* (see esp. 62–67, 427–51, 799–804). Yet they offer cold comfort for such a position. A realistic Athenian in the early 450s could not possibly envision a world free of war. Celebration of a specifically military alliance with Argos (*Eu.* 287–91, 762–74), the traditional rival of Sparta for hegemony of the Peloponnese, is built into Aeschylus’ plot. This alliance, part of the radical turn of 462–61, made conflict with Sparta virtually inevitable (Ste. Croix 1972: 183–85). Still, the aggressive passion for war is here presented as at best a monstrous force to be directed outside the body politic, *faute de mieux*. If this form of *erōs* is perceived as a human attribute regardless of class, Aeschylus nonetheless suggests that the social and political institutions of democracy offer greater promise of successfully rechanneling it than does the aristocracy with its inherent inducements to individual heroics.

Unsublimated sexual passion, so frightening in the adulterous Helen, Klytemnestra, and other mythic great female characters, is celebrated in the democracy only in the context of marriage and procreative fertility. Apollo denounces the Erinyes’ disregard for the “sworn pledges” (*pistomata*) of marriage and “Kypris (Aphrodite) . . . from whom mortals have what is dearest of all” (*Eu.* 213–16). Apollo’s words should be viewed in the light of the subsequent emphasis in the final choral hymn on happy marriage under the tutelage of

> Goddesses [daimones] of upright customs/laws [orthonomoi]  
> Who have a share in every home,  
> Who press on us at every moment  
> With company that makes us just.  
> (*Eu.* 963–66)

Together these texts not only suggest a repudiation of adultery by males or females but offer Athenian marriage as a paradigm of a union freely entered and sustained by moral choices. The fact that this seems to bear little relation to the arranged marriages of the aristocracy and the well-to-do or that known instances of an Athenian woman freely choosing her husband are extremely rare (Lacey 1968: 105–8) suggests how profoundly utopian Aeschylus’ sexual solution may be. As suggested earlier, however, it is just possible that the majority of the Athenian population who had little or no property to haggle over in the form of inheritances and dowries were prepared to respect the principle that women should have a say about whom they marry.

The Athenian democratic form of justice implies a radically different relation to divinity from the religious assumptions of heroic aris-
tocrats. The full association of Athena, goddess of the city, with the implementation of courtroom justice implies that redress of grievances, revenge, is no longer the province of individuals who can claim divine support. The special relation of Orestes to Apollo remains an anomaly—relevant, we have suggested, primarily insofar as it prefigures the explicitness of laws and courtroom analysis of motivation. But the chief focus on the divine role of Athenian justice is in connection with the transformation of the Erinyes into the "Kindly Goddesses." Here, as we have already suggested, the oppressive anxiety and fear that beset those victimized by tyrannical power is transformed into the good fear (to deinon, deos, phobos) that internalizes the rule of law. Those who see the concessions Athena grants the Eumenides either as threatening to invalidate the progress implicit in the establishment of the court or as proof that no real change is intended (e.g., Lloyd-Jones 1971: 93–96) underestimate the extent to which fifth-century arguments for and against democracy were based on psychological grounds. Here again the constitutional debate in Herodotus is a key text. The chief argument against monarchy/tyranny is the absence of legal restraints, the unchallenged power of the monarch which corrupts the character of even the best of men, carrying him "outside the realm of normal thoughts" (3.80.3). It engenders "insolent violence" (hybris) and "resentful jealousy" (phthonos). The oligarchic argument against democracy presupposes the same negative view of human nature as inherently prone to wildly selfish and irrational behavior when free of institutional restraints: "There is nothing more devoid of understanding or more insolent [hybristoteron] than the worthless mob" (3.81.1). "Whatever the tyrant does, he does knowingly, but the mob is quite devoid of knowledge. For how can it know when it has neither been taught [edidakhthe] nor has any inherent [oikeion] knowledge of what is noble [kalon], but attacks public business mindlessly like a river in flood?" (3.81.2–3). The pro-democracy speaker emphasizes the vulnerability to corruption of even the best of men; but, as A. H. M. Jones notes, "the [anti-democratic] philosophers are strangely blind to this danger, and are content to rely on the virtue of their hereditary or cooptive oligarchies of wise men" (1964: 61). In the Herodotean

88Macleod (1982: 134) stressed the relatively modest "supporting and subordinate role" of Apollo in the trial and seems to imply that this is a model of democratic religious relations. I am not quite sure how this would manifest itself in a specific religious politics.

89Debates about discipline and the role of fear in Sophokles' Antigone or Ajax are suggestive and chronologically nearer than Herodotus, but they have the disadvantage of requiring interpretation of the politics of each play in its entirety.

90Here, as in earlier chapters, I have in mind the definition of hybris which I heard long ago in a lecture by H. T. Wade-Gery: "the violent disregard of another person's self-respect."
debate the oligarch adds the elitist epistemological argument that the majority are inherently criminal because they are inherently (οἰκεῖος is frequently a virtual synonym for “innate”) ignorant. The implication that aristocrats, who by and large are the only people who can afford teachers, know by nature what is noble (kalon has class as well as moral connotations) would be congenial to Pindar. Without resorting to extensive citation of other post-Aeschylean sources (see A. H. M. Jones 1964: 41–72), I believe it is legitimate to see these arguments as typical of anti-democratic thought.

The Oresteia’s response is twofold. First, the text answers the charge of irrationality by placing enormous emphasis on the positive role of internalized fear of transgressing the law. Not only do the Erinnyes state the case for this fear in terms closely echoed by Athena, their incorporation into the fabric of the democratic state is the symbolic emblem of the centrality of that fear in democratic theory. Indeed, the notion of internalized fear is the chief fifth-century argument in defense of any government based on law, even the relatively repressive Spartan regime. Thus, in response to Xerxes’ incredulity that free Spartans, not driven by fear of a master, could possibly stand up against his vast army, the exiled kind Dēmarētus is given the following reply by Herodotus: “Though they are free, they are not wholly free; for law is master over them, under whom they cower in fear [ὑποδειμανοῦσι] far more than your people do under you” (7.104.4). The formulation in Herodotus is nearer to a sociological doctrine, one parallel to the emphasis on the internalization of ethical values in the early Sophists.91 As de Romilly has ably demonstrated (1958: 113–14), the special quality of Aeschylean democratic fear is that it hovers between primitive religious fear and a self-conscious form of social indoctrination.92 It is the poet who has chosen to tap this religious sanction for the rule of law in response both to the simple critique cited earlier of the irrationality of the mob and to the subtler critique, implicit in Pindar but spelled out only in Plato’s attack on the Sophists, which focuses on the mutability and therefore unreliability of what is merely “learned.”

91 The “great speech” attributed by Plato to Protagoras in the dialogue of that name offers the earliest systematic discussion of the socialization process. I discuss this text in some detail in Chapter 6. But the fragments of Democritos already cited suggest that he too was much interested in the internalization of politically essential ethical values.

92 Though I agree on the religious cast de Romilly stresses in sebas (Eu. 690), I also believe that here too there is a political transformation of a term with earlier negative connotations. As I argued earlier, with the support of some translators, sebas at Ch. 54 connotes specifically the reverence felt toward royal authority by an oppressed demos. The ideal Athenian democrat does not lose his sense of reverence but redirects it toward a worthier object, the laws.
Aeschylus goes even farther than employing religious sanctions in support of his vision of the good fear of Athenian democrats. As we see in Chapter 6, Plato responds to the radical sophistic analysis of socially enforced values with a complex blend of controlled breeding and controlled socialization to acknowledge their critique while establishing on a new footing an old prestige of what is supposedly innate. Aeschylus, with very different sympathies, describes this democratic fear as “in­nate,” “inherited,” using the very word that for Pindar (Py. 10.12, to . . . sungenes) marked the inherited excellence of the victor: sebas astôn pho­bos te sungenê (Eu. 690–91). As we have seen, in the first two plays, where aristocratic pride in a literally conceived inherited excellence is countered by sharp focus on a metaphorically inherited evil, there is a fundamentally negative presentation of what is inherited. Now in the Eumenides this key ideological element is suddenly reversed into a metaphoric heritage of a whole people. “Inborn” thus retains all its positive connotations of what is natural, normal, real, permanent, fixed (cf. Heinemann 1965: 95–98) without the aura of class pride Aeschylus implicitly repudiates. Yet we should note in passing that this metaphoric shift has been made possible in no small measure by the aristocratic strategy we noted in Pindar, who, depending on the specific family achievements of his victor and the mythic heritage of his polis, moves easily between the most literal praise of inherited excellence and a purely metaphoric sense of inheritance in which all the citizens of the polis are viewed as heirs to the virtues of their mythic heroes. Aeschylus thus transforms an initially elitist strategy of cooptation into a vehicle for attributing legitimacy to the innate fear of the whole people of Athens under democracy. Pindar’s utopian projection of community in the service of a specifically aristocratic vision is here transformed and extended by Aeschylus into a specifically democratic utopian community.

Aeschylus’ second major defense of democratic government, that against the charge of ignorance, also has an affinity with a strategy we analyze later in Plato: as if tacitly acknowledging the inadequacy (or reactionary character?) of what is innate, Aeschylus makes learning bear the chief role in his ideological combat in behalf of democracy. A sort of polar complement to his positive valuation of democratic irrational fear, Aeschylus’ doctrine of learning through suffering is a fully historicized defense of the proposition that a whole people, specifically the Athenian people, are capable of becoming sôphrones [Lit. “safe­thinking,” i.e., “moderate”]—of acquiring that mental posture toward the world around them to keep them safe. As noted earlier, those scholars who insist that the protagonists of the Agamemnon learn nothing are quite right. Aristocrats corrupted by their own wealth are truly at the Homeric stage of pathei mathos—“even a fool knows it once the
deed is done” (ll. 17.32, 20.198; cf. Lloyd-Jones 1956: 62). But Orestes, who states early in the *Libation Bearers* his wish to die after slaying his mother, seems to know in advance of his act that it must have disastrous personal consequences. Though he is no longer the center of interest in the *Eumenides*, it is surely a significant clue to the paradigmatic nature of his pathos that he begins his second appeal to Athena with words that emphasize his personal learning experience: “I (egō is emphatic), having been taught [didakhtheis] in sufferings, have knowledge [epistamai]” (Eu. 276). Moreover, he follows the orders of “a wise teacher” (sophou didaskalou, 278). The foundation of the court to resolve Orestes’ case and the *agōn* over the future of Athens which results from settling that case establish that the Athenian people are the chief target of the Orestes paradigm—as manipulated by their own sophos didaskalos, Aeschylus himself.93 The conventions of a public dramatic festival may seem to leave little room for the sort of poetic self-reflexivity we noted even in the *Odyssey* poet and in such abundance in Pindar, but here perhaps it is not amiss to detect a sly pun.

In any case, the longer speeches of Athena and the final choruses are addressed directly to the entire people of Athens (astikos leōs, 997; pantes hoi kata ptolin, 1015) and represent dramatically the teaching function of drama itself: “Seated near Zeus’s dear virgin and dear to her, [they, the Athenian people] are becoming wise in time” (sophronountes en khronoi, 998–1000). The historicizing, progressive vision implicit in the trilogy form is summed up in this phrase, where the force of the present tense to designate an on-going process is insisted on by the addition of “in time.”

Sexual Politics: Vision and Reality

In passing, I have inevitably glanced at the sexual level of the democratic vision, but this topic merits separate treatment. In contrast to the adultery associated with aristocratic patriarchy we have noted the valorization of marriage as a locus of sworn faith and laws overseen by female divinities, obligations represented as applying to male and female alike. We have also noted that the *Eumenides* as a whole has been seen as fundamentally misogynistic. It has been argued that Aeschylus’

---

93In view of Pindar’s regular use of sophos to designate the poet, and the use of didaskalos for the trainer of a chorus by Aeschylus’ contemporary Cratinus (256 Kock; compare Simonides 147.5 Bergk), the phrase is a far more normal way to allude to a tragedian than to the god of an oracle. I must acknowledge, however, my disappointment that such an apostle of self-reflexivity as Goldhill sees here only a crypto-allusion to the Sophists (1984: 227 n. 14).
clearly original version of the myth of the origin of Apollo’s role at Delphi, presented by the Delphic priestess in the prologue (2–19), establishes the model for peaceful transference of power from female to male (Zeitlin 1978: 163). On this argument, the thrust of the final play is to celebrate the decisive change from the perverted female dominance of Klytemnestra, that is, from mythic matriarchy, to the all too real patriarchy of democratic Athens, where women were excluded from participation in political and, as far as possible, social life. Similarly, the allusion to Theseus’ defeat of the Amazons in the very speech in which Athena establishes the all-male court of the Areiopagos (685–90) is symbolic of the defeat of the female element in the resolution of the chief dramatic conflict.94 From this perspective, Apollo’s argument that only the male is parent whereas the mother is merely a host for the male seed is “the hub of the drama” (Zeitlin 1978: 167–72; Gagarin 1976: 101–3). Apollo uses the example of Athena’s own birth from the male god Zeus as proof of his thesis (664–66); and Athena, in explaining the grounds for her tie-breaking vote (Hester 1981: 270–72; but also Goldhill 1984: 257–58) which frees the matricide, echoes this argument (736–38).

Without denying that there is much in the text that supports such a reading, I cannot escape the impression that for such readers the decisive factor in their interpretation is their knowledge of the oppressive reality of the political, social, economic, and sexual roles of Athenian women. The tacit assumption is that the artist cannot negate or transcend what is so deeply embedded in the structure of society. Here one needs to remember, but go beyond, the dictum of Vernant quoted earlier: “Tragedy does not reflect that reality, but calls it into question” (Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988: 25). The status quo is called into question not (pace Goldhill 1984: 283) simply as a function of the indeterminacy of all language but by a historically specific negation and a utopian projection.95 The artist is indeed limited by his or her own society’s structures, but not limited to them. The thrust of art, like myth, is to seek imaginary resolutions of real contradictions; but to the

94For the general symbolism of the Amazonomachy in fifth-century thought, see duBois 1982: esp. 56–71.

95Overall, I find Segal’s generalizations about language in tragedy nearer the mark: “The tragic situation distorts normal speech. . . . Language itself . . . is a major concern of Greek tragedy. Its dissolution parallels the shedding of kindred blood or incest in the familial code and the perversion of the man/god communication in the ritual code. . . . The whole Oresteia can be read in terms of a dissolution and gradual reconstitution of language which runs parallel to a destruction and reconstitution of ritual forms” (1986b: 44–45, emphasis added). Although I certainly recognize the tremendous emphasis on ritual matters in the text, I suspect that I interpret it more metaphorically than Segal would.
extent that art is more self-conscious than myth, it is capable of presenting solutions that do not simply validate the status quo but negate it, transcend it by projecting a utopian vision and inviting society to embrace that vision. In miniature, we have already seen that process at work in Aeschylus' utopian representation of democratic leadership in the Suppliant Women. In the tragic pattern of the Iliad and in the tragedy of Sophokles (see Chapter 5), art may even confront society with the impossibility of resolving its contradictions (compare Segal 1981: 51, citing Barthes).

The sexual politics of the Eumenides do indeed seem to wrestle with insoluble contradictions, but the movement of the play as a whole is toward a triumphant, if utopian, resolution. The alleged straightforward pattern of male triumph in the prologue admits of a more complex reading. That the male god Apollo controlled the most powerful religious seat of Greece was a given. What Aeschylus' version repudiates is precisely the misogynistic tradition of violent male conquest of a vicious female monster and punishment of female deceit, a version so vividly realized in the Homeric Hymn to Apollo (224–384). Aeschylus' version gives pride of place to female figures evoked in positive terms: Gaia ("Earth"), rather monstrous is Hesiod, is here simply "first in prophecy" (prōtonomantin, Eu. 2). Themis, a figure given special honor by the author of Prometheus Bound (she is substituted as the mother of Prometheus), is a representation of divinely sanctioned Right of Law that is by nature never superceded, only supplemented. The shadowy titaness Phoibē has no apparent inherent significance other than her role in explaining the traditional epithet of Phoibos Apollo, the emphatically voluntary process of her assumption of power from her mother Themis, and the benign process by which she bestows Delphi on Apollo as a birthday gift (5–8). These female figures, like the Erinyes and unlike the dragon or Telephussa of the Hymn to Apollo, are not obliterated but remain centrally operative in whatever is worthy of reverence in the divinity of Phoibos Apollo. It is legitimate to see in this version a model of willing acquiescence in female subordination; but the fact of subordination was not Aeschylus' doing, whereas the myth he offers to explain it maximizes the enduring positive contribution of females to the new order and specifically rejects a version that represented them as the threat to be beaten and obliterated. The Athenians, represented in their most working-class aspect as sailors associated with Athena and as "children of Hephaistos," the humble god of craftworkers, are linked with the god's journey to Delphi as escorts and road builders through the formerly wild territory that separates Athens from Delphi (10–14).

The trial, in which the acquittal of Orestes is also a given, is likewise not so simple a triumph of male domination. As noted earlier, the ar-
argument of Apollo denying the female role in parenting is the very hub of the trilogy (Zeitlin 1978: 167) for those who see the whole structure as unmitigated misogyny. Because Aristotle a century later echoes this argument, it is often assumed that it must have been obvious or compelling to the mid fifth-century audience. On the contrary, in the same section in which Aristotle makes this argument he is at pains to refute what the Hippocratic corpus reveals was a common view before Aristotle, namely, that women also produced semen and that therefore their pleasure to the point of orgasm was essential to reproduction (Aristotle De Gen. An. 738b–739b; Rousselle 1988: 27–30). In the famous Danaid fragment giving Aphrodite’s speech at the trial of the only Danaid who did not murder her husband on her wedding night, we get in the metaphor of cosmic union as close to an explicit Aeschylean description of reproductively fertile sexual intercourse as I am aware of: “The holy sky desires [erai] to have union with97 the earth; Desire [erōs] seizes hold of Gaia to meet with union [gamōn]” (Lloyd-Jones 1963: Frag. 25, my translation). The rhetoric of the passage marks with anaphora and adnominatio (different inflections of the same word or root) precisely the mutuality of desire. Moreover, the final play cannot simply cancel the assumptions of the earlier plays of the same trilogy (Winnington-Ingram 1948: 143). We noted in the Libation Bearers the emphasis on the ethos Electra and Orestes inherit from their mother (Ch. 421–22; Lebeck 1971: 122–28). After the victory of Apollo and Orestes by the narrowest of margins, in which purely personal grounds tip the scale (Hester 1981: 271), the pattern is reversed. The female goddess Athena acts as the prototype of a democratic political leader who uses persuasion (Peithō, cf. Eu. 970) in open debate to win over the potentially destructive female Erinies and secure the best interest of the polis. The latter portion of the play celebrates the decisiveness of females (real ones, not just virgin goddesses) in the

96 Lloyd, for example, who gives a fairly exhaustive review of theories about the relative roles of the sexes in reproduction, states without citing any evidence that “in line with assumptions concerning the superiority of the male sex in the dominant ideology it was commonly supposed that the essential or more important contribution to reproduction and to heredity was that of the male parent” (1983: 86). He cites the Eumenides as his first example and considers the medical and presocratic comments in this area as departures from the dominant ideology (86–94). Subsequently, while reiterating that these philosophers were dissenting, he acknowledges in a note that “if anything, the doctrine propounded by Aristotle is the minority view among those attributed to named theorists” (107 and n. 182). Although alluding briefly to a 1980 article by Rousselle, he takes no stand on the issue whether the medical writers’ information came from women or represented their own observations (62). Sommerstein (1989: 206–8) has a good summary of the weaknesses in Apollo’s case.

97 The Greek verb trōsai normally means “to wound,” reflecting no doubt the usual violence of sexual metaphors in many cultures. LSJ, with that maddening coyness in sexual matters that drives any student of Aristophanes to distraction, explain this passage with another Greek work, sunousiazein, the most general word for sexual intercourse.
prosperity of the whole polis (959). To the extent that this celebration represents a reduction of female identity to a purely biological function within the confining reality of Athenian marriage, it is scarcely progressive. Yet alongside the strategy of containment implicit on the literal level of this celebration of fertility is the richly metaphoric fusion of the sexual/procreative role with a profoundly political role. The consequences of the transformation of the Erinyes from spirits of inherited evil, thus from a specifically aristocratic revenge ethic, into democratic inherited fear that internalizes government by law are first of all the expulsion of political factionalism (stasis, 977) and intrigue from the Athenian body politic and concomitantly the metaphoric prosperity of the well-ordered state. That fertility was envisioned in the more narrowly patriarchal world of Homer and Hesiod as essentially a function of male kingship (cf. Od. 19.109–14; Works and Days 225–37). Solon may have eased the transition to a conception of this force as female by his rich allegorization of Eunomie. But Aeschylus, by his dual celebration of both the goddess of the city and the profoundly politicized female Erinyes, succeeds in presenting the political, social, and procreative prosperity of the democracy as entirely the gift of females. This purely symbolic political role is, to be sure, a far cry from full political isonomia for women. Plato will indeed come very close to that step in positing female guardians and philosopher-rulers. Aeschylus, by confronting his male audience with the problems arising from their own domination and by offering such desperately mythic and symbolic resolutions, has at best only pointed the way.

Utopian Vision versus Tragic Reality

We must ask now, finally, what is the status of the utopian vision in the Aeschylean dialectics of the trilogy? The question applies no less to the explicitly political and juridical aspects of the vision than to its sexual component. For, whereas, in the case of the sexual, one is tempted by the ugly reality to undervalue the visionary element, in the case of the juridical and political one is tempted by Athens’ actual achievements to miss the visionary dimension altogether—to see the third play as nothing more than an enthusiastic celebration of the Athenian present as the triumphant end of history. But what is truly dialectical in the Aeschylean form is that what is represented as past is not simply negated but remains as a structural component of the present envisioned in the third play. Indeed we noted earlier in the Hesiodic model that Ouranos, though no longer supreme, is an indelible component of the cosmos. Within the dialectics of the trilogy, many have seen the Erinyes as
Aeschylus' Oresteia: Dialectical Inheritance

A relatively straightforward allegorical representation of the enduring aristocratic element so fully associated with the revenge ethic in the first play (e.g., Livingstone 1925: 120, cited by Dover 1957: 236; Forrest 1966: 215). The potential destructiveness of this element is transformed into a creative role by the integrating exercise of democratic persuasiveness. On this level I have argued that the monarchic leadership function is represented in the new world of the democracy by the role of Athena herself, who initiates policy, makes clear her own personal grounds for taking sides, but yields ultimate institutional responsibility to the votes of the judges. But there are severe difficulties with univocal allegorical labels in analyzing an art that operates through polysemous symbols on multiple levels. Moreover, although I have attempted to avoid the simple reflexive view of art that has characterized both Marxist and non-Marxist approaches to the politics of the Oresteia, we must now at least explore briefly the relation of the text to the retrievable realities of Athenian social and political life. Without some such confrontations, it is impossible to assess what is visionary or utopian in the solutions the text offers to the contradictions the text generates.

At the risk of oversimplifying a deeply complex and by no means easily accessible historical situation, I would argue that the most realistic political expectations for the Athens of 458 B.C. were nearer to the world of the Agamemnon than the gleaming prospects of the finale of the Eumenides. The actual political situation in Athens, far more than the Oresteia as a whole, might make "one afraid for one's life" (Vickers 1979: 425). The reforms of Kleisthenes (508–7 B.C.; Forrest 1966: 191–203; Murray 1980: 253–59) had far-reaching consequences, first in giving the poorer classes legal and political leverage against excessive exploitation by the aristocracy (Ste. Croix 1981: 73). This relative economic liberation was associated with Kleisthenes' assault on the role of kinship in determining citizenship under the aristocratic and tyrannical forms of government. Before Kleisthenes, citizenship required

98Dover (1957: 237) seems to me to reject allegorical levels for exactly the wrong reason; he sees the text as so univocal, so literal, that there is no room for allegory. An audience educated by the richly polyvalent personified abstractions that people choral lyric was scarcely incapable of simultaneously perceiving multiple meanings (see J. H. Finley 1955: esp. 5).

99I cannot agree with Ste. Croix's casual dismissal of the reforms of Ephialtes (1981: 289) or his subsequent murder and the oligarchic conspiracy to betray Athens to Sparta in 458–57 (1981: 291). See Forrest 1966: 209–20 and Davies 1978: chap 4. Davies begins his chapter by pointing to the most tangible evidence of the radical consequences of this revolution: "From the late eighth century onwards there is a trickle of documents from Athens written on stone, bronze, or pottery, but till the 460s only about ten of them are public documents, decrees or dedications, set up by the state or its officials. From about 460 onwards there is a flood of documentation" (462).
being enrolled in one of the four Ionian tribes believed to be descended from the four sons of the hero Ion and into which the whole population was divided. Kleisthenes devised ten quite arbitrary new tribes and an intricate mechanism for insuring that these new tribes broke up the age-old regional power of aristocratic rivals (Forrest 1966: 193–200). As Rhodes sums up a complex institutional shift, “the old tribes were based on actual or supposed kinship; the new were based on locality” (1985: 251). The aristocracy thus no longer monopolized the mechanisms by which one acquired citizenship or dominated the subjective grounds of self-esteem; the ideological hold of an identity dependent on allegedly ancient blood descent was broken with one stroke. The first result of these multiple liberations was a dazzling release of human energy that transformed Athens from a mediocre military power into a unified state capable of defeating the combined assault of three hostile oligarchies (Herodotus 5.78). The decisive role of the navy, the poorest class of Athenian citizens, in the defeat of Persia and the acquisition of an empire must have given an enormous boost to the self-esteem of this segment, by far the largest, of the Athenian polity.100

Yet initiative in presenting policy and implementing it militarily remained entirely in the hands of a few aristocratic families. Evidence for the fifty-year period between the Persian wars and the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War is notoriously skimpy. Indeed, Aeschylus is our only native, contemporary literary source for the cultural life of Athens after the Persian wars until the Ajax of Sophokles, usually dated in the early 440s. We do have inscriptions, vases, and statuary, in addition to a wealth of debatable later evidence, the best of which is in Plutarch. Without giving detailed argument, I conclude on this basis that in the period immediately preceding the Oresteia aristocratic hegemony of cultural values was probably still intact but, judging from Aeschylus’ other surviving plays, not unchallenged. Politically, the violent internal crisis of 462–58 is best understood, I would argue, not as a direct political conflict between the aristocracy and the demos but rather as an internal split within the hegemonic class over the form in which their hegemony should be exercised. With the potentially deceptive wisdom

100 Herodotus (8.1) puts the full strength of the Athenian navy in 480 at 200 ships. Each ship took approximately 200 men, giving a total of 40,000. Herodotus also assumes that c. 499 B.C. the total male citizen population of Athens was only 30,000 (5.97). Even assuming a large number of allied sailors, the proportion of the Athenian citizens who were also sailors must be set very high. This accords well with the evidence cited earlier that those with little or no landed property, the thetes, constituted the majority of citizens.
of hindsight we can say that the Periklean hegemonic model won out and seems to have remained dominant until at least 430.

This model involved continuation of aristocratic initiative in articulating policy, in persuading the demos to support it, and in carrying out its military consequences. To be sure, it also extended dramatically the relative role of the demos in deliberative and judicial functions. The military side of this model included a direct challenge to Spartan preeminence in mainland Greece. It is difficult to ascertain whether the rationale for this challenge was essentially defensive, that is, to forestall the threat of Spartan intervention against the Athenian democracy (Ste. Croix 1972: esp. 290–92), or simply represented the excessive ambition of a successful young empire (Davies 1978: 76–98).

The Kimonian hegemonic model had favored the “yoke-fellow” policy (Plutarch, Cim. 16.10–17.1), a division of Greece into sea and land spheres of influence headed by Athens and Sparta, respectively. Domestically it implied a far more paternalistic working of the Kleisthenic constitution in which the aristocratic generals and an authoritative Areiopagos (Ath. Pol. 25.1) cooperated in restraining the demos.

It would seem that the Spartan’s rebuff of their own ally Kimon in 462 was interpreted by the more progressive wing of the aristocracy as a sign of hardening hostility to the democracy. More simply, it may have been perceived as an intolerable insult requiring retribution on a heroic scale—ostracism of Kimon, stripping the Areiopagos of all authority except over murder trials, alliance with Sparta’s bitterest traditional enemy, Argos (Plutarch, Cim. 17.3; Ath. Pol. 25.2–4). Whatever the rationale, these actions triggered violent retaliation from the conservative faction. Ephyaltes was assassinated in 462. Presumably members of the same group were still sufficiently disgruntled four to five years later (458 B.C. according to Merrit et al. 1950: 3.177; 457 B.C. according to Gomme et al. 1956: 1.411–12) to have attempted to betray the city to Sparta (Thucydides 1.107.4). 101 It would be nice to know the precise date of this attempted betrayal—whether before or after the Oresteia, whether a stimulus for the terror of stasis expressed in the text or an immediate subsequent confirmation of it.

But, more generally, how should we conceive of the relation of the Oresteia to this whole political configuration? There is a natural temptation, which few scholars have resisted, to situate Aeschylus in one or another of the contending factions. 102 More cautious scholars have

101 Gomme, et al., ad loc., argue plausibly that Kimon himself would have no sympathy for such an attempt.

taken the potential tangle of contradictions that arise from this effort as in itself proof of the poet’s intention to avoid obvious partisanship by calculated ambiguities (e.g., Dodds 1960: 21). Though I am in some sympathy with this approach, its risks underrating both the critical edge and the utopian projection of the trilogy as a whole. I have tried to demonstrate the intensity, range, and depth of the implicit critique in the *Agamemnon* of the aristocratic domination of political and social life. The self-serving and self-deluding ambitions and hatreds that threaten to tear apart the polis are not blandly conceived or equivocally presented. In 458 B.C. Aeschylus may well have perceived, in the terms of his lion cub parable, the polis in real danger of receiving a grim return for its “nourishment” (trophe) from the aristocratic “lion cubs” it had reared. This is not to line him up for or against Perikles, an approach with the misleading consequence of substituting an all too palatable individual allegiance or antipathy for Aeschylus’ categorical indictment of a whole class.103

On the other hand, the critical negation of aristocratic domination of Athenian political life encounters the insurmountable reality of the absence of any viable alternative even within the institutions of Athenian democracy. The utopian leap that projects a stasis-free polis must acknowledge as the price of this internal peace both accommodation of the Athenian aristocracy and external war with all the potentially destructive passion that such war engenders. More concretely, it embraces the Argive alliance as the inevitable correlative of abandoning the more paternalistic and repressive of the two available forms of aristocratic hegemony. But for me at least the choice of the female divinity Athena over King Theseus as the only representative of executive authority in Athens implies a refusal to offer concrete dramatic endorsement of even the most benignly conceived purely male leadership model. To be sure, Athena is as masculine a female as the Greek male imagination could conjure up, but the aspects of Athena stressed in the resolution of the trilogy are precisely those nearest to the democratic ideal of persuasiveness growing out of a capacity to articulate the general good and sympathetically infer the deepest needs of one’s enemies.

Thus on the political level the substantial historical progress achieved by Athens may sustain Aeschylus’ relatively optimistic vision as at least an attainable goal within its actual institutions. On the sexual level, the optimistic vision is in more drastic tension with the ugly contradiction it seeks to overcome. The critical edge of the trilogy confronts the audience with the intolerable human cost of unmitigated

patriarchal power: murdered daughters, injured wives, foreign women raped and enslaved, seething resentment and deceit at home. Particularly the emphasis on female intelligence and political competence confronts the disruptive consequences of too narrow a restriction of female roles. The utopian resolution posits marriage as the locus of trust and sexual satisfaction while pointing in the mythic virgin female deities toward the harmony and productivity attending a society capable of acknowledging a female role in both politics and procreation. The full theoretical rationale for expanding women’s roles had to await Plato. That Aeschylus' society never even approached adoption of his vision is, however, no grounds for denying its presence in the text. That the Periklean hegemony seemed for a few years to constitute a rough approximation of the political vision of the Oresteia is no grounds for failing to appreciate its utopian dimension.