
The Eumenides

Aeschylus || Oliver Taplin

dramaturgical actor packet 2020



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the oresteia

The magic of the Oresteia sits itself within its very existence being the only surviving complete trilogy from ancient Greece. It dazzles us with its upswing of language. It's vigor and power. Its decisions of hope and closure. Moreso than the other tragedies, Aeschylus reigns with dictation. The simplicity of sense and justice. There's a great deal of crispness in the cycle's trajectory. Before Sophocles and Euripides turn these ideas into more complex conversations, Aeschylus introduces the baseness, the horrors, and the true consciousness of tragedy to us.



Francis Bacon, "Triptych", inspired by Aeschylus' Oresteia

The emblems of duty and righteousness are challenged by this new heralded idea of democracy. Acts of vengeance, systematically used prior to this moment to "make right" of a sea of wrongs, are turned on their head. The characters in these plays act based on what they have been taught is right. Even in acts of murder. Of love. Of hate. The impetus behind their acts is rooted in this morality or preconceived justice. Though the trilogy begins to ask the questions:

what is just?

how do we retaliate against wrong?

what is tyranny?

what is the antithesis of it?

what is our moral responsibility?

how does it differ from our legal one if at all?

does the law encompass collective healing?

can there be an order to it?

Symbolically, there are a great deal of ensnarements. Children are put into precarious situations. Parents are heaved with loss. Husbands and wives become divided. By blades. By wars. By lack thereof. With all the betrayal that pollutes Argos' air, the families grow confused in the smog. For one act of avenging seems to create a slew of forbidden crimes. The characters are stuck within a web. Within a cycle. The frenzy of violence grows from domestic to political to environmental. The cuts begin to waver as “not so clean”.

Oliver Taplin's Translations

Oliver Taplin's translations are often excited by ideas of performance and staging including the entrances and exits of characters. He works to convey the poetic musicality of the plays, their immediacy and color, while keeping them accessible to modern ears. He notes that much of the translation is in verse, not prose that works to reflect the musical differences displayed in the original text mainly with iambic beats, indentations, and rhyme.



Lynn Chadwick, "Untitled"

“The Oresteia provides a powerful reminder of how far theater can depart from naturalistic realism, and yet still be dramatic, arguably even more highly dramatic in some ways. This translation does not try to water down Aeschylus’ rich palette of phrases and images, but tries to bring out how we, the audience, are being challenged by poetry and music and color, and how that is all part of its enduring theatrical power.”

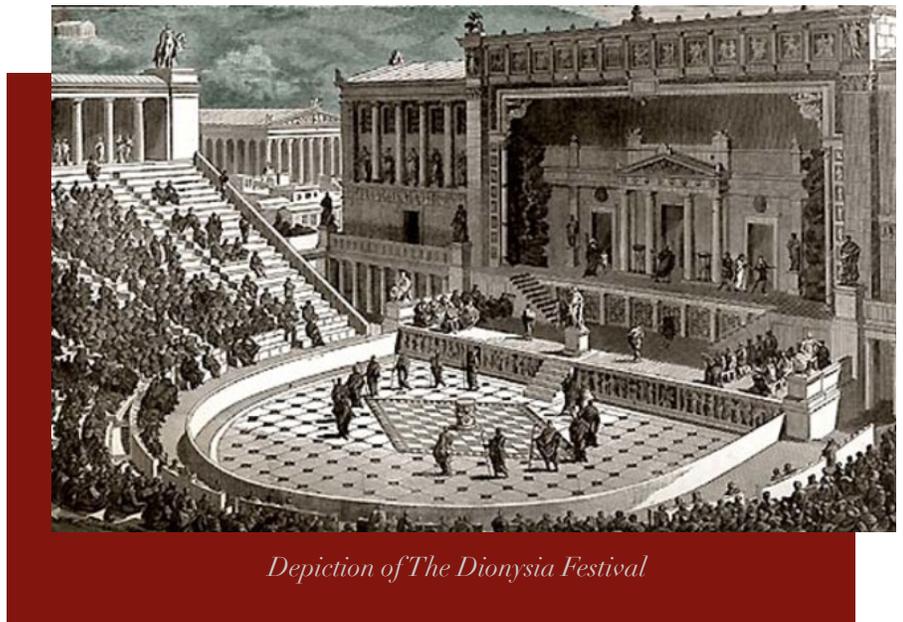
— Oliver Taplin

the historical context

Aeschylus was a soldier before a poet. His love for Greece and Athens weaves itself into his work.

Early greek drama was sacred. Sanctimonious. A matter of ritual. Rite. Slowly growing into an educational form. To bring (re)formation to society. To their ideas. Of right. Of justice. Not so different from our theatre today.

Aeschylus really kickstarts where we study greek tragedy. There were others before him (Thespis, etc.), though it is his work that mainly survives and begins to unveil the grit of conversation. After Thespis added an actor to converse with the chorus, Aeschylus introduces a second actor thereby enabling the generation of conflict and deep-seeded drama.

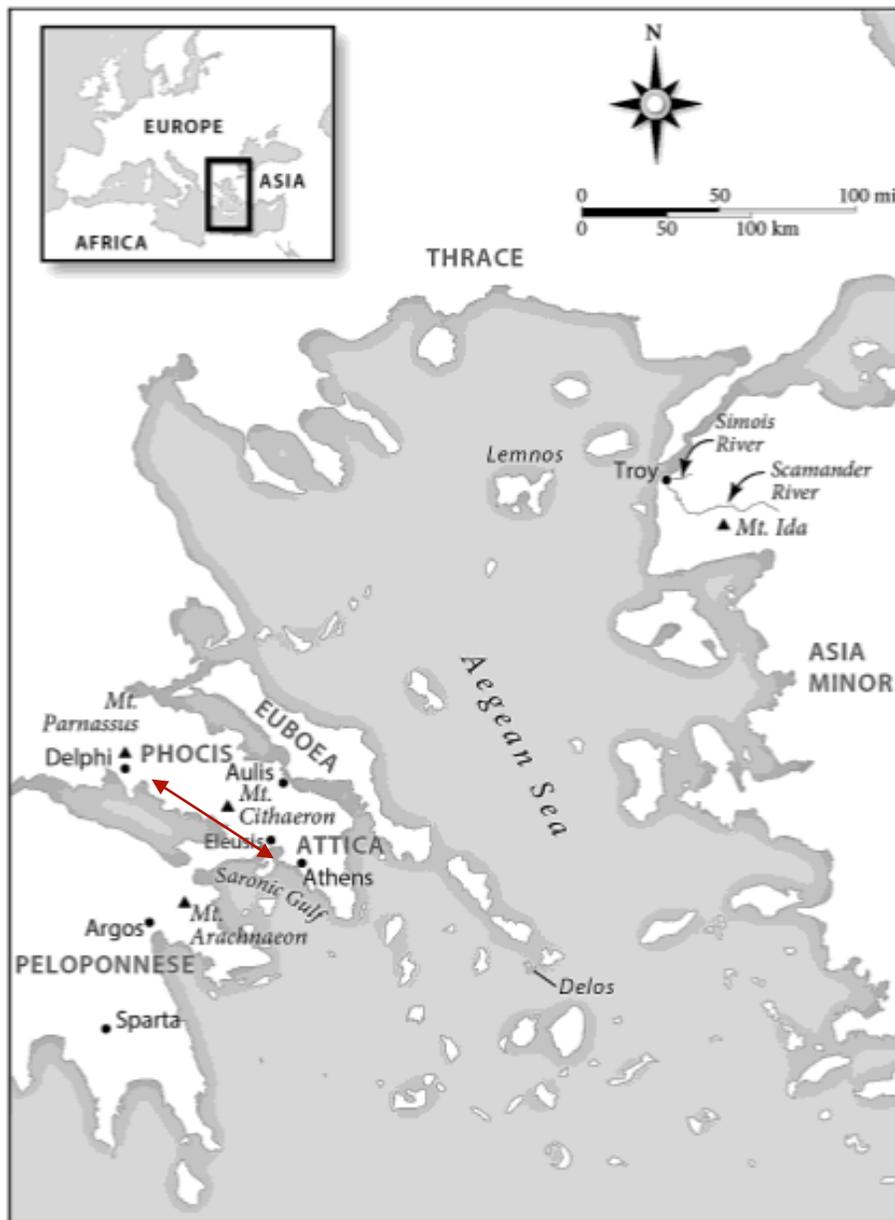


Athenian festivals or competitions are where we see this work materialized. The stories are often rooted in previous greek myths. This one, the Odyssey.

The bodies who initially told these stories were exclusively male. Often the bodies who viewed these stories were exclusively male (though it is said some women partook in viewing the festivities). Not all were literate. Therefore, the ideas introduced in the theatre gained greater weight in their instruction. The chorus was a prominent figure acting as a reflection, a recitation, a commentary partaking in this conversation.

Stylistically, the language was lyrical. Following metrical forms. Often displaying the complexities of humanity while giving voice to the gods and oracle. Ideas of “naturalism” were quite different. The plays were epic, grand. The characters masked, innately figures. Violence occurred offstage. Most followed the unities of drama (time, action, place), though remarkably, The Eumenides breaks Aristotle’s rules.

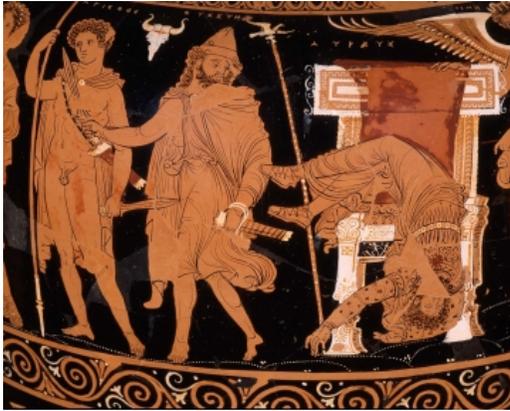
The play does center on the singular action of Orestes' trial, but begins in Delphi and ends in Athens. The change of location also alludes to an extension of time over the required period of a singular day, as the named places are so distanced from each other. The fact that The Eumenides breaks the rules of unity exhibits its larger symbolic breaking of the cycle of violence depicted in greek society at the time.



Map by Mapping Specialists, Ltd., Fitchburg, WI.

the myth

Atreus and Thyestes are brothers. Thyestes seduced his brother's wife and argued his legitimacy as next in line to the throne. He was driven out. Later, he returned. Atreus invited him and his children to dinner. Atreus killed his brother's children and served them to him. All except one, Aegisthus. Thyestes cursed his brother and the house of Atreus and fled.



Thyestes' Revenge



Menelaus Chasing Helen

Atreus' sons Agamemnon (husband of Clytemnestra) and Menelaus (husband of Helen) ruled the kingdom of Argos. When Helen left the city at the hands of Paris of Troy (though it is still debated if it was by her own will or not) Menelaus set out to reclaim her causing the Trojan War. Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter, Iphigenia, to appease the gods and to bring good luck to their battles. After 10 years, the Greeks conquered Troy. Agamemnon returned home with his captive, Cassandra.

Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's cousin Aegisthus became lovers. She seeks revenge on her husband for killing one of their daughters just as he seeks to avenge his father and siblings. Clytemnestra sends her children, Electra (whom is married off) and Orestes away so they won't get involved in the bloodshed. Once Agamemnon returns, Clytemnestra kills him and Cassandra. Orestes seeks to avenge his father's death with help from his sister. He arrives at his mother's doorstep, pretending to be a stranger bringing news of Orestes' death. Once let in, he kills his mother and Aegisthus, following the prophecy Cassandra once predicted and the orders of Apollo.



Martha Graham Dance Company; Clytemnestra (1958)

The Furies do their best to execute justice and drive Orestes out of the city. Orestes found an escape in the arms of Apollo, who vouched for his morality, though the Furies refused to absolve him of his crimes of matricide. The Furies, along with Apollo and Orestes sought out Athena's jurisdiction. She concluded that the case was too hard to be decided by just her and arranged a jury to judge. It was a tie. Athena breaking it in favor of Orestes, who then returned to Argos. The Furies, quite upset at the charade, were appeased by Athena and given a more gracious name "The Eumenides" or "The Gracious Ones" along with a rightful place in Athens to exact constructive justice. Henceforward, Athena rules that all trials will be settled in a court-like setting with a jury instead of through personal vengeance.



Théâtre du Soleil's Production of The Eumenides, Martine Franck (1992)

National Theatre's Production of The Eumenides, Peter Hall (1983)



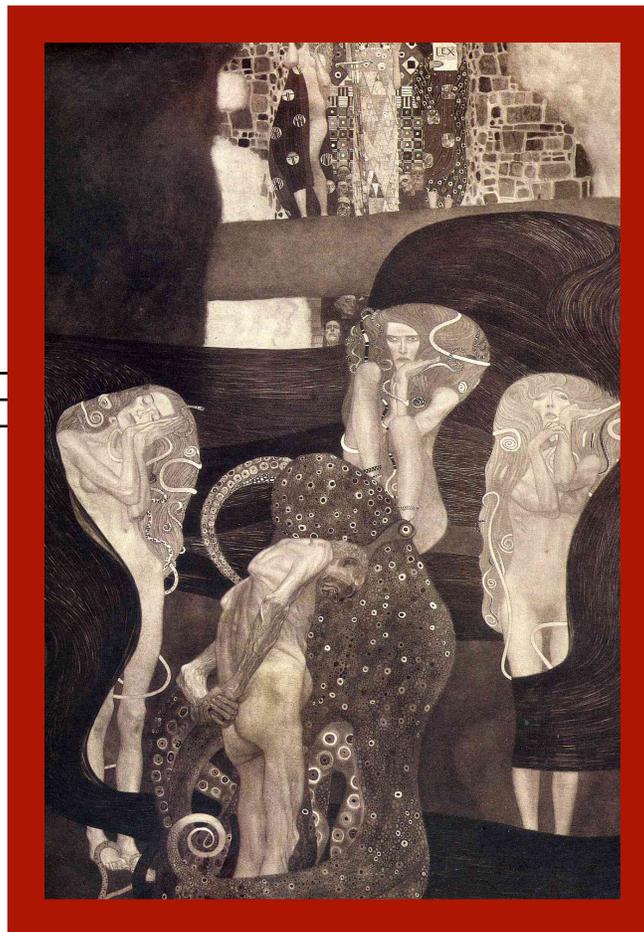
the erinyes

The Furies or the Erinyes (“name that cannot be spoken”), refers to the the scary trio of goddesses whose purpose was footed in the execution of justice.

Related to the Titans, the Erinyes live in the night and are often associated with the underworld or death as a whole, rising only to pursue those who commit crimes. Their presence was often not desired and to speak their name was daunting as it could risk a person’s peace of mind.

They’re described as animal-like. Compared to bloodhounds, snakes, lions, goats, or even gorgons. It was said in the initial performance of *The Eumenides* the audience was so terrified that women fled and some had miscarriages out of fright.

As a whole, their ideals are of the old world. Their belief in punishment instead of reformation is rooted in the tribal sense of justice that people take care of grievances as they see fit and the government stays out of it. Though in this play they take on a new role, they innately represent the preservation of duty and loyalty.



Gustav Klimt, “Jurisprudence” (1899-1907)

the oracle

The Delphic Oracle was the most prestigious at the time and Pythia, the priestess of the temple, was one of the most powerful women of the classical world. It said she was filled by the spirit of the god Apollo and language on her presence began in the late 7th Century BC up until the 4th Century AD. Prior to Pythia and Apollo, the post was originally held by Gaia, who had a snake named Python, that guarded her oracle. When Apollo took possession of the oracle, he had to kill the snake, which is how his priestess, Pythia, got her name.

Pythia Speaking at the Oracle



In Greek Antiquity, Apollo was the god most favored as giving oracles and Delphi was famously sought after for consultations which typically concerned religious matters, but also was used by leaders seeking support for political or military action. Typically, there was long wait time, upwards of a few months, before someone could come to the Oracle at Delphi. Not to mention the various sacrifices and expenses that needed to be performed prior.

There isn't much detail on how Pythia operated, and the information now possessed gives conflicting views. Some say that she delivered oracles in a frenzied state, induced by vapors. She'd rise from inside of a rock, speaking gibberish. Others argue that she spoke intelligently and gave prophecies in her own voice. Either way, the oracles that were delivered were seen as direct knowledge that didn't need further explanation. Which points to the incredible power this female figure possessed. Once the oracle was given, (and gods were free to give or withhold oracles without reason), the prophecy would be turned into a poem. Oracles were always ambiguous and the final step was for the recipient to interpret the words, and therefore the prophecy, correctly.



CP Kate, "Apollo in Caution Tape"

the greek justice system

The Areopagus (the greek court) held a great deal of power in ancient Greece. Before it became democratic, it was led by archons (wealthy aristocrats) who made decisions for all citizens of Athens.



sketch of the Court of the Areopagus

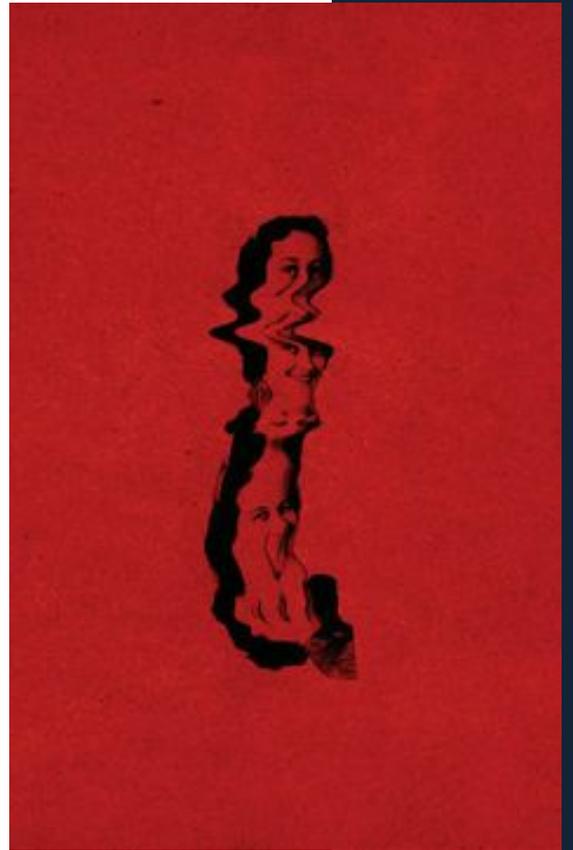
In 461 BCE, Athenians began to seek out political voice and representation. It was a time of conflict (with Sparta). And a time of dissatisfaction with the current ruling class. They began to support a democratic individual, Ephialtes, who reformed the court system and replaced the leaders with a council of citizens. He introduced the idea of drawing a jury by lottery and solidified the political revolution and idea that “the people” are the government.

In many ways Aeschylus reflects an imperial ideology opinion that Athens holds a cultural superiority in terms of their system of justice. This idea of a “civilized court” rubs against the ideas of who exactly it protects.

the role of gender

Throughout the Oresteia, there is a critique on female figures who threaten masculine power. Both Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra are demonized for their actions and agency despite the trauma they have faced. Clytemnestra becomes a depiction of an animal or monster once she enacts violence against Agamemnon thereby rejecting the wife/mother role placed onto her and because of this Orestes takes violent action against her. There is never a question of the sheer violence Agamemnon enacted, both against his own daughter, and against countless women in Troy during the war. It is the female bodies who are intended to hold trauma without retaliation. Once the women become subversive, they become problematic.

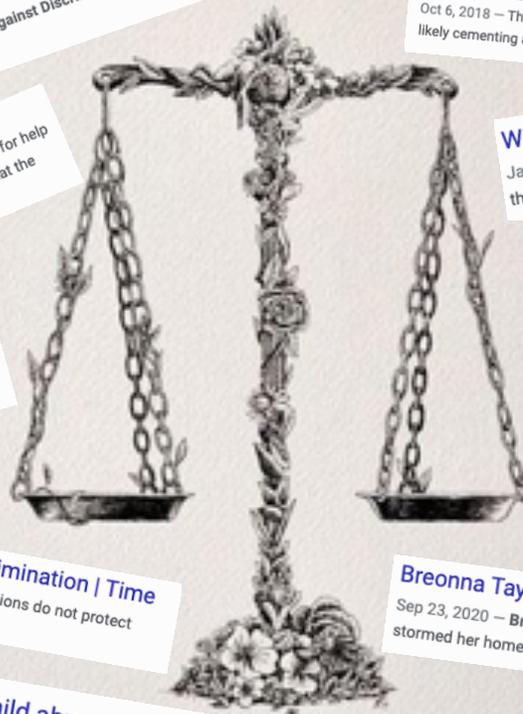
All this cyclical tension builds into The Eumenides where the opposing confrontations between Apollo who's in defense of Orestes, and the all-female cast of Furies working to enact true justice cross at almost a battle of the sexes. In this set up dichotomy, Apollo becomes depicted as a god of light, almost a savior of sorts, while the Furies are holistically demonized both in appearance and action. The act of vengeance is dissected as inappropriate for women, but completely suitable for men. Clytemnestra who worked to avenge her daughter's death and the Furies who attempt to avenge the matricide committed by Orestes, are both silenced. The ideas of justice change, arguably for the greater good with ideas of structure to circumvent chaotic violence and the ideas of forgiveness, but also undoubtedly in Orestes and the male population's favor. Men are marked as superior in society who prevail over women no matter the harm enacted against them. Apollo even notes that a father's life is worth more than a mother's. The message that female bodies are disposable surfaces as only male bodies find true justice in the end.



this moment

In the United States, we see a court system that very similarly protects a certain demographic. Historically, the Supreme Court has reflected it in its own demographic, and countless cases have been ruled in favor of those who perpetuated harm against marginalized bodies. We see it in terms of race, sexuality, and gender. We see it enacted against survivors, protestors, reporters, grieving families. Just to name a few.

This injustice is not concentrated in just the United States of course, it is unfortunate we see it threaded throughout the world today. Each court system in each country varies to a large extent. The laws and bodies who govern limit freedoms and protect the people in various ways. Though there is something interesting about the United States, who similarly projects the Athenian imperial ideology of a “supreme justice system” that supposedly works to aid and protect citizens. It is all a matter of perspective, of course. Of relevance, of course. Though the question must be asked, protecting who?



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