



## The *Oresteia* and the poetics of equity

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### Abstract

The essay argues that Aeschylus’s tragic trilogy *The Oresteia* articulates what I call a “poetics of equity.” After placing the genesis of this article within a theological debate between David Bentley Hart and Rowan Williams on the viability of a Christian appropriation of tragedy, I aim to show – using the suggestive work of J. Peter Euben (amongst others) – that *The Oresteia* dramatizes a growth in perspective and linguistic capaciousness which confirms Williams’s general picture of ancient tragedy. The progress of the trilogy, from the *Agamemnon* to *The Eumenides*, can be shown to represent ever-deepening awareness of mutual claims of justice and recognition, and moreover that its linguistic indeterminacy manifests the breadth and instability of the lexicon of justice (*dikē*), and how this plays itself out within the Aeschylean narrative. The essay closes with some of Donald MacKinnon’s reflections on temporality and growth, and how these relate to *The Oresteia*.

### Keywords

*Aeschylus; David Bentley Hart; J. Peter Euben; Donald MacKinnon; Rowan Williams; tragedy*

## I

Geoffrey Hill, in a discussion of the Elizabethan Jesuit Robert Southwell,<sup>1</sup> spoke of this writer’s “polemic of rapprochement,”<sup>2</sup> of his ability to model a sense of “equity,” of the “just sentence,” putting forward a “witness”

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1 Geoffrey Hill, “The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell,” in *Collected Critical Writings*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 21–40.  
2 “The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell,” 24.

that contributed to “a sustainable reality.”<sup>3</sup> His very language aimed to exhibit the “just measure,”<sup>4</sup> “to distinguish and affirm,”<sup>5</sup> to hold a balanced “complexity of association” within “a vision of great serenity.” Such was not a blithe gesture, but one “achieved in the full awareness of the realities of spiritual and legal violence.”<sup>6</sup> As such, his prose in its very performance exacted an intuition of justice, and “a serenely witty form of tact”<sup>7</sup> that was exemplary of his overall “complex simplicity.”<sup>8</sup> In this essay, with all historical and religious differences duly granted, I would like to argue that Aeschylus similarly advocated a “polemic of rapprochement” within a narrative of “spiritual and legal violence.” I would suggest that there is an analogous dynamic at work within the drama of *The Oresteia*, especially as regards its lexicon of *dikē*. Aeschylus, within the unfolding nexus of the tragedy, sought to dramatize and unfurl the many-sidedness of the “just measure” of which Hill speaks of above. And following the directions of Rowan Williams, this expansion is connected to the wider emphasis within the tragedy on the importance of moral growth, on the learning that takes place through suffering (*pathei mathos*).

This essay is a part of a continuing, albeit polite, disagreement with David Bentley Hart.<sup>9</sup> His criticism of *The Oresteia* is that it tends to place evil within a timeless framework, within the context of an existential “curse” that outworks itself within the bloodline of Atreus. It does not begin with the sins of Clytemnestra or Agamemnon but proceeds from something more metaphysical and malign, and therefore unchangeable. In other words, *The Oresteia*, does not *historicize* evil but traces it to some inscrutable

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3 “The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell,” 27.

4 “The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell,” 37

5 “The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell,” 36.

6 “The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell,” 38.

7 “The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell,” 34.

8 “The Absolute Reasonableness of Robert Southwell,” 40.

9 See Rowan Williams, *The Tragic Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); David Bentley Hart, “The Gospel According to Melpomene: Reflections on Rowan Williams’s *The Tragic Imagination*,” *Modern Theology* 34, no. 2 (2018): 220–234; Williams, “‘Not Cured, Not Forgetful, Not Paralysed’: A Response to Comments on *The Tragic Imagination*,” *Modern Theology* 34, no. 2 (2018): 280–288; Khegan M. Delport, *On Tragedy and Transcendence: An Essay on the Metaphysics of Donald MacKinnon and Rowan Williams* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, Forthcoming).

fate existing within the universe, resolute and non-negotiable (being “more ancient than the laws of gods or mortals”). And even when Athena appears in *The Eumenides*, this has less to do with the amelioration of this fact, and more to do with “the violence of ‘justice’ made beautiful and engaging.”<sup>10</sup> If imported uncritically into Christian teaching, this could result in “a tragic theology that is simply focused on the unrelieved pathos of human suffering and God’s ‘identification’ with this,” to quote Rowan Williams (he probably has in mind someone like Moltmann).<sup>11</sup> However, this needs to be balanced by other considerations: Williams wonders whether tragedies can be so quickly categorized as about “the unavailability of appeasing a violent sacred order,” “a world governed by indifferent deities and hostile fate,” or as a “conflict between noble humans and cruel external necessity.”<sup>12</sup>

More broadly-speaking, Williams is advocating for a view of tragedy in which “suffering can be narrated,” “communicatively or imaginatively shared” and therefore made into “a *cultural fact*.”<sup>13</sup> Tragedy, or at least some of its iterations, are seen by him as representing processes of grappling with loss, within a wider remit of moral growth and maturation, one whereby human beings come to a knowledge about themselves and the world; a temporality in which human beings can speak about “*ceasing* to feel and think in certain ways.”<sup>14</sup> So rather than constituting a sustainable exegesis of these texts, Hart could be accused of imposing a rather one-sided reading of these tragedies. Therefore, what needs to be shown now is whether the complexity of *The Oresteia* is able to resist some of these worries. It is also readily admitted that Hart is not the only reader to have problems with this text. Modern critics have questioned the supposed “progressivist” picture of *The Oresteia*, especially as regards what it leaves out or elides, as can be

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10 David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003), 378.

11 Williams, *The Tragic Imagination*, 111.

12 *The Tragic Imagination*, 111.

13 *The Tragic Imagination*, 132.

14 *The Tragic Imagination*, 112.

seen in the outputs of feminists<sup>15</sup> and postmodern *avant-garde* theatrics,<sup>16</sup> as well as those who assert that Aeschylus underplays the “violence”<sup>17</sup> or “artificiality”<sup>18</sup> of the legal procedure itself. All of these criticisms will be kept in mind in what follows; but as we will see such readings, arguably at least, fall short of the trilogy’s poetics of equity.

## II

As far as scholarship tells us, *The Oresteia* is the only extant trilogy that has come down to us from the Greek tragedians.<sup>19</sup> Its historical genesis (458 BCE) is probably situated sometime after Ephialtes’s campaign (462/461 BCE) to remove the Areopagus from direct political influence in the city, re-transcribing it into a purely judicial power. This manoeuvre fomented a significant crisis within the Athenic *polis*, agitating the advent of democratic mechanisms that were designed to incorporate vying interests within the city, thereby diminishing the possibility of civil war (cf. *Eum.* 976).<sup>20</sup> Within this context, Aeschylus presents his drama with the aim of

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- 15 Froma I. Zeitlin, “The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*.” *Arethusa* 11, no. 1–2 (1978): 149–184. Also, cf. G. Newtown, “Vengeance is His: Justice in the *Oresteia*.” *Angelaki* 4, no. 1 (1999): 135–146.
- 16 Of particular relevance is the development of so-called “postdramatic” interpretations of the *Oresteia* trilogy. A sample and discussion of recent work in this vein can be found in Anton Bierl, “Postdramatic Theater and Politics: The *Oresteia* Today.” *Atena e Roma* 6, no.3–4 (2012): 283–296.
- 17 D. Cohen, “The Theodicy of Aeschylus: Justice and Tyranny in the *Oresteia*.” *Greece & Rome* 33, no. 2 (1986): 129–141.
- 18 Sheila Murnaghan, “Legal Action: The Trial as Theatre in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*.” *Graven Images* 5 (2002): 190–201. However, cf. J. Fletcher, “Polyphony to Silence: The Jurors of the *Oresteia*.” *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies* 41, no. 2 (2014): 56–75 who argues that the trial scene is prefigured by the behaviour of the Chorus in Agamemnon; she also makes the case and for a greater co-ordination of divine and human concerns within Aeschylus’s version of the story (when compared with Euripides’s *Orestes*, for example). Therefore, to declare this ending as simply “violent” or “artificial” needs to be questioned.
- 19 For what is to follow, I rely on the summary found in Simon Goldhill, *Aeschylus: The Oresteia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). I am also leaning heavily on reading of the *Oresteia* given by J. Peter Euben, entitled “Justice and the *Oresteia*,” to be found in *The Tragedy of Political Theory: The Road Not Taken* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 67–95.
- 20 For the historical and political background of this period, see Christian Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, trans. David McLintock (Cambridge: Harvard University

displaying “the Areopagus [as] the instrument for breaking the ancient chain of vengeance and counter vengeance” (here quoting Christian Meier) in which “the ineluctable sequence of self-perpetuating revenge yields to the law of the polis,” one that holds in check “all particularist forces.”<sup>21</sup> The structure of the play lends itself to the general trope of learning and moral growth, of *pathei mathos*, summed up in those famous lines chanted in the *Agamemnon*: “Zeus has led us on to know, / the Helmsman lays it down as law/ that we must suffer, suffer into truth” (*Aga.* 177–179).<sup>22</sup> Such a dramatic expansion, as we will see, is prevalent in the trilogy’s unfolding sense of the “just measure.” Euben in his very stimulating chapter on *The Oresteia*, has spoken about how the play “develops as a series of confrontations on both divine and human planes,” “each with an integrity of its own and a place of reinforcing or modifying all others.”<sup>23</sup> The play works with a ramifying sense of the claims of *dikē* and of what happens when we do not submit ourselves the mediation of law and interpersonal recognition. The trilogy thus dramatizes the constriction and terror that comes when such a failure happens. Because injustice is fundamentally about excess, about a failure of proportion between competing interests, the poetics of equity will have to strive for a fragile sense of balance. Euben lays out four aspects of justice that this drama aims to display, namely (1) “the reconciliation of diversities into a restored yet new city,” (2) “a continuous though imprecisely defined sharing of authority and mutuality of decision,” (3) a “recognition” of the other in his or her claims, and (4) “judgement,” in a sense that avoids “the mechanical cycle of vengeance” (as witnessed in *Agamemnon* and *The Choephoroi*), and rather evidences a “balance and proportion,” both “evidence and reflection,” a “looking backward and forward” (*The Eumenides*). It is

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Press, 1990), 82–139. Also, cf. E.R. Dodds, ‘Morals and Politics in the “Oresteia.”’ *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 6 (1960): 19–31; C. W. MacLeod, ‘Politics and the Oresteia.’ *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 124–144; A. M. Bowie, ‘Religion and Politics in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*.’ *The Classical Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (1993): 10–31; Simon Goldhill, ‘Civic Ideology and the Problem of Difference: The Politics of Aeschylean Tragedy, Once again.’ *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 120 (2000): 34–56.

- 21 Meier, *The Greek Discovery of Politics*, 91. Meier later dubs this a movement from the “processual” to the “political” (p. 138).
- 22 The translation, unless otherwise indicated, is taken from Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, 1979).
- 23 Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 68.

manifest in that commitment “to see things from another’s point of view and so accept the human condition of plurality.”<sup>24</sup> Thus we could say that “the structure of tragedy itself exemplifies justice,” and reaches for a “unity of difference” that is necessary for its enactment.<sup>25</sup> But how is this factor displayed within the drama itself?

*Agamemnon* recounts the return of its eponymous character to his homeland of Argos, after ten years of war with Troy. The war sanctioned and inspired by Zeus (cf. *Aga.* 525–526), concerned the execution of justice (cf. *Aga.* 813), in response to the sexual violation of Helen by Paris. After the reception of an omen, Agamemnon is offered the “choice” of either being defeated in battle (and thereby disobeying Zeus), or he has to sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia in order to bring about victory (thus violating the sanctity of family bonds).<sup>26</sup> He chooses the latter, and returns home the victor. In the meantime, Clytemnestra (his wife) has exiled their son Orestes and has reduced their daughter Electra to a slave. She has also taken a lover (Aegisthus), and together they plan and execute a murderous plot upon Agamemnon and the prophetess Cassandra (*Aga.* 1331–1371). This is done under the auspices of “justice,” to avenge the sacrifice of Iphigeneia (*Aga.* 1432). On this score, several things need to be unpacked: the first thing to mention is that *Agamemnon* epitomizes the excess of injustice we have mentioned above. It puts on a theatrical display “the excesses of men and women” those who have a disregard for “the proper boundaries of action and place.”<sup>27</sup> Its drama aims to show that in comparison with the order of nature, humanity’s drive to self-transcendence is both mysterious and destructive: “Oh but a man’s high daring spirit, who can account for that? / Or woman’s desperate passion daring past all bounds?” (*Chor.* 594–595). As Euben says, this pulsion towards the overcoming of boundaries is tied to the antique virtue of heroism, which is by no means evil in itself but becomes so when it is pursued without equity: “there is something noble about the heroic ethic,” to be sure; its “expansiveness is liberating” and “its drive to test the outer reaches of human capacity” is “inspiring.” The

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24 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 81.

25 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 84.

26 Euripides in *Ephigenia at Tauris* tells a rather revisionist account of this story.

27 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 68.

balance to this however needs to be imagined as well since there is a dark side to the equation, since heroism is liable “to see others and the world as sheer potentiality, as obstacles to be conquered and instruments to be used.”<sup>28</sup> Regarding Agamemnon, he does not find the right measure, opting for a militarist supersession over-against parental responsibility. Of course, one needs to be fair at this point: Agamemnon is conflicted and does not engage in his decision lightly and is thus aware of the countervailing claims imposed on him (*Aga.* 206–210). However, his election of kingly honour cedes “the lovely grace of things untouchable,” the bonds of fatherhood and household (*Aga.* 376), for the sake of chivalry. He thus “destroys the balance of nature”<sup>29</sup> in the name of masculine pride and military victory, and hereby continues the vein of internecine murder that has plagued the house of Atreus.

However, even though this malignant tendency can be traced down the bloodline, we should not read Agamemnon’s decision as being fated: despite his membership in “an accursed family” that is “predisposed towards evil,” we should not see his choice as simply “predestined”; even though the bloodline has a proclivity towards familial crime, Agamemnon, through his own volition, “dons the yoke of necessity” (*Aga.* 218) and “reactivates the curse.”<sup>30</sup> It is not something that happens apart from his responsibility. Such an emphasis on the willing election of ends is something that is novel and distinctive about Aeschylean tragedy, as has been argued by Jean-Pierre Vernant<sup>31</sup> and Albin Lesky.<sup>32</sup> It does not simply happen without his choice: there is a “doubleness” to its enactment that concerns both the inscrutable will of the gods and the impact of human agency. Nonetheless, whatever complexities may be mentioned here, it is the outcomes of such choices that ultimately reveal his deeper flaws. In the aftermath of his decision, so writes Euben, he becomes “a changed man, unable to recognize that part of himself and the world that he had cherished a moment before. Now blinded

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28 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 71–72.

29 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 71.

30 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 70–71n.10.

31 Jean-Pierre Vernant, “Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy,” in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York, Zone Books, 1988), 49–84.

32 Albin Lesky, “Decision and Responsibility in the Tragedy of Aeschylus.” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 86 (1966): 78–85.

he comes one-sided, partial, unjust.”<sup>33</sup> He is unable to internalize his action or fully adopt its consequences, and thereby refuses that mutuality of recognition that is needed for the promotion of justice in the city. But it should also be said that this one-sidedness is not Agamemnon’s alone; Clytemnestra similarly refuses the balance of equity: “If the temptation for men is the passion for high daring which takes too little account of house, nurture and female, the vice of women exalts marriage and household at the expense of the masculine force for movement and glory.” Whatever one may say about the androcentrism or even misogyny of this vision, one has to admit that the death of Iphigeneia “transforms” Clytemnestra into a rather brutal and masculine figure who relishes in the death and murder of her husband. This too, in her own way, takes Clytemnestra “beyond justice.”<sup>34</sup> Here again, there is an “absence of reciprocity” and a failure of “mutuality” between the feminine and masculine parts of the drama.<sup>35</sup> They have chosen opposition rather than mediation. Such a dynamic is further replicated in the “tension” between old and new: the feminine, in antiquity, often being associated with “reverence for what is continuous, local, and inherited,” while the male is often analogised with “what is new, far-flung, and chosen.”<sup>36</sup> If there is to be progress, both of these tendencies have to be engaged with integrity.

Orestes’s *pharmakon*, in the second play (*The Choephoroi* or *The Libation Bearers*) concerns this dilemma as well, that is, the reconciliation between old and new, since he desires to wrestle with that “past and inheritance” as it activates both “blessing and curse.” It is a “blessing” because he, in the avengement of his father and the “purification” of his household, will aid his sense of “homelessness,”<sup>37</sup> enabling him to return to the Argive household, but only after Orestes and Electra bring down “justice” upon the heads of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus (*Cho.* 372–460, cf. 641–645). But this blessing of homecoming comes with a “curse” as well: even though Orestes’s revenge is sanctioned by Apollo, who places priority on

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33 Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 72.

34 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 73.

35 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 75.

36 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 75–76.

37 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 76.



the marriage relation violated by Clytemnestra, the Furies (the feminine chthonic powers) are seen to prioritize blood relations and therefore seek to prosecute matricide (cf. *Cho.* 1044–1076). This conflict culminates in the third play *The Eumenides* in which the Furies, as plaintiffs, seek to prosecute Orestes for his crimes. A trial is set up in the Areopagus, in which Apollo and the goddess Athena (who is neither female nor male) come to the aid of Orestes. Each puts forward their case, but it is ultimately stipulated (by Athena) that if the votes for acquittal or conviction are split, then Orestes will go free. This is exactly what happens, with the help of Athena who casts the deciding vote. The Furies are of course not impressed with this outcome and threaten to assert havoc on Athens (*Eum.* 778–847). However, this finality is avoided: through the mediation of Athena the Furies are cajoled into being incorporated as foreign metics within the new order of Athens (*Eum.* 848–1031), and are thereby transformed from the Furies (the Erinyes) to the Happy Ones (the Eumenides). The old and new gods are appeased and mutually recognised within the political order of the city. This move should not be necessarily read as implying an obliteration of the feminine, as some feminist critics have argued, since both parties, Apollo and the Furies, are portrayed as being one-sided or “intransigent” in their arguments, both requiring a mediation of perspectives. The Furies – here exemplifying the older and more passionate deities of local tradition – are to be reconciled with the more and rationalizing forces of the newer gods, namely, Apollo.<sup>38</sup>

Overall, then, one could suggest that *The Oresteia* dramatizes a *growth* in perspective: “Orestes” point of view is broader than that of his parents,”<sup>39</sup> so says Euben. He acts knowing that it is wrong, and he does not relish the murder itself. It should therefore be distinguished from Clytemnestra’s ritualized, orgiastic act of killing, as well as Agamemnon’s rather nonchalant response to sacrificial femicide. As Dodds has pointed out,<sup>40</sup> there is a growth of *mathos* that can be discerned between the three main protagonists: Agamemnon is blinded from any insight of wrong-doing

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38 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 78–81.

39 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 82.

40 Dodds, “Morals and Politics in the ‘Oresteia,’” 29–31.

during his (admittedly brief) stint on the stage; to use Cavell's language,<sup>41</sup> he has failed to yield to what he knows: the holocaust of Ephygeia. Clytemnestra has some insight, but this insight – to use Dodd's language – is only of the "nightmare" she inhabits. There is a lack of recognition regarding the gravity of her wrong-doing; and when it finally comes, it is too late for her to activate her insight. Orestes, on the other hand, seems to have come to the awareness that the actions he perpetrated were criminal; and it is this fact, more than anything else, that makes him stand out from his parents. One could suggest that his acquisition of *mathos*, arguably, leads to his ultimate victory and pardon in the Areopagus – without thereby absconding him from the weight of his previous actions.

Connected to this is the observation that "suffering" itself takes on a different register as the trilogy develops: in the words of Euben, the *Agamemnon* shows pain as "barren," forming "an affliction that constricts understanding rather than enlarging" it. In *The Eumenides*, however, it is shown that "the just city" is a site where suffering is "liberated from fruitless reproduction."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, this transformation can be seen in the movement throughout the trilogy. Euben again writes that the "dense poetry" of *Agamemnon* "creates an oppressive atmosphere that is both claustrophobic and boundless." Herein, "men [and women] are reduced to abortive and deceitful speech," having language that remains "unfocused, too full of meanings the speakers cannot understand, as if the world lacks firm centre and coherence ... Metaphors, images and omens have endless associations and create ironies that split human discourse into fragments, concealing rather than revealing events." Meaning collapses, "Word and deed have parted company." This can be contrasted with *The Eumenides* where there exists a greater "simplicity of expression," and less of that "deceit and irony" that is evidence of a "polluting discourse" hindering "the re-establishing of previously severed relations." This is something like the "complex simplicity" of which Geoffrey Hill has spoken about. Euben argues, within the concluding drama, that "Word and

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41 Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 141.

42 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 90.

deed are joined,” and coherency is placed on a firmer foundation.<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that we have entered utopia, since in *The Oresteia* “the final reconciliation does not and cannot obliterate what has gone before,”<sup>44</sup> nor does it abolish suffering but rather “collectivizes it through the medium of dramatic performance,” thus educating the audience in the “wisdom [that] brings suffering and suffering [that brings] wisdom.”<sup>45</sup> In other words, it displays something of the *pathei mathos*. The drama is able to frame “the irony of action” in a way that is “vivid, intelligible, and bearable,” with “a beginning, a middle, and an end,” displaying “a finitude for action that is essential to judgment.”<sup>46</sup> Statements like this can be compared with those of Rowan Williams, who has written in *The Tragic Imagination* about “how some pain can be spoken of and understood, ‘humanized,’” that is, put into some kind of communicable arrangement, while also indicating that there is pain that cannot be spoken about too quickly because “the words are not yet there.”<sup>47</sup> As Euben indicates, the settlement achieved in *The Oresteia* remains a fragile unity, because one now cannot avoid a further site of real conflict, namely, “the discrepancy between the drama’s vision of order and the political disarray of the contemporary city.” Such awareness is tied to a sense of “the precarious nature of what has been gained and the constant proximity of loss.”<sup>48</sup> For Aeschylus, in the world of human action and politics “there is no final escape from contingency” and the unforeseen consequences of human actions<sup>49</sup>; it is this condition of plurality, contingency and limitation that Martha Nussbaum has in mind when she defines the *pathei mathos* as “a kind of knowing that works by suffering because suffering is the appropriate acknowledgement of the way human life, in these cases, is.”<sup>50</sup>

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43 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 86–87.

44 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 89.

45 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 90.

46 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 86.

47 *The Tragic Imagination*, 41.

48 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 90.

49 *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 85.

50 Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (rev. ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 45.

### III

The poetics of equity within *The Oresteia* can also be seen in how the polysemy of “justice” plays itself out.<sup>51</sup> For depending on who is using the word and its cognates, the word can take on a variety of meanings (vengeance, execution, right order, justice, trial, etc.). The Chorus in *The Libation Bearers* links *dikē* – “Right” or “Justice” – to “the daughter of Zeus” as that which guides Orestes’s hand in his act of vengeance (Cho. 948–951). Such is the case because “justice” itself, in ancient thought more broadly, was linked to a cosmological ordering that emphasized the balance and “natural” relations accrued to humanity. This metaphysical context can be seen in the way that *The Oresteia*, as a whole, has the structure of a creation myth, a recital of the formation of order out of chaos, a movement from violence to conciliation, from irrational force to reasonable suasion (cf. *Aga.* 760–765).<sup>52</sup> But Aeschylus can only show this transition through its dramatization and cannot simply state its content at the outset. It has to be unfurled within the many perspectives of the tragedy itself and is in some sense left open-ended at the denouement also. For example, one can see how this ambiguity is performed when Electra is called by the Chorus to pray for a saviour; here she displays this indeterminacy by asking (Cho. 120) whether they are calling for a “judge” (*dikastes*) or an “avenger” (*dikēphoros*). The former refers to a legal process of adjudication, while the latter instance points towards unlawful retribution. So already in this bivalency, one encounters the central animus of the drama: Whose claims should be recognized? Who has overstepped their boundaries? Who has the legitimate claims, and how should they be recognized? (“Where, where lies Right? Reason despairs her / powers,” as the Chorus says in *Aga.*

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51 For what follows regarding the instability and over-determination of *dikē*, and Aeschylus’ language more generally, see Nicole Loraux, “La métaphore sans métaphore A propos de l’ «Orestie.»” *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger* 180, no. 2 (1990): 257ff. A more detailed exposition of *dikē* in the *Oresteia*, see Simon Goldhill’s discussion in *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 33–56. This instability in “legal” terminology is reflective of a broader linguistic instability within Greek tragedy, as has been remarked upon by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet. On this, see Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, “Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy,” in *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, 29–48.

52 N. S. Rabinowitz, “From Force to Persuasion: Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* as Cosmogonic Myth.” *Ramus* 10.2 (1981) 159–191.

1529ff.).<sup>53</sup> Electra further complicates the equation: in her response she says that her desire is for a *dikē nikephoros*, that is one who brings “victory” – here echoing *dikēphoros* – showing that she does not just want “justice” but something more decisive. The ambiguity is therefore doubled, since now there are semantic resonances which extend beyond *dikē*, that is, to *nikē* and its derivative cognates. Thus, one is also confronted with the problem of language itself: are concepts adequate to reality? Can they say what needs to be said? In a scene where the Furies are hell-bent on prosecuting Orestes for his crime, Athena suggests that by merely taking an oath and confessing to his crime, the claims of “justice” would not be met. The goddess seems to say that there is a distinction to be made between the semblance of justice and the enactment of it: “Athena: And you are set on the name of justice rather than the act. / Leader: How? Teach us. You have a genius for refinements. / Athena: Injustice, I mean, should never triumph thanks to oaths.” (*Eu.* 442–445). Oath-taking it seems cannot finally establish justice because it might not bring the whole picture into adjudication: if Orestes takes the oath and swears that he committed the crime, the Furies might consider that enough evidence to exert violent punishment. But Athena thinks that taking this route would not actually evidence the balance necessary for justice.

This concatenation of differing tonalities is also expressed in a flurry of *dikē*-related terms spoken by Orestes after the murder of Aegisthus (Cho. 987–990): “So [the Sun] may come, my witness when the day of judgement comes [*in dikēi*], / that I pursued this bloody death with justice [*endikōs*], mother’s death. / Aegisthus, why mention him? / The adulterer dies. An old custom, justice [*dikē*].” Orestes’s self-justification here reaches for a whole range of overtones: justice as a legal process, justice as customary practice, justice as retribution. All of these put on show the many-sidedness of *dikē*, an indeterminacy that continues to provoke the actors, the audience and the readers regarding their own, potentially narrow, sense of the “just measure.” Such enables them, as Euben writes, “to recognize voices and forces that are otherwise marginalized, silenced, or denied.”<sup>54</sup> This is a

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53 This translation is taken from *Aeschylus, The Oresteian Trilogy: Agamemnon, The Choephoroi, The Eumenides*, trans. Philip Vellacott (Great Britain: Penguin, 1956).

54 Euben, *The Tragedy of Political Theory*, 72.

never-ending process, since as Goldhill has said “[t]he most unsettling recognition from [the *Oresteia*] is that the reader’s or spectator’s own convictions, attitudes and postures become implicated, questioned and undercut in what at first sight seem so clearly the disastrous conflicts of others.” Therefore, he continues, “Tragedy’s challenge is precisely to the sense of the secure and controlled expression of the order of things that for so many critics in their different ways has constituted the end of the *Oresteia*.”<sup>55</sup> This “challenge,” or what we might call “negativity,” is something readily admitted by Rowan Williams. He has spoken of how tragedies show that there is “a divinely ordered balance of different obligations running in different directions,” obligations which mandate that there must be some “law as the institutionalized means of recognizing these multiple interdependencies.” Here “the individual agent” is challenged as being “always *implicated*,” as “always defined by unchosen connections and the obligations that come with them.” For the tragic writers, “Human action is not a simple assertion of the individual will but a *thinking-through* of the diverse sorts of connection that we inhabit,” with the purpose of discerning “courses of action that are as truthful as possible and as little harmful as possible.”<sup>56</sup> Tragedies like *The Oresteia* show that “the possible world of truthful perception” is something that is gradually formed, something that is “*made* possible, however precariously and impermanently, for actual persons in communication with each other.”<sup>57</sup>

Arguably then, despite the ambiguities which certainly remain, one could argue that *The Oresteia* is concerned with a vision of establishing institutions, and new capacities of language that are able to mediate justice and conflict resolution within the city-state, in a manner that is neither “mechanistic or intrinsic,” but requires “continuous effort.”<sup>58</sup> As such, it places an emphasis on a *mathos* in which characters (and the audience)

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55 Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, 56.

56 *The Tragic Imagination*, 13.

57 Rowan Williams, “Trinity and Ontology,” in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 164.

58 Martin Revermann, “Aeschylus’ Eumenides, Chronotopes and the ‘Aetiological Mode,’” in Martin Revermann and Peter Wilson (eds.), *Performance, Iconography, Reception: Studies in Honour of Oliver Taplin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 252.

are awakened to the inclusion of otherness and complexity (as seen in its dramatization of ambiguity), as well as an explicit portrayal of moral growth. It also leads to the confirmation that tragedy is not necessarily about the conflict of irreconcilable goods – according to the pseudo-Hegelian perspective – but about the *misrecognition* of what the good is.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, it is questionable whether the tragic outworking of evil works within an ahistorical sphere of influence: the placing of the familial curse within the interplay of necessity and choice undermines a merely deterministic reading, and therefore is not simply tied to the impurity of blood. An additional weight can be added to this interpretation if we understand the drama as concerned about unfolding perspectives which are not simply predestined from the outset. There is a real sense of moral growth, a coming-to-see that certain behaviours are not congenial within a justly-ordered city. Murder does not have to be the last word in the house of Atreus.

This is why a modern re-telling of *The Oresteia*, such as Yael Farber's *Molora*<sup>60</sup> is faithful to the original narrative in its attempt to show that internecine killing is not eternally destined but can be halted in its progression. In Farber's drama, here set within the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission,<sup>61</sup> Orestes finally pulls back from murdering his mother.

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59 On this, see Stephen Houlgate, "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy," in *Hegel and the Arts*, ed. Stephen Houlgate (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 146–178.

60 Yael Farber, *Molora: Based on the Oresteia by Aeschylus* (London: Oberon Books, 2008). This play has already gathered a significant amount of critical commentary; see Astrid Von Weyenberg, "Rewrite This Ancient End! Staging Transition in post-apartheid South Africa." *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies* 3 (2008): 31–46; A. Stathaki, *Adaptation and Performance of Greek Drama in post-apartheid South Africa* (Ph.D, University of Toronto, 2009), 125–203; Betine Van Zyl Smit, "Orestes and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission." *Classical Receptions Journal* 2, no. 1 (2010): 114–135; G. A. Odom, "South African Truth and Tragedy: Yael Farber's *Molora* and Reconciliation Aesthetics." *Comparative Literature* 63, no.1 (2011): 47–63; Loren Kruger, "On the Tragedy of the Commoner: Elektra, Orestes, and Others in South Africa." *Comparative Drama* 46, no. 3 (2012): 355–377. On the reception of Greek tragedy in South African theatre more generally, see Betine Van Zyl Smit, "The Reception of Greek Tragedy in the 'Old' and the 'New' South Africa." *Akroterion* 48 (2003) 3–20; also cf. W. J. Dominik, "Reception of Greek Tragedy in (Sub-Saharan) African Literature," in H. M. Roisman (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Greek Tragedy* (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 2014).

61 Within Farber's published work up to date, *Molora* constitutes a kind of turn from a theatre of "witnessing" to a theatre of "adaptation," with *Molora* embracing both of these generalized periods. Farber's previous three plays had focused on the real testimonies of those who had suffered under apartheid, but in her more recent works

His act of vengeance against Ayesthus tastes bitter, leaving him with the realization that a furtherance of bloodshed will not bring about the desired outcome. In contrast, Elektra had earlier placed a strong emphasis on revenge as a form of moving their lives forward: “For if the dead lie in dust and/ nothingness, / while the guilty pay not with blood for / blood – / Then we are nothing but history without a future.”<sup>62</sup> There is intimation here of being locked into the past, of being unable to progress without the agency of more killing. When Orestes is initially reported as dead after his period of exile, Elektra similarly proclaims that “Our future is now ash”<sup>63</sup> (*molora* in Sesotho). Here again, the question of futurity is an animating feature: how is one to move forward without the enactment of vengeful justice? Can the bewitchment of the past only be exorcized through a return to the violence that brought it into being? This seems to be Klytemnestra’s and Elektra’s perspective on the matter – at least initially. But Orestes, towards the end of the play, begins to think differently, he is “*ceasing* to feel and think in certain ways”;<sup>64</sup> namely, that our future is not reducible to a violent past but may be re-determined. He coaxes Elektra away from the murder of her mother by saying “There is still time, Sister./ Walk away./ Rewrite this ancient end.”<sup>65</sup> This statement seems to imply that we are not stuck into an eternal present or a Stoic determinism, when the final deed has already been done and there are no further contingencies available. There is still time for movement, for an openness to “Rewrite this ancient end.” There is still time for “the residue of revenge” to dissipate, and for the house of Atreus to rise once again from the “ash” it has been mired in. There is still time for “grace,” for that gift that makes other futures possible, since “We are still only here by grace alone.”<sup>66</sup>

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Farber has turned to transcribing the work of others into a more (post)-modern idiom, all in which a marked political emphasis is noticeable. For examples former trend, one can consult Farber, *Theatre as Witness: Three Testimonial Plays from South Africa* (London: Oberon Books, 2008). For her more recent trend, see *RAM: The Abduction of Sita into Darkness* (London: Oberon Books, 2011); Farber, *Mies Julie: Restitutions of Body & Soil since the Bantu Land Act No. 27 of 1913 & the Immorality Act No. 5 of 1927: Based on August Strindberg’s Miss Julie* (London: Oberon Books, 2012).

62 Farber, *Molora*, 24–25.

63 *Molora*, 52.

64 *The Tragic Imagination*, 112.

65 *Molora*, 75–76.

66 *Ibid.*, 79. These words are spoken by Klytemnestra.



## IV

In an essay from 1975 entitled “Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time,” the late Donald MacKinnon, one-time Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, reflected on “memory” and how it is through “the concept of causality” that acts of remembrance are “disciplined,” and whereby “the items of our lives assume significance.”<sup>67</sup> Adopting his characteristically dire tone, he remarks that remembering works with “the sense of the past as something given” and that it is within this givenness that “we do organize, imposing form or shape, even a terrible design upon the items of our recollected biography.”<sup>68</sup> Our sense of narrative coherency will have to be aware of this factor of “causality,” and its often tragic refractions. But MacKinnon does not think that this temporal concretion implies any “idiom of facile determinism,” because despite all the necessary qualifications of “reaction, of inevitable consequence, of inescapable condition,” we must also dialectically sustain “what human beings in their suffering make of that which has made them what they are, which indeed they themselves go on to fashion or to refashion.”<sup>69</sup> Much-like a maturing child that becomes not merely “a passive victim” to their material inheritance but in some sense grows into adulthood, we are able to express “a measure of involvement, even of complicity, conscious or self-conscious.”<sup>70</sup> Applying this to Christ’s life, no doubt alluding to passages like Luke 2: 52, MacKinnon suggests that an immersion in “temporality” might be conceived as “a form of growth” or even “estrangement” from ourselves.<sup>71</sup> For Christians, we cannot hope for anything different, since “the conditions of temporality belong to the very substance of the Incarnate Life.” Any kenotic form of living will therefore be different from a simplistic “transcendence” or “timelessness” or “a kind of peace” that betokens an “immediate wholeness without the cost of letting go.”<sup>72</sup>

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67 Donald MacKinnon, “Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time,” in *Explorations in Theology* 5 (London: SCM, 1979), 93.

68 “Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time,” 93.

69 “Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time,” 92–93.

70 “Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time,” 92.

71 “Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time,” 96.

72 “Some Notes on the Irreversibility of Time,” 97.

Commenting on this essay, Rowan Williams, responding to David Bentley Hart and John Milbank’s criticisms of MacKinnon, says

To exist in time and its limits is to exist in a world where there is no *historical* end to risk and suffering, and thus to the likelihood of damage within any and every action. Yet this does not mean presupposing some super temporal principle or existential curse. It is simply a matter of parsing what it means to recognize our finitude: narrative itself presupposes the irreversible passage of time and thus the omnipresence of loss. But that’s the point: it is only in narrating it, “plotting” it if your will, that it can be spoken of. What happens as result of our decisions is not an abstract and identical calamity but always the specific kind of loss that this unique set of temporal conditions will generate ... the very act of narrating anything at all involves the possibility of *tragic* narration. The passage of time is a process of loss, *identified as such in the act of relating it*.<sup>73</sup>

What the above examination of Aeschylean tragedy suggests, with all due differences acknowledged, is that something similar is going on in this masterpiece of Attic literature. The tale of the house of Atreus, with all its catastrophe and murderous recriminations, implies that the narrative of tragedy does not necessitate disastrous outcome, or that blood curses have final dispensation. There is something like a maturation of perspective that develops in Orestes, a movement towards adulthood, and that he is not just a victim subject to a “facile determinism.” Like Farber’s faithful re-imagination of the trilogy, we can “Rewrite this ancient end” through a kind of “grace,” that we can even discover, to quote Williams again, “the tragic within grace.”<sup>74</sup> This suggests that Hart’s brilliant interventions on the theme of “tragic theology” are well-taken, but should at the very least be qualified by the texture of the Oresteian composition. Similarly, his suggestions of the imposition of “the violence of justice” are complicated by the way that the trilogy, somewhat democratically, attempts to jostle and juxtapose different resonances and meanings of “justice,” suggesting a capacious field of resonance in its attempt to sustain multiple appeals and

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73 *The Tragic Imagination*, 113.

74 This phrase is taken from Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London-New York: Continuum 2005), 114.

self-assertions. If there is any residual “violence” in the conclusion of *The Eumenides*, it is in its implication that there is not perfect instauration of justice within time, that contestation will not end. Of course, Christianity has an eschatological vision that is not within the purview of ancient paganism, and certainly adds something to how we might imagine the coming of final justice. I am certainly not claiming that Greek tragedy is the resurrection gospel or that it alone gives us an adequate metaphysics for that deep, ontological longing prescribed by Christianity. But to invoke another biblical metaphor, a favoured locus of MacKinnon’s writings (and before him Karl Barth), the imaginary of the Oresteia might be conceived as “parabolic” intimation of this vision, however curtailed or dim-sighted that might be; for as the figure of Tiresias teaches us: even blind prophets are not left totally in the dark.

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