

Introduction

Afterlives in the *Oresteia*

Similarly, David said to the Holy One, blessed be He, “make me to know my end,” that is, he wished to know to which end he was allotted, and his mind was not at rest ’til the good tidings reached him, “Sit at my right hand” (Ps. 110:1).

(*Zohar Bereshith* 1.63a)¹

Dear to the dear ones who nobly died over there,
being prominent
as an august lord under the earth
and an attendant of the greatest
chthonic rulers there.
For when you lived you were king
of those wielding in their hands destined fate
and the mortal-persuading scepter.

(*Choephoroi* 354–62)

Preoccupation with one’s lot after death has been suggested as the starting point of all philosophical thinking and is one of the central concerns of world religions. It is evident in the quotation above from the *Zohar*, as it is in innumerable other religious texts.² In Ancient Greece, mystery cults promised a better afterlife – but antiquity’s profound silence has segregated them from the mainstream of Greek religion. Unlike the scriptures and commentaries of numerous other religions, the only openly circulating Ancient Greek texts outspoken about the afterlife are philosophical and literary. Among them, the one with perhaps the greatest disparity between its overt concern with what lies beyond death and the lack of scholarly attention to the theme is Aeschylus’

¹ Quoted in Segal (2004), 630.

² For recent overviews of afterlife conceptions in ancient and world religions see Obayashi (1992); Coward (1997); Bremmer (2002); Segal (2004); and Smith (2009).

Oresteia.³ In scene after scene, and in the work as a whole, afterlife conceptions transform both individual values and the structures within which humanity operates. I am not claiming that focusing on the afterlife radically transforms our understanding of the *Oresteia*. In analyzing this understudied theme, I merely attempt to estrange and thus reevaluate some of the trilogy's most often discussed ethical and political dilemmas.⁴

Plurality and ambiguity enrich the *Oresteia*'s representations of human afterlives. Foremost, these techniques demonstrate a literary field of meaning, in interaction with, but not bound by, religious ideas. One can unpack crucial differences between religious and literary treatments by contrasting the two quotations above. Each passage depicts the figure who personifies the highest kingship in its culture facing an uncertain afterlife. The first exemplifies how definitive religious answers can be. The *Zohar* fills in a gap from the absence of a positive individual afterlife in the Hebrew Bible. It presents David's anxiety about his "end" after a tumultuous earthly reign, yet it mollifies him with assurance from the highest authority, directly quoting the divine through a passage from the Psalms.

By contrast, the *Choephoroi* passage is sung by the Chorus of Slave Women, who have no stated connection to the divine. Moreover, its content is highly incongruous with its setting: Agamemnon's wife has slaughtered him, dismembered him, and interred him without proper funeral rites. Agamemnon's disgraced end is not alleviated by this serene picture of the powerful ruler beloved in the afterlife by "the dear ones who nobly died over there," that is, his friends who died gloriously in combat at Troy. Without a definitive promise, this choral song only increases the tension between Agamemnon's manner of death and his imagined afterlife.

In the *Oresteia*, epistemic uncertainty complicates nearly every mention of the afterlife. The translation of the first sentence of the *Choephoroi* passage above lacks a main verb, reflecting its absence in the Greek. Are the Chorus

³ There has been little scholarship on the afterlife in tragedy in general and in the *Oresteia* more specifically until recently. North (1992) briefly demonstrates just how freely tragic authors treat traditional understandings of the afterlife. Schlatter (2018), in a lightly revised doctoral dissertation in German, provides a running commentary on chthonic forces in key tragedies, with comparanda and bibliography. Martin (2020) surveys the types of interactions between the dead and living in all of tragedy, emphasizing the harm they may do to each other.

⁴ This is in line with other readings of the *Oresteia* and tragedy more generally that have shifted our understanding by shedding light on specific themes. The works of Vernant, Zeitlin, Lebeck, Goldhill, and the collection of essays edited by Silk (1996) are the most relevant for my approaches to the genre of tragedy, its poetics and themes.

singing of a factual situation in which Agamemnon is honored in the afterlife (“you *are* dear”) despite his ignominious death and dishonored funeral? Or are they *wishing* for the honor that is currently lacking (“you *would be* dear”) and thus declaring it may still occur? Such ambiguity is partially a product of the *Oresteia*’s multivalent web of themes and terms couched in dense poetry, whose permutations have been analyzed on a variety of fronts. This study uncovers a further, little-examined set of linguistic, thematic, and philosophical issues that arise specifically from potential afterlives. The trilogy’s use of this imagined plurality is part of its poetics of the beyond.

Taking the epistemic uncertainty so prevalent in the *Oresteia* one step further, most of the characters who depict the beyond make no religious or prophetic claim to knowledge. Their descriptions are regularly marked as their own projection onto the unknown. The views of human characters are ambiguous when taken alone, contradictory compared with their previous statements, at odds with those of others, or belied entirely by the manifestation of an underworld figure. For instance, several characters at the start of the trilogy express views of death as oblivion, an absolute end to consciousness. In contrast to this are, at first, the hints of continuity in ambiguous statements by these same characters. As the trilogy progresses, numerous scenes feature afterlife continuity prominently. These include a vision of the self in the underworld, a staged attempt at raising from the dead, ghostly returns from the underworld, the transformation of staged characters into afterlife beings, and even references to judgment by Hades. Sometimes an assortment of these possibilities is expressed by or about the same character. In the *Choephoroi* scene of mourning, the Chorus describe several other ways of thinking about Agamemnon, including as an agitated, undead avenger. The afterlife, moreover, is not only left to human surmise. In the *Eumenides*, the Ghost of Clytemnestra speaks of her existence in the underworld and the chthonic Erinyes reveal the ethical punishment of the dead.

Understanding how possible afterlives transmute both individual arcs and political structures in the *Oresteia* leads to new perspectives on key points and affects the reading of the whole. Characters draw radically disparate conclusions from their contemplation of the beyond; affirmation or denial of the afterlife affects how they face the possibility of death, a theme that the Herald, Cassandra, and the *Agamemnon*’s Chorus all address. Other characters ground vengeance, and even political coups, on one or several versions of existence after death. These appeals are conspicuous in the mourning for Agamemnon, in the claims of Clytemnestra’s Ghost, and in Orestes’ transformation into an undead hero. Many see the finale of the *Oresteia* as akin to religious revelation, promising to resolve all the problems of humanity. Yet,

this book will argue, the counterrevelation of ethical punishment in the underworld presents a wide-ranging contrast to the vision of justice and the state at the end of the trilogy.

Several introductory sections follow, as a guide to the book and its key terms. The first provides necessary background on Ancient Greek religious and literary ideas about the afterlife. The second section offers some common methods for analyzing ethics in literature that several of the chapters will challenge. This section also gives a working definition of tragic poetics for contextualizing ethical analysis in a genre of stylized characters and extreme situations. The third section surveys the relevant political background for the structures and themes in the *Oresteia*. The last section introduces the main concerns of each chapter to preview the arc of the whole book.

Material Background and Literary Precedent

The concept of an “afterlife” is a flexible one in the Greek tradition.⁵ Generally, it refers to the continuity of a human being after biological death, with the retention of some group of recognizable features. Yet the mechanisms, forms, and meanings of such a continuity are multifarious. Western religions inherited from the Greco-Roman tradition a specific subset of ideas concerning an ethically determined afterlife, with the promise of reward as well as punishment.⁶ These have led to a tendency in earlier scholarship to condemn or disregard the far more prevalent Greek views that had little or nothing to do with the judgment of ethical actions. On the other hand, the vast array of Eastern ideas about the afterlife, many of which bear similarities to Greek ones, were not widely discussed by the Greeks themselves, nor is direct influence from the East easily found.⁷ Between these two factors, studies of Greek religion have sometimes had trouble dealing with its flexibility and diversity on its own terms.⁸ Within the *Oresteia*, many of the culturally available notions concerning life after

⁵ Major studies and overviews concerning the Greek afterlife include Rohde (1925); Vermeule (1979); Burkert (1985), 190–215, 276–304; Vernant (1989), (1991), and (2001); Sourvinou-Inwood (1995); Johnston (1999); Bremmer (1983) and (2002); Garland (1985); Jouanna (2015); and Larson (2016), 251–309.

⁶ On the wide range of sources, both Greco-Roman and Near Eastern, for the various modern notions of life after death, see Bremmer (2002), 41–102; Segal (2004), 399–732; and Casey (2009).

⁷ Bremmer (2002), 24–6.

⁸ Attempts to fit Greek afterlife ideas into a narrative that progresses more or less toward the views in later religions occur both in classic and modern studies, such as Rohde (1925), Burkert (1985), and Bremmer (2002). On the opposite extreme, Parker (2011), xii, claims that the Ancient Greeks were relatively indifferent to the afterlife, which is therefore not a part of his study of major issues in Greek religion.

death make consequential appearances. Moreover, there are several ideas hardly found in previous Greek texts or mainstream religious practices. What was culturally standard in 458 BCE and what might have stood out? A necessarily oversimplified, brief discussion of contemporary Archaic and Classical Greek cultural and literary treatments of afterlives follows, to help contextualize the occurrences of these ideas in the *Oresteia*. Each chapter will return to and expand on relevant ideas in this overview.

From the earliest times, Ancient Greek care for the dead focused on honorable memorialization and rites with social importance. Rituals could be sophisticated affairs in which lament channeled grief and brought groups together, burial goods symbolized honor, and markers at the grave focused memory.⁹ There was clearly political tension in democratic Athens surrounding the lavishness of aristocratic funerals, since they were repeatedly legislated against.¹⁰ Further emphasis on the state's role in burial seems to be influenced by Cleisthenes' democratic reforms. Starting in the early part of the fifth century, the Athenian war dead were buried in the *dēmosion sēma* ("public tomb") outside the city walls of Athens, breaking with general Greek practice of burial on the battle site.¹¹ The new location – away from previous aristocratic tombs – the broad architecture, and the associations with symbolically significant tombs all signaled the difference of democratic values.¹² The funeral was at state expense, first with a chance for individual offerings and then with processions of caskets by tribe, with one casket for those whose bones were not recovered. Funeral speeches were given to the citizen body. The most famous one, Pericles' funeral oration, as reported in Thucydides, does not focus on the afterlife at all, but on the perspectives of the living citizens on Athens, how their ancestors increased its power, and how the fallen have preserved it (2.35–46).¹³ This is a speech in part about subsuming familial memories of the dead to social memory. It emphatically

⁹ On grave rituals and their surrounding mourning, see Garland (1985), 21–37; Alexiou (2002), esp. 4–7; Oakley (2004); and Mirto (2012), 62–167.

¹⁰ See Shapiro (1991), 629, 643–47; Morris (1992), 129–34, 138–45; Meyer (1993), 106, on Cicero *de Leg.* ii 59–66; and Mirto (2012), 148–51.

¹¹ Thuc. 2.34. On the *dēmosion sēma*, its excavations and imagery, see Clairmont (1983); Stuppenrich (1994); and Arrington (2010). On the meaning of the split from Greek practice of battlefield burial for the ideology of Athens, focusing on the equality of all Athenians, see Loraux (1986), esp. 18–56. Contrary to Thucydides' claims, we have evidence of burial at battle sites both before and after the Persian Wars, on which see Toher (1999).

¹² Arrington (2010), 525, 532–3.

¹³ On the whole genre of Athenian funeral orations and their emphasis on building an imaginary idea of Athenian democracy, see Loraux (1986). On the funeral oration as a specifically Periclean political statement in the context of the first year of the war, see Sicking (1995). For an example of the long debate over the particular relationship of his speech to democracy and its institutions, see Harris (1992).

states that the act of facing death bravely and the consummation of dying for the *polis* erases any harms these individuals did in their private lives (2.42).

We also have evidence from Thucydides of cult for the dead of Plataea (3.58.4) and late evidence for a cult for the dead of Marathon, as protectors of Athens.¹⁴ Although they did not end tyranny in Athens, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, the aristocrats who attacked the tyrannical family, were referred to as the Tyrannicides; uniquely, they were awarded statues in the Agora and received democratically tinged cultic worship.¹⁵ These are some of the ways the material and ritual commemoration of the Athenian dead reinforced political ideas about the democracy at the time of the *Oresteia*.

The following chapters address analogous aspects of the trilogy, as death and burial rites are loci of discord throughout. I argue that close attention to all aspects of speech regarding the dead, burial, and afterlife return shows that they diverge substantially from internal expectations, which are conditioned by civic and individual practices as well as by literary precedent. The return from the Trojan War involves public discourse over its casualties (Chapters 1 and 2). This includes civic disaffection at their loss and halting, restrictive discourse about their afterlife and share of glory. The *Oresteia*'s corrupted burial rituals and emphasis on the mourning of Agamemnon (the *kommos*) are familiar ground.¹⁶ The contest over the burial of Agamemnon is intertwined with the rivalry for control over the royal house and the attempt to restore rites proper to a father and king (Chapter 4). The question remains open of whether it is not vengeance rather than ritual that restores honor, an issue in the afterlife of Clytemnestra as well (Chapter 6). On the political front, both Agamemnon's and Orestes' afterlives include continuing civic protection (Chapter 5). I will argue that death in war and rhetoric over burial from the start of the trilogy provide a framework for a meaningful rereading of the picture of Athens at its end (Chapter 7).

As is well known, Archaic and Classical Greek culture often distinguished between body and soul: the former decayed, and the latter

¹⁴ On the heroic aspect of these burials, see Kearns (1989), 55; and Currie (2005), 89–119, who adds evidence concerning the dead of Thermopylae, Salamis, and the Megarian dead of the Persian Wars, as well as from other *poleis*.

¹⁵ Hdt. 5.55–6, 6.123; Thuc. 1.20.2, 6.53–9; *Ath. Pol.* 18.2–6. Shear (2012) identifies the rituals as occurring during the Panathenaia and thus posits a mutual reinforcement between the democratic aspects of the festival and the actions of the Tyrannicides. Cf. Kearns (1989), 55, 150; and Azoulay (2017), 15–23.

¹⁶ For the corrupted rituals in the *Oresteia* and their poetic function, see the classic articles of Zeitlin (1965) and (1966). On the poetics of ritual in tragedy, focusing on Sophocles, see Brook (2018), 3–19.

would go elsewhere.¹⁷ Literature and artistic representations depict some portion of the person continuing after death in the grave, in the realm of Hades, or in both. One of the most influential texts, *Odyssey* II, contains a different set of elements in tension. The notion that a partly physical body could continue in Hades alternates with something close to an immaterial soul existing there.¹⁸ Although this study will use the term “ghost” in English for consistency, a wide range of terms, each with its own undertones, refers to the soul after death. The most flexible and wide ranging is *psukhē*, from the word for breath. Others, such as *eidōlon* (“image”), *skia* (“shade”), *opsis* (“vision”), and *onar* (“dream”), all refer to the vestige of the person as visual, without their former substance.¹⁹ Archaic literature tends to depict the dead soul less as a full subject than as the remainder of a person, lamenting its lost life, aroused only by contact with the living. Such is the main tendency of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, with references to death and the realm of Hades as dark, gloomy, shadowy, and invisible.²⁰ The presumed etymology of Hades (Ἅιδης) in many Greek texts is from ἄ-ιδεῖν, *a-idein*, “not to see.”²¹ This notion of life as light and death as darkness is structurally embedded in Greek culture and recurs with variations throughout the *Oresteia*, as do many of the Archaic afterlife terms and ideas.

Even in the Homeric shadow realm, however, the theme of continuation beyond death invites poetic transformations of value. Instead of souls unable to interact with each other or with the living, both Homeric epics return dead souls into the narrative to reverse some of the positions they held in life. Thus, when comparing antecedents in literature, this study refers to the scenes of Patroclus’ return as a ghost (*Il.* 23.62–107), Odysseus’ stories of visiting the realm of Hades (*Od.* II), and the (likely written somewhat later) scene of souls interacting with each other in the afterlife (*Od.* 24.1–204). Aeschylus’ Ghost of Darius from the *Persians* and the

¹⁷ Rohde (1925); Vermeule (1979); Mirto (2012), 10–28; and Jouanna (2015), 55–62.

¹⁸ Tsagarakis (2000), 105–23; and Sourvinou-Inwood (1995), 10–107.

¹⁹ Vernant (1991), 186–8, defines three kinds of supernatural apparition denoted in Homer by the term εἰδῶλον, all of which are actual doubles of a human being, rather than products of the imagination: the phantom, *phasma*, created by a god in the semblance of a living person; the dream, *oneiros*, considered to be a sleep apparition sent by the gods as an image of a real being; and the souls of the dead, *eidōla kamontōn*, phantoms or images of the dead, which exist in the afterlife and are also called *psukhai*. Cf. Rohde (1925), 3–26, 156–235; Vermeule (1979), 8; and Burkert (1985), 190–8.

²⁰ Gazis (2018), 36–40; and Vermeule (1979), 23–34, with comparanda from other cultures.

²¹ On the disputed etymology of Hades, see Chantraine, s.v., who is unwilling to commit; and Beekes (1998), s.v. For further notes on etymology and alternate names, see Burkert (1985), 195–6; Albinus (2000), 32; and Gazis (2018), 36. Cf. Homer’s puns in *Il.* 5.844–5 and 6.284–5; and Aeschylus *Sept.* 856–60.

numerous references to Hades in his *Suppliants* provide the other major comparanda.²²

Absent any scene in tragedy that takes place in the underworld, scholars routinely understand phrases that refer to acting in Hades as simply metaphors for being dead.²³ Yet meaningful actions and interactions in the realm of the dead are mentioned by several characters in the *Oresteia*, from allusions by Cassandra (Chapter 3) and the Slave Women (Chapter 4) to the risen Ghost of Clytemnestra's claim that those she killed are shaming her (Chapter 6). Even the shorter references and allusions, the following chapters will show, are deeply imbricated with the trilogy's themes and should be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. Each underworld reference echoes some aspects of the Homeric underworld but often differs in pivotal details.

When the dead were thought to be agitated by a lack of care, such as remaining unburied, they were said to reappear, demanding in a dream or through an intermediary some ritual or action to return them to rest.²⁴ In Athens, for which we have the best evidence in the Classical era, several annual civic festivals were concerned with honoring the dead, explicitly as prophylaxis against the anger of spirits who could affect life.²⁵ In Homer, too, there are numerous threats from the dead and dying. Not one of the Homeric undead, however, actually manifests any power over the living.²⁶

In tragedy generally, and Aeschylus more particularly, undead figures can be pivotal to the dramatic action.²⁷ Aeschylus himself may have been

²² Other types of afterlife are beyond the scope of the argument but are still fruitful areas for research. These include the Hesiodic spirits of the gold race and his "Watchers"; and Herodotus' story of Melissa at the Oracle of the Dead (5.92). Plays with central undead figures in extant tragedies after the *Oresteia* include Polydorus' Ghost in Euripides' *Hecuba*, Achilles' Ghost mentioned within his speech, and the revenant title figure in *Alceste*.

²³ Short references to acting in Hades without follow-up are plentiful in Sophocles and Euripides, e.g.: Soph. *Aj.* 865; Eur. *El.* 1144–5; *Ion* 953; and *Tro.* 445. The *Antigone* as a whole, however, presents a counterexample to such a dismissive attitude. Antigone's speeches conjoin references to Hades that can be taken as merely synonymous with death with appeals to the "laws of Hades" (519, cf. 451–2) as a religious matter and repeated references to being there with her family as motivation for her act (72–6, 542, cf. 912). Cf. Rehm (1994), 59–71; and Foley (1996). On the *Alceste*, a play deeply concerned with the afterlife, see Dova (2012), 170–87; and Schlatter (2018), 191–235.

²⁴ Johnston (1999), 9–10, 38–81; and Jouanna (2015), 62–3.

²⁵ See Johnston (1999) on the fear of ghosts rising, 22, 29; on the needs of the dead, 27–8; on funerary law, 40–1; on the Genesia as a civic "festival of the dead" for one's "begetters," 43–5; on the Nemesis as a "festival of the dead" to avoid Nemesis, "wrath," even from dead parents, 46; and on the Anthesteria, which was partly comprised of sacrifices to Hermes Chthonios for leading the dead back to the underworld after three days above, and included roles for Dionysus, Orestes, and the Erinyes, 55, 63–6. Cf. Burkert (1985), 190–203.

²⁶ Hence the ubiquitous dishonoring of enemy corpses and seeming unconcern for the cremation of common soldiers, on which see Garland (1984).

²⁷ Johnston (1999), 7–32, lays out the evidence for the increasing influence of the dead in literature from Homer's relatively weak souls to the active undead in tragedy.

the first to bring spirits on stage.²⁸ Certainly the summoning and appearance of the Ghost of Darius is the central dramatic action of the *Persians*. Although our evidence is limited, the extant sources are most likely not the only literary undead to which Athenian audiences had ever been exposed by 458 BCE.²⁹ For example, Aeschylus' fragmentary *Psychagogoi* ("Ghost-Raisers"), of uncertain date, is connected with Odysseus' journey to the underworld.³⁰ In the *Oresteia*, the unsettled spirits of the dead play a number of roles: the Herald denies the desire of the Trojan War casualties to rise (Chapter 1), Cassandra sees the ghostly forms of the Children of Thyestes (Chapter 3), the mourners of Agamemnon call on him to rise bodily (Chapter 4), and Clytemnestra's Ghost actually arrives on stage and activates destructive forces in the world (Chapter 6).

In Greek religion, attributions of divine power to the dead sometimes blurred the line between humans and gods. Heroes were conceived of as the powerful spirits of dead individuals. They were local semidivinities with shrines where they received ritual cult, unlike the gods, who were worshipped at multiple sites all over the Greek world.³¹ Historically, both Agamemnon and Orestes received cult as heroes. In the *Choephoroi*, the mourners of Agamemnon attempt to harness his supernatural power for vengeance (Chapter 4), and in the *Eumenides*, Orestes speaks of his own powers after death in the manner of a hero (Chapter 5). However, I will argue that the afterlife of each bears a counterintuitive relation to their living characters and their cultic worship in Greece.

The Ghost of Clytemnestra, for her part, neither haunts Orestes directly nor gains heroic powers but mobilizes the Erinyes on her behalf. These chthonic deities, known from Mycenaean times, had only a minor cultic presence in Greek religion.³² The Erinyes are widespread, however, in the visual arts and Archaic literature. In the former, they are depicted as snakes, symbolizing divine vengeance.³³ In the latter, the Erinyes have their own

²⁸ As Bardel (2005), 92, argues, from later evidence.

²⁹ There were clearly tragedies with scenes set in Hades, which Aristotle, in *Poetics* 1456a3, specifically mentions under the category of "spectacle." Yet none survive. Aristophanes' *Frogs*, set mostly in the underworld, was staged over fifty years after the *Oresteia*. The Basel Krater (Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig BS 415), dated to 480 BCE, gives a visual representation of a possible tragic raising of the dead preceding the *Oresteia*. See Wellenbach (2015).

³⁰ Henrichs (1991), 187–92; Moreno (2004), 7–29; Cousin (2005), 137–52; Bardel (2005), 85–92; Sommerstein (2008b), 269–73, and (2010a), 249–50; and Martin (2020), 76–80. Other Aeschylean dramas with potential underworld or soul motifs exist only in tiny fragments: *Sisyphus the Stone-Roller*, which might have been a satyr play, and *The Weighing of Souls*, in which the characters are still living.

³¹ Rohde (1925), 115–38; Burkert (1985), 203–8; Kearns (1989); Antonaccio (1994) and (1998); Currie (2005); Bremmer (2006), 15–20; and Parker (2011), 103–23.

³² Burkert (1985), 44; and Sewell-Rutter (2007), 81–2. ³³ LIMC, s.v. "Erinyes."

genealogy and functions: myths before Aeschylus present them as older than the Olympians, the daughters of Gaia.³⁴ This locates them in a wide constellation of dark, chthonic, bloody, and deadly forces.³⁵

There is always an undertone of terror to the Erinyes, yet previous references to their functions fall into two connected categories – balancing the universe and carrying out curses among humans – the first of which is seemingly benign. In Heraclitus, they prevent occurrences contrary to nature, keeping the very sun in its course, as ministers of Justice.³⁶ This also covers one of their most prevalent duties in Homer, namely to guard against actions and events contrary to the universal order, even when divinities themselves would transgress it.³⁷ This is the only function of the Erinyes within the *Prometheus Bound* (whether or not it was written by Aeschylus). Along with the *Moirai* (Fates), they are explicitly the pilots of divine necessity, whom not even Zeus can contravene (*Prom.* 515–18). In curbing the excesses of the gods, the Erinyes function as noncontingent enforcers of the current structure of the universe.

For mortals, however, the balancing power of the Erinyes is far more sinister. Their most neutral function is as the guarantors of oaths, in which, however, self-cursing is also involved.³⁸ More destructively, they are the divine forces of vengeance, deeply identified with family curses.³⁹ In many of these examples, they come from under the earth.⁴⁰ Both literary and material

³⁴ On the genealogy of the Erinyes in Homer and Hesiod, their functions before Aeschylus, and their distinction from the spirits of death, the *Kêres*, see Sommerstein (1989), 6–9; and Sewell-Rutter (2007), 78–91, who also distinguishes them from the Fates, the *Moirai*, 143–4.

³⁵ On the meaning of “chthonic,” a poetic term for supernatural forces connected to the earth and underworld, see e.g. Scullion (1994); Burkert (1985), 190–215; and Henrichs (1991), who emphasizes its dual aspect as both fertile and deadly.

³⁶ Fr. 94 DK. Sewell-Rutter (2007), 79, collects instances of the Erinyes’ corrective nature from Homer, citing the scholia on *Il.* 19.417 that “they are the overseers (ἐπίσκοποι) of things contrary to nature.” Cf. Sommerstein (1989), 6–12.

³⁷ In the *Iliad*, Poseidon is admonished by the threat of the Erinyes, who support the claims of the elder, in this case Zeus (15.204). Hera uses them to silence a horse endowed with speech (19.400–18). Cf. Johnston (1992); and Sewell-Rutter (2007), 88 n. 40.

³⁸ See Burkert (1985), 197–8, 200, 252–3. Oath formulas in the *Iliad* invoke the Erinyes (19.259–60, cf. 21.412). In *WD* 803, the Erinyes assemble at the birth of Oath, son of Strife (“Επίς). On oaths in ancient Greece, see Sommerstein and Torrance (2014).

³⁹ For example, Phoenix’s father curses him with the Erinyes (*Il.* 9.454–6) and Meleager’s mother curses him similarly (*Il.* 9.566–72). Athena tells Ares that the Erinyes of his mother are taking vengeance on him for abandoning the Achaeans (*Il.* 21.412–14). In the *Odyssey*, it is the mother’s Erinyes that afflict Oedipus (*Od.* 11.280). This literary identification with curses has a material corollary, for in curse tablets from even before the *Oresteia*, they are part of a constellation of threatening, chthonic (and often female) deities: Hecate, Hermes of the underworld, and Persephone; see Johnston (1999), 71–9, 91–4.

⁴⁰ As in Agamemnon’s speech in *Il.* 19.259–60: “the Erinyes, who beneath the earth punish dead men, whoever has sworn a false oath.” Cf. *Il.* 3.276–9; and see Schlatter (2018), 125 n. 4, for further citations of their connection with the underworld.

sources group the Erinyes with other avenging or killing divine forces, such as the *Kēres* (goddesses of death, often associated with sickness), the *Alastor* (Avenger), and the *Arai* (Curses).⁴¹ In the *Seven Against Thebes*, the curse of Oedipus on his sons accounts for all eleven uses of “Erinyes,” which are again paired with a variety of other divinities such as the Curses, Hades, and *Moirai* (Fate).⁴² Numerous studies have examined the *Oresteia*’s staged Erinyes as representatives of the old *lex talionis* who transform into beneficent spirits.⁴³ Few, however, have examined in any depth their connections to the larger structure of afterlife punishment. Hints of it wind through the choral passages of the trilogy and will be examined in Chapters 2, 4, and 7.

In the most significant of the choral references, the Erinyes reveal to Orestes and the audience the universal judgment and punishment by Hades for ethical transgressions (*Eum.* 264–72). This passage has little precedent in Greek religion, art, or literature. Although he is a brother of Zeus, in neither Homer nor Hesiod does Hades have a personality or much interaction with the world of the living. Of the “Homeric Hymns,” he appears only in the *Hymn to Demeter*. Due to the inability of the dead to return from his realm, his inexorability is proverbial already in Homer.⁴⁴ For this, he and his realm are hated by its heroes.⁴⁵

Hades, in his aspect as a god of death, was seldom worshipped in mainland Greece because of his nature as unseen, removed, and implacable.⁴⁶ The known temples associated with the underworld are regularly related to Demeter or Persephone and only use a pseudonym if they refer to Hades, for they are concerned with a different aspect of chthonic power, fertility.⁴⁷ Similarly, Hades alone was never connected with the possibility of an improved afterlife. Nonstate salvation cults from this period pick up on the return of other figures

⁴¹ See Sewell-Rutter (2007), 86–7.

⁴² Connected with Curses: *Sept.* 70, 574, 699–700, 709, 723, 725. Connected with strife: *ἔρις*, 723–6, 791. Connected with Hades: ὕμνον Ἐρινύσος . . . Ἄϊδα τ’ ἐχθρόν παϊῶν, 868–70, 886. Connected with Fate: Μοῖρα . . . τ’ Οἰδίππου σκιά . . . μέλαιν’ Ἐρινύς, 975–7 = 986–9. Connected with the *Kēres*: 1055.

⁴³ E.g. Brown (1983); and Sewell-Rutter (2007), 79–109.

⁴⁴ See *Il.* 9.158–9 and its scholia, in which the claim is made that no cities have altars to Hades, since he cannot be propitiated, quoting Aeschylus, *Niobe* fr. 161: “Alone of the gods, Death (Θάνατος) desires no gifts; one can gain nothing by making sacrifice or pouring libation to him, nor has he any altar, nor is he addressed in songs of praise; from him, alone among divinities, Persuasion (Πειθώ) stands aloof.” Cf. Sommerstein (2008c), 168–9.

⁴⁵ *Il.* 9.312–13; *Od.* 14.156–7.

⁴⁶ Pausanias, 6.25.2, claims that Elis contains the only temple to Hades.

⁴⁷ The aetiological story of the *Hymn to Demeter* illustrates the basis of these cults: Hades’ snatching of Persephone is the mythical link between the crops rising from the earth and the underworld. See Scullion (1994), 93. On temples and religious use of pseudonyms for Hades, including “Chthonic Zeus,” see Rohde (1925), 183–4; and Burkert (1985), 196–6, 200–1. On the agricultural aspects of the festivals at Eleusis, see Parker (2005b), 328–32.

from the realm of the dead, including Orpheus and Dionysus, who offer secret knowledge and rituals meant to improve an individual's afterlife.⁴⁸ As is well known, Aeschylus was born in Eleusis, the cult site at which there were year-round festivals, the most famous of which were the Eleusinian Mysteries.⁴⁹ These were run by Athens and were connected with the story of Demeter and Kore, but they did not, as far as we know, entail any worship of Hades.⁵⁰ Following roughly along the lines of these religious demarcations, there is no discernible reference in the *Oresteia* to salvation of the soul through initiation.⁵¹

The *Oresteia*'s Hades passage is one of the earliest descriptions of ethical punishment for all humans in the Western tradition. Surprisingly, it has received no attention to speak of in a wide range of relevant studies.⁵² The idea is extremely unusual in its culture, for Hades is not seen as a judge of the dead in early Greek cult, nor is such judgment a theme in almost any Greek literature until Plato.⁵³ The notion that *every* human is subject to punishment in the afterlife based on their action in life is unknown in Homeric epic. The *Iliad* does not differentiate the dead except for the unburied, whereas the *Odyssey* describes penalties and rewards only for great transgressors and those connected with the gods.⁵⁴ Hesiod differentiates afterlives by mythical era rather than individual deeds. He does grant

⁴⁸ On these Orphic, Dionysian, and Pythagorean cults see Linforth (1973); West (1983); Burkert (1985), 276–301; Graf (1993) and Graf and Johnston (2007); Edmonds (2004) and (2011); Parker (2005b), 327–68; Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal (2008); and Bremmer (2014), 55–80.

⁴⁹ It is likely significant to his writing about the afterlife that Aeschylus comes from Eleusis and had a strong connection to Sicily, where he died. On Aeschylus as most likely an initiate of the Mysteries, against the ancient biographical story to the contrary, see Sourvinou-Inwood (2003), 248–50.

⁵⁰ See Mylonas (1961); Graf (1974); Burkert (1985), 285–9; Cavanaugh (1996); Bremmer (2014), 1–20; and Jouanna (2015), 151–82.

⁵¹ There are several allusions to mystery-cult phrasing, referred to in the chapters as they arise, and there is certainly concern for the state of the soul after death, on which see esp. Chapter 4. On the Eleusinian Mysteries and tragedy, including the *Oresteia* specifically, see Thomson (1935), 22–34; Tierney (1937), 11–21; Solmsen (1947), more generally on religion in Aeschylus; Zeitlin (1978), 160–74; Bowie (1993), 24–6; and Sourvinou-Inwood (2003), 167, 248–50.

⁵² It is either absent or glossed over in studies of Aeschylus and religion, theology, or cosmology, and even of Greek ideas of the afterlife more generally: for example, Rohde (1925); Rose (1946); Solmsen (1947); Burkert (1985); Zak (1995); Johnston (1999); Seaford (2012); Sourvinou-Inwood (2003); Bees (2009); Parker (2009); Jouanna (2015); and Larson (2016).

⁵³ Rohde (1925), 238–9; North (1992); and Johnston (1999), 11–2, 31–2, 98–9. For death and immortality in Classical Greek philosophy and selected Archaic Greek literature, see Long (2019).

⁵⁴ Cf. Sourvinou-Inwood (1986); and Johnston (1999), 11–12. The only exceptions in the *Iliad* are two instances in which Agamemnon calls on a host of powers above and below as witnesses of his oaths. He invokes Zeus, Helios, rivers, Earth, and the underworld powers, who punish oath-breakers, 3.278–9; and again invokes Zeus, Earth, and Helios, and the Erinyes, who beneath the earth punish oath-breakers, 19.259–60. On the general restriction of the afterlife in the *Iliad*, see Schein (1984), 67–84; and Currie (2005), 41–6.

positive outcomes for the gold and silver races, with increasingly worse ones as humans degenerate, not even mentioning it for people of his time (*WD* 109–201).⁵⁵ The first afterlife reward for ordinary people's actions in life is the *Hymn to Demeter* and its associated Eleusinian Mysteries, but these were specifically reliant upon ritual cleanliness and knowledge through initiation, not ethical action.⁵⁶

Pindar's *Olympian* 2.56–80 is the only explicit passage of ethical judgment in Archaic literature. Judgment is performed by “someone” below (δικάζει τις, 59) and afflicts with terrible punishment those who are wicked in life (56–60, 67). The singular occurrence of this theme in extant Pindar, its brevity, allusiveness, and description of this punishment as a truth not ordinarily known, all mark how unfamiliar it is.⁵⁷ The passage, moreover, also includes a set of rewards for good people (61–6), which are seen to be the counterpoint to punishment. The statement that humans “remain three times on either side” (68–9) is the first mention of reincarnation in extant Greek literature. The poem's promise of the Islands of the Blessed to those who keep their soul pure in these multiple journeys (68–80) also has no literary or cultic precedent in mainland Greece. The many novel aspects of this structured conception of a universal afterlife in *Olympian* 2 are deeply obscure and appear to be related to Southern Italian and Sicilian religious ideas.⁵⁸

The above survey should make it clear that in Aeschylus' time there was no single, shared picture of life after death, despite a desire by some scholars to reconstruct one.⁵⁹ Nor was Aeschylus himself a religious innovator, as has sometimes been claimed.⁶⁰ Rather, in the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus uses the available bounty of religious and literary ideas concerning the afterlife in ways that differ radically from his culture, other authors, and even his other extant plays.⁶¹ The

⁵⁵ On the races, see, e.g., Solmsen (1995), 83–94, and on Hesiod's unconcern with the divinity Hades, 72; and Clay (2003), 81–95.

⁵⁶ On ritual cleanliness, see Parker (2005b), 343–7, with the formulas quoted in n. 86. On initiation, see the *Hymn to Demeter* 480–2: “Happy is he among men upon earth who has seen (ὄπωπεν) these mysteries; but he who is uninitiate and who has no part in them, never has lot of like good things once he is dead, down in the darkness and gloom” (tr. Evelyn-White). Burkert (1985), 198–9, attributes the first structured concern with one's place in the afterlife to mystery cults – which only demanded rites – and ethical concerns to the sophists, with Plato synthesizing the two. Cf. Albinus (2000).

⁵⁷ The other Pindaric afterlife passages all differ from this one, namely *Threnoi* fr. 129, 130, and 133, on which see Willcock (1995), 170–4.

⁵⁸ See Willcock (1995), 135–40; Solmsen (1982); Lloyd-Jones (1984); and Nisetich (1988).

⁵⁹ On the plural, vague, and contradictory nature of Greek burial customs and beliefs about the dead, see, e.g. Vermeule (1979), 1–2; Burkert (1985), 190–1; and Garland (1985), 102–3.

⁶⁰ Lloyd-Jones (1956); and Parker (2009), esp. 127–8, address this flawed modern idea.

⁶¹ Further introductory material relevant to the afterlife in Greek tragedy more generally may be found in Martin (2020), 11–32; with the idea that contradictory views are commonly found alongside each other in this genre, 34–7; and a scale of awareness, from witless to manifest, 37–62.

following chapters address in detail the conflicts he creates through a poetics of multiple afterlife ideas. These conflicts are specific to the context of the trilogy. They are therefore relevant to subsets of ethical and political thought evident within the *Oresteia*. Since “poetics,” “ethics,” and “politics” are heavily contested terms and refer to broad fields of study, the remaining portion of the Introduction preliminarily defines and narrows how each will be used.

Ethics and Tragic Poetics

Throughout the *Oresteia*, characters make conflicting claims about acceptable and unacceptable behavior, take actions that fall under the categories they themselves discuss, and find themselves subject to proliferating repercussions. Central to every statement about transgression and justice, every deliberation about consequences, and every plot action is the implicit understanding of relationships between beings as ethically bounded.⁶² It is crucial, however, to delimit the scope of the term “ethics” – a fraught notion throughout the history of philosophy – in order to give it analytical utility.⁶³ Doing so clarifies how tragedy in general and the *Oresteia* more specifically fall outside the domain of most modern philosophical discussions of ethics.

This book will use the terms “ethics” and “ethical” for the evaluations of individual behavior toward others, of more general norms of individual behavior, and of the transgression of such norms.⁶⁴ Everything concerning benefit and harm to others fits within this definition: evaluating actions, individual relationships, and criteria of judgment. Often, scenes contain spoken or unspoken indications of communal norms concerning individual actions; at other times, characters make overt declarations about “justice” as it relates to the individual. Such discourse demonstrates individual and communal values, standards, and behavior and will fall under the category of ethics for the purpose of our analysis. Yet there are still distinctions to make. Ethics, for one, is here analyzed at the level of

⁶² Alongside the many works on justice in the *Oresteia*, debates over ethical or moral choice, variously defined, can be found in Lloyd-Jones (1962); Hammond (1965); Lesky (1966); Dover (1973); Edwards (1977); Helm (2004); Sewell-Rutter (2007); and Lawrence (2013).

⁶³ Rachels (2009), 413–22, offers a brief introduction to twentieth-century ethical theory. See Narveson (2010) for a recent, representative example.

⁶⁴ “Ethical” is here preferred to “moral,” since the latter term evokes more socially contingent prescriptions of what agents must or ought to do, Harpham (1992), 3. Annas (1992) summarizes the differences between ancient ways of writing about ethics and modern ways of thinking about morals, as well as the lack of general agreement as to what differentiates these terms.

individuals, as distinguished from the structures of civic entities and interactions of larger groups; these are covered by “politics,” as defined in the next section. The separation is by no means absolute (they often overlap within the *Oresteia*) but is necessary for clarity. The ethical analysis in this book focuses on the way representations of the afterlife transform interpersonal behavior, norms applied to such behavior, and the understanding of transgressions against both.

Ethical issues in literature are interpretable on a range of scales and from a variety of positions. The analysis may take on a whole genre (such as “tragedy”), an author or work (e.g. the ethical thought of Aeschylus or that expressed in the *Oresteia*), one act (e.g. Agamemnon’s decision at Aulis), or a combination of these. During and after the play, spectators and interpreters might discuss subsections of this range as well as compare them with their own communal mores and experiences.⁶⁵ The relentless interconnections of the *Oresteia* compel a continual cycling between these levels of interpretation. Yet each modern interpreter is at many removes from the original performance and its culture. At times, it is inevitable to consider (surely a variety of) audience responses. This is a necessarily speculative exercise, and I do not claim any special insight into the minds of Athenian audience members.⁶⁶ Instead, I have tried to foreground the internal logic of the play and then add what can be deduced from the strongest available evidence outside of it. The analysis thus includes relevant cultural, linguistic, and dramatic elements whenever they may buttress particular points.

For this reason, also, ethics and poetics are herein jointly analyzed. The manifestation of themes in language and dramatic representation is what the term “poetics” refers to throughout this book.⁶⁷ This includes both metaphorical connections across thematic categories and, at one point, even metatheatrical features (in Chapter 6). The analysis in several chapters will identify specific features of a “poetics of the beyond.” This phrase refers to the warping effects of perspectives on the afterlife, from recasting the referents of particular words to affecting the interpretation of the trilogy as a whole.⁶⁸ Also connected to the

⁶⁵ Altieri (1998), 31–3, categorizes ethics in literature through the perspectives of different audiences: how individuals evaluate motives and actions in texts, how readers imagine or converse about their assessments, and how readers and critics interact with philosophical discourse about morality.

⁶⁶ On Greek tragic audiences, both as collectives and individuals, responding to ethical issues in tragedy, see Segal (1996); and Easterling (1996).

⁶⁷ For tragic poetics and Aristotle’s ideas, see, for example, Heath (1987). For Aeschylean poetics, see Rosenmeyer (1982).

⁶⁸ For the “poetics of the afterlife” in Homer, see Gazis (2018); and for the “poetics of *katabasis*,” see Dova (2012).

afterlife is a related “poetics of multiplicity.” This refers to the creation of contrasting and sometimes totally opposite perspectives on the afterlife in one scene or across the trilogy, and to the effects specific to such plural perspectives.

Positing these two types of poetics and deriving ethical points from them requires responses to three methodological objections.⁶⁹ The first is that there is no inconsistency between multiple views of the afterlife in the *Oresteia* because Greek society and religion itself contained these very contradictions, which were discussed in the previous section. The second is that references to death and dying, punishment in the afterlife, and ethical rules are all merely expressions of popular morality.⁷⁰ Commentators routinely mark such statements as “commonplaces,” list references to similar statements, and thus imply that there is no further meaning worth investigating. On a more specific, linguistic level, there are interpreters who claim that certain Greek words have a singular meaning, based on their understanding of Greek culture or tragedy as a genre, oftentimes picking comparanda from later examples. They then use this idiosyncratic, specific, or later meaning to deny the multiplicity of possible meanings in a particular passage in the *Oresteia*.

These three positions miss something fundamental to tragedy. Part of what makes the genre so enduringly important is precisely that it focuses on cultural incongruities and linguistic ambiguities. It thus challenges the audience by taking contrasting meanings to extremes, soliciting ethical responses.⁷¹ Of course, what we can tell of ideas circulating at the time serves as useful background for phrasing and themes in the trilogy. However, this does not determine or fix the meaning of a particular word, idea, or passage.⁷² Every chapter of this study will draw attention to the peculiarities of specific phrasings in context and to antithetical views pitted against each other, either in close proximity or across the trilogy. In linguistic discussions, I have been careful to cite the Aeschylean corpus along with relevant earlier sources, if necessary, rather than later tragedies. I put forward the

⁶⁹ These objections are contained in the scholarship on particular passages that will be cited as the discussion progresses.

⁷⁰ The classic work on popular morality is still Dover (1974). On tragedy, see 14–17; and on the afterlife, 261–7.

⁷¹ These tragic techniques are discussed at length in theoretical works cited throughout, for example Goldhill (1986).

⁷² Dover (1974) rightly insists on the unsystematic nature of moral discourse and behavior in any society, xii–xiii; as well as on the dependence of meaning on the source, its genre, and the particular usage, 1–45.

reasons for each claim of problematic meaning or linguistic ambiguity, taking into account other uses, a wide range of commentaries, and specialized studies. As a whole, the book attempts to demonstrate just how much there is to be gained from closely analyzing the language of the afterlife.

The approaches one takes to dramatic character are especially consequential in interpreting ethical ideas within tragedy. Dramatic characters most often – although not always – speak as agents with their own perspectives.⁷³ The chapters thus generally focus first on individuals embedded in their context, then build connections to the larger ethical issues in the trilogy. This practice addresses ethical issues as characters experience them, since prolepsis in interpreting ethics should be avoided.⁷⁴ Following the course of the trilogy also more strongly emphasizes the specificity of particular ethical actions and choices. These are often reconceived in later scenes, and the Summations/Connections at the end of each chapter draw out these links, whereas the Conclusions chapter addresses the interplay between the local level and the trilogy as a whole.

Tragic characters are also always constructed through conventional language and action, against which their individuality emerges.⁷⁵ From this generic axiom come more subtle distinctions: “character” (etymologically from a distinctively engraved mark) includes all of a wide range of both individual features and positions in society. One can thus consider the structuring elements of character in terms of ethos (e.g. whether characteristics are inherited or actions are affected by a divinity) or the roles a figure plays in particular circumstances (e.g. what is expected of a “king” versus a “father” in Agamemnon’s dilemma at Aulis). Understanding the issues that arise when dramatic characters are placed under stress requires scrutinizing their continuity from one scene to the next. Has anything changed when they reappear?

⁷³ See Gill (1990) on tragic character and (1996), esp. 176, on regarding the thinking agent as involved with and reacting to a communal nexus of beliefs and practices.

⁷⁴ See Lebeck (1971), 1–2, on prolepsis as a main structural feature of the *Oresteia*, which she claims necessarily entails teleological reading. It is crucial, however, to heed the double warning of Porter (1990), 35, against considering enigmas in the text as clarified by later events and, conversely, against treating any particular passage in isolation. Bernstein (1994) gives an ethical critique of prolepsis as a literary and historical technique of writing about catastrophe and stipulates that the focus should be on the perspective of individuals.

⁷⁵ See the survey of scholarship in Judet de La Combe (2001), 1.39–46. Character as a generic construct is also connected to the standardized masks and costumes of Greek tragedy, on which see Halliwell (1993); Wyles (2011); and Meineck (2011). Cf. Lawrence (2013), esp. 15–18.

This is an especially germane issue when examining the shift from a living figure to a representation of the same figure after death.⁷⁶ A number of the following chapters will demonstrate that instances of ghostly returns, spiritual continuation in the underworld, and supernatural power in the living world significantly transform previously staged characters.

The analysis in this book is also intended as a delimited argument for reconsidering the use of Greek tragedy in ethical philosophy. Some thinkers attempt to draw universal ethical insights from tragedy.⁷⁷ The dilemmas discussed and enacted within each play and the reconciliations that sometimes occur pull in this direction. Yet there are major quandaries for ethical generalizations from tragedy. Formally speaking, such readings begin from (often unstated) socially normative assumptions. Among these are the requirements for agents to act within relatively stable societal structures and to work to preserve such structures.⁷⁸ Greek tragedies, however, unceasingly undercut the gender, kinship, political, and even divine structures they depict.⁷⁹ Tragic scenes of ethical action or deliberation consistently occur at moments of crisis and follow societally toxic transgressions. Political turmoil and kin murder are particularly prevalent. Tragedy often follows flawed central characters who commit such acts, yet still critique the oppressive norms of their societies.⁸⁰ Moreover, the solutions offered at the end of tragedies are oftentimes unexpected, including divine intervention and rituals that – despite serving as a form of reconciliation – often fail to

⁷⁶ Further issues of continuity include what characters know in each scene and whether characters are considered psychologically coherent or merely vehicles for the action. See Easterling (1990), 83–92, on disagreements concerning the nature of dramatic characters and on the different levels of interpretive codes audiences use to understand performances. Goldhill (1984a), 69–79, 167–9 and (1990a), separates dramatic “figures” from “real people” with psychological histories. He maintains that the former emerge only through the tragic narrative’s language, in which they are fully embedded, arguing against scholars who refer to external notions of consistency.

⁷⁷ Nussbaum (1986), while recognizing the reversals of fortune and irreconcilably conflicting imperatives in Greek tragedy, is nevertheless a prime modern example of generalizing from it to normative ethical claims.

⁷⁸ This can be seen from the categories of normative ethical theory, which focus on determining what is best for society (consequentialism), the obligations of duty (deontology), or understanding how a virtuous actor would approach a dilemma (virtue ethics).

⁷⁹ The recognition of the exceptional character of tragedy and the tragic hero goes back to Aristotle in the ancient world and Schelling at the beginning of modern philosophical approaches to tragedy. For useful surveys of philosophical theories of tragedy, many of which emphasize its undermining functions, see Schmidt (2001); Szondi (2002); and Young (2013). Cf. Goldhill (2012), esp. 137–65.

⁸⁰ Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1990), 25–48, emphasize the tensions that tragic characters face within their society and in their collision with larger divine forces. Gill (1996), 94–174, analyzes the “problematic hero” (especially Achilles and Medea) as a critic of societal norms.

address the provocations to the structure of society raised in the course of the action.⁸¹ Thus, the tragic genre as a whole presents insuperable challenges precisely to the foundational premises of normative ethics. The afterlives of Agamemnon, Orestes, and especially Clytemnestra will provide illustrations of such challenges to normative ethics as echoes of these characters' transgressive living actions.⁸²

Tragedy also contains far stronger and more diverse divine influences than accounted for in modern ethical thought. Supernatural forces repeatedly pressure human agents in ways that affect ethical claims. Examples in the *Oresteia* are the real or interpreted alterations of mental states, signs construed as supernatural demands, and more or less direct divine commands.⁸³ The *Oresteia's* polytheistic framework and the competing claims of divine justice within it are part of its poetics of multiplicity, as will be discussed in Chapter 7. Whereas divinities may be responsible for framing these situations, characters routinely construe action as (at least partially) the agent's responsibility.⁸⁴ This can be seen in the Elders' often-discussed formulation concerning Agamemnon's fulfilling the divinely demanded sacrifice of Iphigeneia: "He put on the yoke of necessity."⁸⁵ The divine pressures on characters warp the *Oresteia's* ethical dilemmas beyond normative frameworks. They thus bedevil any abstraction into ethical rules for conventional situations.

Continuity after death further strains the stable societal structure implied in most philosophical analyses of ethics.⁸⁶ Claims on behalf of the deceased also entail the uncertainty inherent in the multiple Greek pictures of the potential afterlife. As we will see, appeals for justice on

⁸¹ Segal (1996); Easterling (1996); and Dunn (1997).

⁸² There have also been numerous powerful critiques of normative ethics, notably in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, for example (1969) and (1987). Levinas often frames ethics as an infinite obligation to the always separate, unknowable Other. His work may be seen as foundational (and much reacted against) for taking the individual seriously regardless of socially normative frameworks. Although not following Levinas's philosophical framework, an ethical emphasis on individuals will be part of the argument of several of the following chapters. For the difficult conjunction of Levinas's ethical and political philosophy, see Bernard-Donals (2005).

⁸³ Discussions of decision-making in the trilogy have always focused on the restrictions governing human freedom, citing such forces as necessity, the divine, and the family curse or guilt of the Atreidae, for example, Greene (1943); Gantz (1982); and Sewell-Rutter (2007).

⁸⁴ Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1990), 79; *contra* Rosenmeyer (1982), 284–307, who denies the notion of "choice" anywhere in Aeschylus.

⁸⁵ ἀνάγκας ἔδω λείπαδνον, *Ag.* 218. The bibliography on Agamemnon's decision is immense, for example Greene (1943); Lloyd-Jones (1962); Lesky (1966); Peradotto (1969); Dover (1973); Edwards (1977); Nussbaum (1986), 25–50; Griffith (1991); and Lawrence (2013), 71–83.

⁸⁶ For modern philosophical approaches to death and the afterlife that address potential transformations of values, see Moore (1981); Paterson (1995); and Kagan (2012).

behalf of dead family members recur in scene after scene in the *Oresteia* without any suggestion of sure knowledge of the beyond. Instead, the many ideas about potential continuity raise new questions concerning actions taken by an individual or their kin in life or after their death: What might affect their status in any society of the dead? How might postmortem existence, or even divine punishment, force rethinking of living actions and values?⁸⁷

Just as in religion and philosophy, in literature transformations of the self and of how one is valued may occur after death. In general, it is only literature, however, that presents the perspectives of the deceased, sometimes startlingly unpredictable ones. To give a famous example from Homer (heavily oversimplified by necessity), Achilles in the *Iliad* must choose between two foretold paths: glorious early death or long, inglorious life (*Il.* 9.412–16; 18.97–126). For reasons less to do with glory than with vengeance and guilt, he eventually embraces death in battle.⁸⁸ In the *Odyssey*, by contrast, the soul of Achilles in the underworld declares that he *only* values life, even without property or freedom. He thus abnegates any honor accrued in battle and denies that glory gives him power in the afterlife (*Od.* 11.488–91). That is, he finds no joy in the state that his choice hastened.⁸⁹ It soon becomes clear, however, that the soul of Achilles is anxious about the status of his son (*Od.* 11.492–3), who is unmentioned in the *Iliad*. Achilles seemingly returns full circle to valuing glory by rejoicing at Neoptolemus' earthly deeds, despite renouncing any continuing benefit from his own.⁹⁰ Odysseus' encounter with the soul of his comrade entails a number of reversals of Achilles' stated concerns. It ends with an underworld happiness grounded in continuity through living children.

Crucially, the story itself also demonstrates the reflexive use of the afterlife to reevaluate life on the level of poetics and metanarrative.⁹¹ Since Odysseus narrates the tale simultaneously to an internal audience and to the external audiences of the epic, both sets are invited to rethink the terms of Achilles' choice: glory relative to longevity and the individualistic mentality of the hero versus a legacy through family, among other themes. This example, with its continual turns, fits in especially well with the

⁸⁷ On the major ethical problems raised by different perspectives on the afterlife in Greek tragedy and how Plato reworks each for his philosophical questioning of values, see Shilo (2013). Cf. Annas (1982); and North (1992).

⁸⁸ Schein (1984), 128–63. ⁸⁹ Gazis (2018), 184–95, with bibliography.

⁹⁰ *Od.* 538–40. The common misconception about the pessimism of Achilles in Hades does not take into account the joy he demonstrates as he departs, Schmiel (1987), 35–7.

⁹¹ de Jong (2001), 271–95.

following discussions of the transformations of Cassandra, Agamemnon, Orestes, and Clytemnestra after death. A major indication of this theme's importance in the trilogy is that each of its three choruses sings of the afterlife as a place for the reversal of fortune.

Conscientious analysis of ethical issues in the trilogy ought to elicit their complexity, to temper unconditional conclusions, and to reconsider any tempting generalizations. Despite the multivalenced language of tragedy and the repeated reversals of many themes, ambiguity cannot be an endpoint for interpretation. Therefore, this book concatenates afterlife themes as the trilogy progresses, with the later ones also qualifying the earlier ones. Each chapter draws out the consequences of major and less obvious aspects of possible human afterlives. The book as a whole thus builds a layered argument about the trilogy's challenges to ethical thought based upon plural perspectives on human afterlives.

Politics and the *Oresteia*

"Politics," too, is a term in need of wider, provisional definitions and narrower redefinitions in individual chapters. It is easily seen that structures of government, actions with effects on rulers, and discourse about societal values all play a role in understanding the political aspects of particular scenes, whole tragedies, and tragedy as a genre. Tragedy, having evolved in Athens, has long been understood as enmeshed with the city and its ideas, especially those opposed to the heroic values of epic.⁹² More specifically, in studies of Athenian democracy and scholarship on tragedy's connection with political theory there is a widespread tendency to refer to the *Oresteia* as an essentially democratic text.⁹³ Consequently, the analysis of political themes in this book will touch on references relevant to contemporary Athenian concerns, writ large, and analogies to democratic

⁹² Thomson (1946) is an early example, while a more recent flood of works stems more or less from Vernant's structuralist interpretations. For example, Vernant and Vidal-Naquet (1990), 23–9, sketch out "the opposition between legal and political thought on the one hand and mythical and heroic traditions," and "the problems of human responsibility that arise as a hesitant progress is made toward the establishment of law," 27. Cf. Goldhill (1986); and Longo (1990), 12–19.

⁹³ Studies of Aeschylus in relation to democracy tend to emphasize the final reconciliation and divine order at the end of the *Oresteia*, for example, Thomson (1946), 199–219, 245–97; Euben (1982); and Zak (1995), 29–88. Meier (1990), 82–139, connects the *Oresteia* to the contemporary Athenian political transformations most emphatically; for example, "there is good reason to believe that the transition to democracy in Attica was never perceived as clearly as it was by Aeschylus," 137; cf. (1993), 102–65.

governance, both of which included high-stakes conflicts throughout Aeschylus' lifetime.⁹⁴ Yet there is much more to politics in the *Oresteia* than its relationship to democratic Athens. This becomes evident in the following brief survey of the political context of tragic performance, the events surrounding the *Oresteia*'s staging in 458 BCE, and the scope of political themes affected by the afterlife within the trilogy.

Over the last several decades, a great deal of attention has focused on tragedy's relation to the festival of Dionysus, within which it was staged, and to the related civic discourse of contemporary Athens. Many features of the festival structure can be labeled as demonstrating "democratic ideology." Although our evidence is tenuous for Aeschylus' time, some democratic features of the dramatic festival and performances include: theater seating by tribe and political status; ticket distribution by deme; the audience as the most numerous annual congregation of citizens, who overlapped with voters and jurors; the judges, chosen by lot, voting on the victors; the presentation of crowns for benefactors of the city; the institution of *khoregia*; and the control over funding by the assemblies and the Council of 500, which made decisions about the festival and audited it thereafter.⁹⁵

A number of other features of the festival and performance are ambiguously democratic. The chorus – which was a widespread feature of festivals around the Greek world – also has elements that scholars have connected specifically with democracy. As a collective, they model plurality and sometimes socially conventional reactions.⁹⁶ Other aspects of the festival are possibly democratic, but definitely militaristic in nature: the generals led ceremonies and sometimes judged (at least once in 468 BCE); the war-orphan *ephebes*, raised at the expense of the city, paraded in full armor; and the choral dance training might have had some correlation to training for hoplite warfare (a link which is disputed).⁹⁷ Even the introduction of the City Dionysia has been tagged as a political-

⁹⁴ It is worth noting, with Denniston and Page (1957), ix–x, that Aeschylus was born under tyranny, and his early years were marked by political assassination, the expulsion of the tyrant, the defeat of the Spartan king who had entered Athens, and the development of the structures of democracy.

⁹⁵ Goldhill (1987), (1990b), and (2000); Sommerstein (1987); Wilson (1997); Longo (1990); Griffin (1998); Sourvinou-Inwood (2003), 67–140, 231–51; Slater (2007); and Roselli (2011). *Contra* Griffith (1995) and (1998); and Carter (2007), 35–43.

⁹⁶ See Bollack and Judet de La Combe (1981) 1.xxix–xxxiv; Gould (1996); Goldhill (1996) and (2012), 166–200; and Foley (2003). Note that in the *Oresteia* none of the three Chorus are comprised of democratic citizens: the Elders of Argos in the *Agamemnon* are the closest, the Slave Women of the *Choephoroi* do not show democratic features, and the Erinyes in the *Eumenides* are least of all concerned with democracy, despite being incorporated into Athens (Chapter 7).

⁹⁷ The evidence is again not conclusive for these other features in Aeschylus' time: on the generals, see *Cim.* 8.7–9; and cf. Goldhill (1987), 60; on the *ephebes* and the choral dances, see Winkler (1990); criticized by Wilson (1997); and Lech (2009).

theological ploy for the unity of a formerly decentralized Athens, but this element was, again, not necessarily democratic. It has been plausibly argued that the ritual procession for Dionysus was part of a wide-ranging attempt at bolstering Athenian imperialistic policy through integrating cult practices from elsewhere.⁹⁸ It is possible that this nexus of religion and politics was initiated by Peisistratus, whose scheme to regain the tyranny of Athens through mocking up a human avatar of Athena in procession drew Herodotus' scorn, yet seems to have worked.⁹⁹ Emotions elicited by tragedy, such as pity and fear, have a central place in political statements within the *Oresteia*. They have strong analogues in Athenian political discourse, but the use of pity for suppliants and fear as a means of social control may be widely shared across forms of government, and not a fundamental feature of democracy.¹⁰⁰

The conjunction of religion and militarism in the festival under strict *polis* control provides crucial background elements for understanding the *Oresteia's* political engagements. The focus on positive ceremonies in Athens and the procession that closes the play may be understood as staging the festival within itself. Yet the fictional ceremony also displaces elements of the real one: the Athens of the play is a mythic double of the real city, Athena is made the founder of both festival and Athenian law, and the divinities whom the festival honors are not Dionysus but chthonic demons.¹⁰¹ Since the *Oresteia* links the Erinyes to the *Semnai Theai*, divinities with their own procession, the Dionysian tragic festival that contains democratic features is no longer a precise referent, but only a general parallel to the trilogy's closing rituals.¹⁰² Thus, from the start, it is worth examining political and political-religious ideas in the *Oresteia* from a perspective broader than the study of Athenian politics or democratic ideology.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ See esp. Kurke (2013), with bibliography. Cf. Goldhill (1987), 59; and Sourvinou-Inwood (2000), 18–19.

⁹⁹ On Peisistratus and Athena, Hdt. 1.60 and *Ath. Pol.* 14.4. On the introduction of festivals by Peisistratus, see Griffith (1995), 116; and Kurke (2013), 148–9.

¹⁰⁰ Rosenbloom (2012) discusses political passages from drama that demonstrate pity and fear, with analogous Athenian political language drawn mostly from the orators. He never, however, proves the assertion that these are specifically *democratic* emotions. Cf. MacLeod (1982), 144.

¹⁰¹ On the varied relationships of Athens to Athena, in myth, art, and political discourse, see Loraux (1993) and Kennedy (2009).

¹⁰² On the links between the Erinyes and the *Semnai Theai*, associated with the Areopagus, see Brown (1984), esp. 262–3. For further challenges to understanding the religious and political effects of tragedies on the city, see Parker (1997); and Sourvinou-Inwood (2003).

¹⁰³ Especially important is the debate between Griffith (1995) and Goldhill (1986), (1990b), and (2000), 34–56. Goldhill challenges any single notion of ideology, especially stemming from the festival context and the notion of tragedy itself. He concludes by drawing attention not only to the ambiguities of the *Oresteia's* political content in context, but to the very issue of critical investment in judgments about ambiguity and closure. Further, wide-ranging critiques that draw attention to issues of ideology, such as Zeitlin (1978), are valuable for understanding the *Oresteia's* place in

The *Oresteia* certainly alludes to contemporary events, yet their place in its political message, if any, is disputed. The trilogy contains transparent references to Athens fighting in Egypt and in what historians retrospectively refer to as the First Peloponnesian War.¹⁰⁴ Contemporary interpolis relations, too, are the obvious reason for the move of Agamemnon and Orestes to Argos (Chapter 5). Scholarship has analyzed references in the *Oresteia* as a reaction to recent, contentious democratic reforms against aristocratic privilege, which led to civil strife. Within the *Oresteia*'s mythical-historical narrative, however, the Athenian government is contrasted with Argos, a monarchy. That is, the warnings against civic infighting, *stasis*, are clear, yet Aeschylus' references to internal Athenian politics are ambiguous.¹⁰⁵

The reform of the Areopagus, hinted at in the *Eumenides*, serves as a prime example. Several aspects of the trilogy's ending seem to be a reaction to the recent turmoil. Historically, Solon transformed the Areopagus from a homicide court to a council of ex-archons.¹⁰⁶ He claimed that it would be "a second anchor" for the state.¹⁰⁷ It is thought that part of the function of these officials was to keep the current archons in line during their year of office.¹⁰⁸ Over time, the Areopagus became a seat of aristocratic influence with wide-ranging powers, through its mandate to "preserve the *nomoi*." Ephialtes in 461/2 (only a few years before the staging of the *Oresteia*) contentiously reduced its power back to judging homicide cases and prosecuted its members, leading to further turmoil and possibly to his assassination.¹⁰⁹ In the *Eumenides*, by contrast, the institution is divinely mandated. Athena establishes the Areopagus under the rubric of a new "law for all time" and declares that it ought to inspire fear (*Eum.* 690–708). It is represented as the place for men "without fault" chosen, in the first instance, by Athena (482a[475]–84); it is not selected from the ex-archons, nor by vote of the *demos*, nor by lot. Aeschylus thus leaves room for the Areopagus to be identified with an aristocratic (or at least nondemocratic) bulwark for the current laws and against any change whatsoever, but,

political thought. Extending Vernant's theories, Zeitlin argues that myth is the unrecognized, unacknowledged legitimizing force for social and political ideology, beyond the psychic forces that compel its creation, which are in dynamic tension with collective ideology, 119.

¹⁰⁴ Sommerstein (2010a), 283–5. ¹⁰⁵ See Meier (1993), 87–9; and Sommerstein (2010a), 285–9.

¹⁰⁶ For a reconstruction of the functions of the Areopagus over time, see Zelnik-Abramovitz (2011).

¹⁰⁷ Along with the Council of 400 that took up matters before the assembly deliberated, Plutarch *Sol.* 19.2.

¹⁰⁸ Wallace (2007), 66–7.

¹⁰⁹ Ephialtes was killed (as we understand it) for attempting to improve the relative status of the *demos* and reform systems that the aristocracy was seen to control, on which see Cartledge (2016), 85–6.

again, this is only hinted at.¹¹⁰ It is impossible to reconstruct his affiliation or a partisan message from the *Oresteia*.¹¹¹

The Areopagus example illustrates that instead of taking a specific stance in contemporary affairs, tragedy addresses them indirectly. The distance in mythical time and the lack of direct references to contemporary politics and public figures that are prevalent in comedy appears to be (with some exceptions) a tragic convention. Tragedy might be said to appeal only to general political principles, such as civic unity. Yet since tragic language, themes, and action also pose challenges to such general principles (including, as we will see in Chapter 7, civic unity), one must continually refer first of all to internal context. By necessity, therefore, this book greatly restricts its treatment of the historical aspects of the allusions in the *Oresteia*. Similarly, the democratic “ideology” of the tragic festival, itself always ambivalent, will be understood as the background for a set of themes in the play and the closing procession. Politics in this study thus refers to the themes related to the Trojan War, the *poleis* Argos and Athens in mythical time, and allusions to contemporary democratic institutions. Additionally, it refers to explicit statements about governing from rulers in the trilogy, general injunctions to humanity from the Erinyes, and Athena’s foundation of a new law.

It is precisely these political aspects that afterlife references can both enrich and challenge. The destiny of *poleis* is at stake in a number of depictions of the beyond: postmortem punishment for those who instigate war, the honor or dishonor of rulers in the underworld, monarchical succession related to the status of the dead, and the political influence of ghosts and heroes.¹¹² The Choruses of the trilogy declare that war, *coups d’état*, and blood-spilling in general are judged by chthonic powers. Afterlife ideas, expressed or enacted, give new perspectives on the political choices of individuals, rulers, cities, warfare, divine justice, and the Athenocentric ending.¹¹³ The postmortem existence of Orestes and

¹¹⁰ The identification of the Erinyes with older forces parallels an argument that the reform of the Areopagus was in fact a restoration of its original function, see Meier (1993), 110.

¹¹¹ Scholars have taken both sides concerning Aeschylus’ support of Ephialtes’ reforms, with no consensus. On these debates and the *Oresteia* as a general reaction to civil strife, see further Sommerstein (2010a), 284–9, and (2010c).

¹¹² Although there are no examples of political martyrdom *per se* in the *Oresteia*, several characters rhetorically express desire for death in conjunction with political attacks, on which see Chapter 5. On the intersection of ethics, politics, religion, and the afterlife in martyrdom, see, for example, van Henten and Avemarie (2002); Castelli (2004); Devji (2005); and Middleton (2011).

¹¹³ Athena’s insistence on a new law in the ending of the trilogy has led to numerous discussions of theodicy in the *Oresteia*, see Kitto (1961), 90–5; Gagarin (1976), 66–73; Rosenmeyer (1982), 259–368;

Clytemnestra, as well as the ethical punishment by Hades, add layers to the heavy emphasis on the individual's action in tragedy as intrinsically opposed to the state, which is the topic of much philosophizing about tragedy.¹¹⁴ In analyzing each, this book strives to maintain the tensions between the power of tragedy's normative pull as elevated public discourse and its subversion of widely accepted political notions.

Order of Chapters

The ever-increasing prominence of afterlife themes in the *Oresteia* allows this book to address them in a natural order. The first two chapters thus analyze death as closure, along with the first, barest allusions to possible continuation after death. Chapter 1 addresses the Herald's remarkable focus on his own death at home and the ethos it implies. The chapter then turns to his repeated attempts to suppress speech and thought about the dead of the Trojan War, which lead to twists of language and untenable political positions. The chapter also includes the first reference to Hades, but in an entirely restricted sense.

Chapter 2 analyzes the Chorus of the *Agamemnon*, who treat death as an absolute end to suffering even more explicitly than the Herald does. Throughout their songs, however, they speculate on a variety of continuations of the self, including brief allusions to a resurrection of the dead and to punishment in the afterlife. Together, these two chapters provide the background for the rest of the trilogy by focusing on characters who lack access to the beyond, but who demonstrate multiple attitudes to death and the afterlife. What are only hints in their scenes continually grow in importance as the trilogy progresses.

The next two chapters concern characters who more actively consider the afterlife, with powerful implications for themselves. Chapter 3 provides a new perspective on Cassandra, the oft-discussed prophetess facing a foretold doom. Cassandra briefly and ambiguously refers to herself singing prophecies in Hades. Attention to this passage leads to questions that have never been asked: How would her continuity in the underworld transform consideration of her predicted death? Does it circumvent Apollo's curse or reinforce it? The notion of fate, built up by Aeschylus throughout the scene, is at stake if Cassandra continues to exist beyond her foretold demise.

Goldhill (1986), 35–9; Solmsen (1995), 178–224; Bees (2009), 157–259; Parker (2009); and Sommerstein (2010a), 193–203.

¹¹⁴ Schmidt (2001), 101–2, 112.

Chapter 4 focuses on the multiple relationships to the dead Agamemnon that his mourners create in the *Choephoroi*. The laments of the Chorus of Slave Women, Electra, and Orestes intertwine diverse possibilities for Agamemnon's afterlife, including appeals to his spirit and even attempts to raise him from the dead. As discussed briefly in this Introduction, the Chorus also depict Agamemnon in Hades, with the implication that his current dishonor might be reversed by ethical and political action. Specifically, they call for vengeance on his behalf, which eventually constitutes a second *coup d'état*. Together these chapters begin to expose a pattern in the *Oresteia* that has garnered little attention: over the course of the trilogy what seemed to only be a personal consideration, the individual afterlife, becomes ever more politically significant.

The next two chapters pick up on this pattern with characters who straddle life and death. Chapter 5 analyzes heroes as afterlife figures of worship in the *Oresteia*, which has not been the subject of sustained study. The only example of the word "hero" in the Aeschylean corpus occurs in the *Agamemnon*. Yet both Agamemnon and Orestes transform into afterlife figures to whom supernatural powers are attributed. Both of these mythical figures received geographically specific rituals in contemporary Greek religion. Within the *Oresteia*, however, their roles shift significantly between life and death, demonstrating the unexpected political-theological use of the afterlife as staged before Athenian spectators.

Chapter 6 examines the dynamics of Clytemnestra's Ghost, who emphasizes her own dishonor in Hades in order to call for the Erinyes to take vengeance on her living son. This afterlife figure is thus a direct instigator of dramatic action, for the Erinyes' pursuit of Orestes structures the plot of the *Eumenides*. I will argue that Clytemnestra's Ghost challenges normative ethical thought through themes unique to her postmortem reappearance and continuation in the underworld.

Chapter 7 analyzes the universal judgment of the dead by Hades. Whereas other Choruses only hint at it and characters on the whole ignore it, the Erinyes present it as a divine revelation. I will argue that afterlife punishment for living deeds forces reconsideration of the ethical calculations of characters and thus gives a new perspective on the ethical points made by the trilogy as a whole. Hades' punishment also has unexplored political consequences, since it continues the Erinyes' check on transgressive deeds even after these divinities subordinate themselves to Athens. A contrast with Athena's law and collective vision for Athens closes the chapter. I argue that Hades' continuing, alternative justice deeply complicates her rewriting of human politics and values.

Finally, the Conclusions chapter links insights from each earlier chapter to demonstrate the layered and unique poetics of the beyond in the *Oresteia*. It draws out the sophisticated revaluations that occur when human life is extended past its normally understood ending. These possibilities beyond death present new perspectives and challenges for some of the trilogy's most widely debated ethical dilemmas and its political resolution.