CHAPTER 2

The Chorus of the Agamemnon
Human Views on the Beyond

Introduction

What was implicit in the Herald's speeches about death becomes more explicit in the words of the Elders throughout the *Agamemnon*. Specifically, the Herald's relation to his own death, his faltering attempts to close off the continuity of the war dead, and his subsequent difficulties navigating the issue of glory after death all have their analogues in the Elders' speeches. As impotent old men facing the recurrent violence of the house of Atreus, they repeatedly raise the prospect of their own deaths but also fail to intervene. They intersperse the dramatic action with odes that comment on it from more universal perspectives and contain the first whispers concerning the afterlife.[1] They offer collective wisdom about life, speculate about the divine, contrast citizen perspectives to those of heroes, and concern themselves with the propriety of ritual.[2] The Elders' plural perspectives on the afterlife provide insights into their dramatic character and contrast with later divine knowledge. This chapter examines how these sometimes-contradictory attitudes affect the representation of ethical and political values, whether they influence character action, and how they connect with the rest of the trilogy.

Wishing the End

Infirm and aged, the Elders of the *Agamemnon* cannot uphold their stated ideology of civic loyalty (e.g. *Ag.* 805–9) against precipitate violence.

[1] See Parry (1978), 73–107, on how tragic choral poetry in general, and Aeschylean in particular, exploits the tension between the Chorus's role as character and the more "cosmic" viewpoint natural to the choral genre. Fletcher (1999) engages the issue of the authorial voice. Rosenmeyer (1982), 145–87, esp. 186, treats their maxims as tapping into "the near anonymous life preserving spirit which sustains civic life while heroes come and go."

[2] See the debate over each of these particular aspects of tragic choruses in Gould (1996) and the response of Goldhill (1996) and (2012), 166–200; cf. Bollack and Judet de La Combe (1981) 1.xxv–xlii; Foley (2003); and Dhuga (2011). On the Chorus focalizing the Athenian citizens but also differing from them, see Griffith (1995), 103 n. 129.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

They affect neither a tyrant's decision for war, with which they originally disagreed (*Ag.* 799–804), nor his bloody overthrow (*Ag.* 1344–71, 1612–71). In response to murderous political events, on multiple occasions they express a desire for life's end. In this, they invert some of the themes from the Herald's rhetorical emphasis on his own death. For the Herald, the focus on the tomb heightened his gratefulness to have escaped from evils and returned home. As we saw in Chapter 1, even this rhetoric is problematic on many levels, culminating in his attempt to entirely close off thinking about the dead. The emphasis on death is even more problematic for the Chorus. For one, these Elders' responses to the action are partially paradigmatic for the audience, so their wishing for death factors into the ominous tone throughout the *Agamemnon*. Further, in their role as characters, they are more directly involved in the action, and their statements frame their values and confrontations with the main figures.[3]

The first instance of the motif of wishing for the end in the Elders' dialogue contains, as we saw in Chapter 1, a direct reference to the Herald's submission to death. They take his claim that he will no longer resist dying (τὸ τεθνάναι δ᾽ οὐκέτ᾽ ἀντερῶ θεοῖς, *Ag.* 539) one step further when they unexpectedly return to his statement several lines later (*Ag.* 550):

> ὡς νῦν, τὸ σὸν δή, καὶ θανεῖν πολλὴ χάρις.
>
> As you said just now, even to die is a great boon.

The Elders' words corroborate that the desirability of death is evident in the Herald's original statement. Of course, as the speakers change, so too change the associations. Unlike the Herald, whose words only ironically connect to the situation in Argos, of which he is unaware, the Elders find themselves enmeshed within specific political and familial conflicts, hinted at darkly from the *Agamemnon*'s earliest lines. In circumstances still opaque at that dramatic moment, death for the Elders is, paradoxically (as expressed by καί, "even"), a πολλὴ χάρις (*pollē kharis*, "a great favor/boon"), if not actually an aspiration. Verbally, at least, they manifest the severity of the problems of life through a transvaluation of its end into a reward. A peaceful death represents the escape from the violence of war for the Herald; for the Elders, death represents an escape from overwhelming political tension.

[3] On the character and peculiar position of the Chorus of Elders compared to other Aeschylean choruses, see Bollack and Judet de La Combe (1981), 1.xxii–xxviii.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

At that early point in the narrative, the wish for death as closure seems purely rhetorical and greatly overstated – it has been dismissed as merely a commonplace.[4] In the aftermath of Clytemnestra's coup, however, violent death manifests itself viscerally on stage as the corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra are wheeled in.[5] These characters had just been interacting with the Elders, one having returned as a blessed victor, one (as a slave) having been spared her civilization's demise. The Elders' worst fears have been consummated. In response to Clytemnestra standing over the body of their king, the Elders formulate their anguish in part by enunciating even more fully a wish for their own death (*Ag.* 1448–51):

φεῦ, τίς ἂν ἐν τάχει μὴ περιώδυνος
μηδὲ δεμνιοτήρης
μόλοι τὸν αἰεὶ φέρουσ' ἐν ἡμῖν
μοῖρ' ἀτέλευτον ὕπνον

Alas, would that some not excruciating
nor lingering fate come swiftly,
forever, carrying to us
eternal sleep

Slumber ends the nightmare of life. The Elders are concerned with the avoidance of both the anguish of continued existence and possible torment in the process of dying.[6] This wish does not pass unremarked upon. Clytemnestra responds specifically to their rhetoric (1462–3):

Κλ. μηδὲν θανάτου μοῖραν ἐπεύχου
τοῖσδε βαρυνθείς

Clyt. Do not pray for the fate of death,
weighed down by these events

Clytemnestra acknowledges that their wish for oblivion is part of their emotional response to her murders and political subversion. She attempts

[4] Compare Aegisthus, who at *Ag.* 1610–11 calls dying (τὸ κατθανεῖν) noble (καλόν) for himself after he has accomplished his vengeance. See Chapter 1, with citations on "now I could die happy." For an analysis of this passage in comparison with Orestes' stated wish to die once he kills Clytemnestra at *Cho.* 438, see Chapter 5. Concerning the general objection that a particular line is a commonplace and therefore lacks any meaningful specificity, see the Introduction.

[5] On the staging, with the possibility of the *ekkyklema*, see Denniston and Page (1957) 196–7; and Taplin (1977), 325–7.

[6] Denniston and Page (1957), 204, condemn this passage as containing "a remarkable quantity of irrelevant detail." The analysis here demonstrates precisely the relevance of evasion of pain to the Chorus's rhetoric of death as closure, as well as the consequences of such rhetoric.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to argue them out of it, yet fewer than eighty lines later they return to the theme in a second passage (1538–40):

> ἰὼ γᾶ γᾶ, εἴθε μ' ἐδέξω
> πρὶν τόνδ' ἐπιδεῖν ἀργυροτοίχου
> δροίτας κατέχοντα χάμευναν.
>
> Oh earth, earth, if only you had received me
> before I looked upon this man occupying
> the makeshift bed of a silver-sided bathtub.

The logic of this second passage is ostrich-like: If the Elders had not lived to see the event, they would not be suffering from it. The network of visual language examined in Chapter 1 continues in this statement's equation of death with the privation of sight ("before I looked upon," πρὶν τόνδ' ἐπιδεῖν, 1539), and therefore with the abolishment of knowledge.[7] It is evident that in both passages the Elders use highly potential, even counterfactual language.[8] Both passages treat death as anesthesia.[9] In a malevolent reality they seem powerless to change, this yearning to renounce what they have actually seen instantiates one conception of death: Its nothingness should be a refuge from earthly adversity.

Glory and Noble Death

The Elders articulate a second conception of death, which diverges from oblivion: Glory allows for a type of continuity of self. After the Herald's problematic silencing of the war dead and glorification of the living, the Elders, too, engage glory in a dubious manner. Against Cassandra's protestations, the Elders define her decision to face a known death as brave (*Ag.* 1300–4):

> Χο. ὁ δ' ὕστατός γε τοῦ χρόνου πρεσβεύεται.
> Κα. ἥκει τόδ' ἦμαρ. σμικρὰ κερδανῶ φυγῇ.
> Χο. ἀλλ' ἴσθι τλήμων οὖσ' ἀπ' εὐτόλμου φρενός.
> Κα. οὐδεὶς ἀκούει ταῦτα τῶν εὐδαιμόνων.
> Χο. ἀλλ' εὐκλεῶς τοι κατθανεῖν χάρις βροτῷ.
>
> Chor. Nevertheless, the last moment is most honored.
> Cass. The day has come. I will profit little by fleeing.

[7] Cf. Schenker (1991), 69.
[8] An interrogative with optative in the first (cf. Fraenkel (1950) ad 622) and a past "wish incapable of fulfillment" in the second.
[9] Sourvinou-Inwood (1995), 394–5, lists Greek sources for the themes of "death as a deliverer from toil, trouble, pain and distress" and "the dead are not touched by pain and suffering." However, both her lists are missing all the passages from the *Oresteia* discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and 5.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Chor. But know that you are courageous from a daring spirit.
Cass. None of the fortunate hears these things said of them.
Chor. But I say to you it is a boon for a mortal to die gloriously.

In 1304, the Elders echo their response to the Herald, only now the χάρις (*kharis*, "boon") is not simply escaping life, but having a good reputation (*eukleōs*, εὐκλεῶς) at its close.[10] This reasoning touches on the theme of glory in the Herald's first long speech.[11] The Elders characterize Cassandra's facing her fate as worthy of glory, unlinking it from its epic roots in warfare. They only retain the notion that glory is a goal that prompts and repays courageous action. The Elders specify that rewards are due to her because she knowingly forgoes the final instants of life to confront annihilation on her own terms.[12] They thus reveal an ethical attitude to death: Dying bravely, even though not in battle, can provide some continuity through reputation. In Cassandra's case, such reputation would be solely bestowed from the outside, for she herself does not seek it but even actively denies its benefit (1303; and Chapter 3). It thus does not fall into the category of afterlife continuity affecting decisions in life.

Closer ligatures to action are found in the Elders' own declarations about fighting tyranny to the death. First, in deliberation over what to do once they hear Agamemnon's dying cries, two of their voices take the position that it is better to die than to live under despots (*Ag.* 1362–5):

–ἦ καὶ βίον τείνοντες ὧδ' ὑπείξομεν
δόμων καταισχυντῆρσι τοῖσδ' ἡγουμένοις;
–ἀλλ' οὐκ ἀνεκτόν, ἀλλὰ κατθανεῖν κρατεῖ·
πεπαιτέρα γὰρ μοῖρα τῆς τυραννίδος.

–Will we really extend our lives this way and yield
to these rulers, defilers of the house?
–But it is unbearable! But it is better to die!
For that is a milder fate than tyranny!

Secondly, at the end of the *Agamemnon*, they themselves choose to stare down the usurpers of the state and declare that they will fight to the death (*Ag.* 1652):

[10] There are strong grammatical and sonic parallels between *Ag.* 550 and 1304: χάρις occurs with an elided verb in both, and κατθανεῖν is in the same metrical position as καὶ θανεῖν. See further Chapter 3.
[11] *Ag.* 577–83. Note the similarity of κλύοντας εὐλογεῖν in 580 to εὐκλεῶς.
[12] E.g. 1290[1289], 1296–8, 1302, 1305, 1321. Cassandra's bravery and the possibility of her glory for facing death are covered in the next chapter.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ἀλλὰ κἀγὼ μὴν †πρόκωπος† οὐκ ἀναίνομαι θανεῖν.[13]

But I too then [with my sword drawn] do not refuse to die.

Both times, the Elders, or a portion of them, inflame their spirit for action. They utter lines suited to extreme defenders of liberty – prepared to fight tyranny to the crimson end. Both times, however, such bravado only emphasizes the inadequacy of their old age.[14] No fight ensues.

How does their anticlimactic inaction connect with their ideas about the end of life? When they declare themselves ready to fight, they fail to ever mention glory. Instead, their own characterization of death as escape from life is prominent. In the first passage, they rhetorically ask whether they will extend life (βίον τείνοντες, 1362) and create an opposition between death and continuing to live under tyranny (1364–5). In the second passage, the double negatives and use of the verb θνῄσκω ("I . . . do not refuse to die," οὐκ ἀναίνομαι θανεῖν, *Ag.* 1652) even echo the acquiescence to death in the double-negative formulation of the Herald ("I will no longer deny dying," τὸ τεθνάναι δ᾽ οὐκέτ᾽ ἀντερῶ, *Ag.* 539). Their language in the moment of action paradoxically returns to escapism and passivity. The rhetorical difference between their mentions of glory and their emphasis on a quiet death helps to characterize the Elders. Their references to death as closure in the moment of action verbally reinforce the sense of their futility in the face of political violence.

Intimations of the Afterlife

The characterization of the Elders in the previous two sections allows us to fruitfully contrast their perspectives on the afterlife. Four critical examples, sung and spoken, demonstrate the range of possibilities of continuity after death. The Elders offer what are essentially the first extended references to different types of afterlife in the *Oresteia*, although they are sometimes hardly more substantial than those of the Herald. Each rewards careful scrutiny, since their motifs continue to unfurl with ever greater import later in the trilogy. Examining them in their context demonstrates how different

[13] The OCT obelizes πρόκωπος, since few believe the Elders could have had swords on stage throughout the whole play or appeared with them suddenly without comment. There are, moreover, possible textual problems, for which see Denniston and Page (1957), ad 1650–3; and Medda (2017), ad 1651.

[14] On dramatizing this moment and the evasion that characterizes the Chorus, see Greenhalgh (1969), 253–8; Taplin (1977), 323–4; and Winnington-Ingram (1983), 208–16. On choral inaction in general and this passage in particular, see Dhuga (2011), 75–97.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

versions of the afterlife work on multiple levels dramatically, extend thinking about human and divine roles, and embolden political critique.

The subtle opening mention of the continuity of the dead involves the Greek soldiers in the Trojan War. It occurs in the first stasimon, before the Herald has even arrived on stage to mention his dead companions. Since it is sung, offers the perspective of the citizens about the distant war, and is quite brief, the theme of continuation beyond death is easy to miss but is nevertheless significant (*Ag.* 452–5):

> οἱ δ᾽ αὐτοῦ περὶ τεῖχος
> θήκας Ἰλιάδος γᾶς
> εὔμορφοι κατέχουσιν, ἐχ-
> θρὰ δ᾽ ἔχοντας ἔκρυψεν.
>
> And there, around the fortification,
> the handsome men occupy graves
> in the land of Ilium,
> and the hostile (land) covers its possessors.

The Elders build up pathos for the casualties via the echoing sounds and image of mutual grasping: The hostile land (ἐχθρά) holds (κατέχουσιν) and hides (ἔκρυψεν) the Greek dead who hold (ἔχοντας) it.[15] Crucially, the one aspect the men retain after death is their bodily image; the substantive "handsome" (*eumorphoi*, εὔμορφοι, 454) provides their sole description.[16] The emphasis on the beauty of their form multiplies the referents to their continuity. Its immediate denotation is their bodies, which are also involved in holding and being held by the land. Yet these corpses would soon lose whatever of their beauty remained through physical corruption.

The term *eumorphoi*, then, has another set of implications. First, it can refer to the underworld shades that retain the image of the living. The emphasis on form thus evokes funerary monuments and vases, where the dead are represented as bodies and sometimes as winged souls leaving the body.[17] Secondly, the (partly visual) memory of these men is nurtured by their loved ones, about whose grief and anger the Elders are singing (433–60). Last is the unstated

[15] On the "unusually strong alliterative overlay" of this passage, see Nooter (2017), 166. Note the even denser soundscape created by the repetition and play of aspirated and unaspirated taus and kappas when τεῖχος and θήκας are included, creating, in less than four full lines, the series τεῖχ-θήκ-κατέχ-ἐχθ-ἔχ-τ-ἔκ.

[16] Denniston and Page (1957), ad loc., take εὔμορφοι as "dead in the prime of their beauty." Cf. the similar phrasing of *Sept.* 587–8, in which a prophet is covered by the enemy land, enriching it.

[17] For the Greek emphasis on precisely the image of the dead at their graves, either as a *psukhē* ("soul, ghost"), *eidōlon* ("image"), or *phantasma* ("image, phantom"), see Vermeule (1979), 23–32. Cf. *Cho.* 490.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

possibility of thinking of the war dead as heroes, in the technical sense, as the dead of past generations worshipped by a community or, more specifically for an Athenian audience, the Athenian war dead.[18] The implications of continuity are manifold in the Elders' brief mention of the beautiful form of the distant, buried casualties.

As we saw in Chapter 1, the Herald attempts to remove these same war dead from consideration through insisting on the profit of victory (*Ag.* 567–73). Yet the Elders give the opposite perspective: These very dead continue to influence the living, for they are the only motive mentioned for political dissent against the war. The Elders, in the part of the first stasimon from which this quotation comes (429–74), explicitly bind the memory and mourning of the dead to the mounting citizen rancor against the authority of the Atreidae. The dead make it back only in urns (441–3), giving a second example of physical continuity, but a far less idealized one. For the war dead no longer have the human body's beauty; they have been changed into "heavy dust" (βαρὺ ψῆγμα, 441–2) and "ashes instead of men" (ἀντήνορος σποδοῦ, 442–3). Whereas the "handsome dead in their graves" stresses the former beauty – whose loss is moving in a Homeric way – references to the cremated bodies focus attention on the dead denatured into objects.[19] Even worse, the Elders' reference to the men as "dust" transformed by Ares as the "gold-changer of bodies" (ὁ χρυσαμοιβός … σωμάτων, 438) implies a conversion of men into money.[20] Undermining the Herald's assessment, *ashes* are the profit from the war.

The Elders even more precisely contradict the Herald's attempt to silence grief. They connect the families' lament (πένθεια, *pentheia*, 429–30; στένουσι, 445) with specific praise (*eu legontes*, εὖ λέγοντες, "speaking well, eulogizing," 445) for the men fallen in battle, emphasizing their expertise in war (μάχης ἴδρις, 446) and their noble death (τὸν δ᾽ ἐν φοναῖς καλῶς πεσόντ᾽, 447).[21] This memorialization leads to the anger against and critique of the rulers, all the way to curses and revenge threatened by the people (457–60).[22] The contrast

[18] Sommerstein (2008b), ad loc., gives an expansive set of referents: "as shades in the underworld, as heroes receiving cult, and in the memory of their loved ones, they will forever remain young and handsome." Wohl (1998), 97–8, ties the image to both Homeric glory and the *epitaphios logos*. Cf. Fraenkel (1950), ad loc.; and Albinus (2000), 31–2. On heroes in the *Oresteia*, see Chapter 5.

[19] Note the contrast between inhumation and cremation for two groups of soldiers, otherwise undistinguished. On the contrast, see Bollack and Judet de La Combe (1981), ad 452–5. For the variety of Greek burial types, rituals, and their implications, see the Introduction.

[20] Bollack and Judet de La Combe (1981), ad 441; Wohl (1998), 95–7; and Seaford (2012), 200.

[21] See Scodel (2006), 128–30, who also briefly contrasts the public memory here with the Athenian institution of public burial and speechmaking to commemorate the dead. Cf. Grethlein (2013), 90–1.

[22] Nooter (2017), 166–7, follows Fraenkel (1950), ad 455, in connecting the murmuring dissent of the Argives with the silence of the dead swallowed by the foreign country.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

between the Herald's and Elders' rhetoric about the same soldiers demonstrates the political implications of the struggle over the continuity of the war dead in body and memory. There is far more at stake than a positive versus a negative attitude to war, or even than an official versus a private perspective on these casualties. Not profit, nor victory, nor glory for the living are enough to justify the massive loss of life. Rather, the memory and material remains of the dead shake the fealty of the people to their rulers.[23]

A second passage within the first stasimon is still more radical, for it contains the first allusion to afterlife punishment in the trilogy. The Elders' lyrical worldview promises that transgressive actions have consequences in life and beyond death (*Ag.* 461–8):

> τῶν πολυκτόνων γὰρ οὐκ
> ἄσκοποι θεοί, κελαι-
> ναὶ δ' Ἐρινύες χρόνῳ
> τυχηρὸν ὄντ' ἄνευ δίκας
> παλιντυχεῖ τριβᾷ βίου
> τιθεῖσ' ἀμαυρόν, ἐν δ' ἀί-
> στοις τελέθοντος οὔτις ἀλ-
> κά·
>
> For the gods are not
> heedless of men who kill many,
> and dark Erinyes, in time, make faded
> the man who prospers without justice
> by a reversal of fortune, by a wearing down of life,
> and there is no defense for him
> being among the unseen.

The Elders had just described the citizen anger against the sons of Atreus (448–60). In this loaded context, they sing concerning retribution for "killers of many" (461) and a "man . . . without justice" (464). That is, the generalities are nevertheless quite specific to Agamemnon, a radical political inversion of the glory of the Trojan War for which he is soon praised. To punish these acts of violence, the Elders double the "publicly ratified curse" (δημοκράντου . . . ἀρᾶς, *dēmokrantou* . . . *aras*, 458) of the angry citizens with the divine forces of the Erinyes.[24] The passage goes beyond simply a second, divine reason that the Atreides may be headed for a fall in life; it hints at further punishment after death.

[23] Wohl (1998), 98. Note that the Chorus of the *Persians* in verses 576–98 also strongly link the dead soldiers both to the families at home and to disastrous political effects, namely the dissolution of the empire.

[24] The Erinyes proclaim that below the earth they are named "Curses" (Ἀραί, *Eum.* 417).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Their references to light and vision on the one hand, and dimness and invisibility on the other, express three themes: epistemological uncertainty, the loss inherent in death, and the dark nature of punishment. The term ἀμαυρόν (466) ranges in connotation from "dark and weak" to "faint and dim."[25] It thus connects the Erinyes' "making a man hard to see" to invisibility as loss of presence and thus to destruction.[26] The "dark" (κελαιναί, 462–3) Erinyes are intimates of Night and Death in their genealogy and in the light–dark thematics of the trilogy.[27] But, for humans, this term also gives the sense of "difficult to discern." The Elders repeatedly utilize the vocabulary of the invisible to imply a divine or demonic agent about whom they are uncertain.[28] This is the case when they assign the reason for Helen's name being so close to the Greek word for destruction to "some being we cannot see" (τις ὅντιν' οὐχ ὁρῶμεν, *Ag.* 683), and when they unexpectedly substitute an Erinys for Helen (738–49).[29] More explicitly, in a later choral ode they use imperceptibility in an ethical sense to describe a wealthy man's fate when he does not take precautions: "It hits an unseen reef" (ἔπαισεν ἄφαντον ἕρμα, *Ag.* 1007).[30] The divine is all the more ominous for fulfilling signs while remaining invisible.

Yet the vocabulary of invisibility in this passage goes further, for it refers specifically to punishment in the afterlife. In the verses ἐν δ' ἀΐστοις

[25] Fraenkel (1950), ad loc.

[26] Analyzed in Chapter 1. It is worth noting that – unlike Denniston and Page (1957) – Fraenkel (1950), Sommerstein (2008b), and Medda (2017) retain the codices' ὄσσοις in verses 469–70, which continues the visual motif.

[27] In Aeschylus, they are children of Night (*Eum.* 321–2, 416, 1034), and they dispense punishment "to the blind and the seeing" (*Eum.* 322–3, 387–8). See the Introduction for the previous genealogy and functions of the Erinyes.

[28] Both in conversation (e.g. assuming that the storm comes from wrath of unspecified divinities: δαιμόνων κότῳ, *Ag.* 635) and in lyric (the Hymn to Zeus, *Ag.* 160–83), the gods are the drivers of events for the Chorus. More specifically, they refer to Zeus as the source and will of all events, which nevertheless remain mysterious to men. Lebeck (1971), 35–6, claims that the Chorus's understanding of Zeus's plan is corroborated by the action and ending of the trilogy. However, Goldhill (1984a), 29–33, insists on the genuine difficulty – which the *Oresteia* itself seems to emphasize – of applying choral *gnomai* to the action due to meaningful linguistic gaps and their deliberate vagueness.

[29] See Nooter (2017), 167–73; and Barrett (2002), 11–2. This theme is evident in the Herald's statement that "some god" (θεός τις, *Ag.* 663) navigated the Greeks out of the storm. Cf. Orestes recounting Apollo's threats to him with this same vocabulary: "a father's unseen wrath" (οὐχ ὁρωμένην, *Cho.* 293–4).

[30] Similarly, the Chorus describe the Achaean expedition against Troy as "hunters on the invisible (ἄφαντον) track of oars" (694–5). The LSJ's translation of this term as "disappearing," in its progressive aspect, loses the disjunction between undetectability and existence that the stronger meaning, "invisible," suggests. The Chorus create a poetic paradox in which the track is unseen yet can still be traced. This vocabulary of tracing is used in supernatural contexts elsewhere in the *Oresteia*: The Elders declare that the punishment on Troy is easy "to trace" to Zeus (ἐξιχνεῦσαι, *Ag.* 368); Cassandra prophetically finds the track of evils long ago (ἴχνος κακῶν, *Ag.* 1184); and the Erinyes follow Orestes' invisible trail like supernatural hounds (*Eum.* 244–53).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

τελέθοντος οὔτις ἀλκά ("there is no defense for him being among the unseen/in the unseen places," *Ag.* 466–8), the metaphorical meaning of invisibility (ἀίστοις, *aistois*) transcends the euphemism for nonexistence. As discussed in the Introduction and Chapter 1, Hades is etymologically "the unseen" (ἀ-ἰδεῖν, *a-idein*). The "unseen places" or being "among the unseen" thus here distinctly refers to the underworld.

This is consonant in vocabulary and themes with the other two references in the trilogy to the punishment of a transgressor in life and after death. The second is sung by the Chorus of Slave Women, with light and dark motifs in the context of taking vengeance on Clytemnestra (*Cho.* 59–65). In the *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi* passages, the notion of ethical wrong punished in the underworld is contained in circumlocutions (especially "there is no defense" *Ag.* 467–8; cf. *Cho.* 65). However, the third is sung by the chthonic avengers themselves and is much more explicit. The Erinyes list three transgressions and name Hades as the judge and punisher of these wrongs (*Eum.* 267–75).[31] Each choral passage is directed against a particular character: Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Orestes respectively. Significantly, the *Agamemnon* passage is in the specific context of the citizens' curse against Agamemnon, for which the Erinyes and affliction among the dead serve as a divine analogue. It is thus the first use of afterlife punishment to explicitly critique political action, certainly in the trilogy, and arguably in extant Greek literature.[32]

The Elders never return to this theme in their other references to possible continuity after death. A third choral passage focuses both on death as final and, paradoxically, on overturning its finality. While appearing to sing of the absoluteness of death, the Elders invoke a mythical story of resurrection (*Ag.* 1019–24):

> τὸ δ᾽ ἐπὶ γᾶν πεσὸν ἅπαξ θανάσιμον
> πρόπαρ ἀνδρὸς μέλαν αἷμα τίς ἂν
> πάλιν ἀγκαλέσαιτ᾽ ἐπαείδων;
> οὐδὲ τὸν ὀρθοδαῆ
> τῶν φθιμένων ἀνάγειν
> Ζεὺς ἀπέπαυσεν ἐπ᾽ ἀβλαβείᾳ.
>
> Once the deadly dark blood
> has fallen in front of a man onto the earth,

[31] For further analysis of the connections between these three passages and the visibility–invisibility dynamic, see Chapter 7.

[32] See the Introduction for how limited conceptions of afterlife punishment are in previous Greek literature and religion.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

who could call it up by chanting?
Not even the one who knew how to correctly
lead up the dead
did Zeus stop harmlessly.

The first part of this passage (1019–21) focuses on the irreversibility of death, one of the several that use blood to justify vengeance in the trilogy.[33] Calling blood dark (μέλαν, 1020) carries some of the same multilayered connotations as the previous reference to the Erinyes (462–3). To the image of liquid flowing out of a human onto the ground, the adjective "dark" adds the mournful emotional aspect of losing life, as well as the privation of light in death. The question appears to be rhetorical; even magical chanting to call up (ἀγκαλέσαιτ' ἐπαείδων, *ankalesait' epaeidōn,* 1021) cannot reverse the one-directional (downward) flow of mortality.[34] Yet the next two verses are a clear allusion to the myth of Asclepius rescuing Hippolytus from Hades. The topographical term ἀνάγειν (*anagein*, "leading up," 1023) is regularly used for leading up spirits and for the reversal of *katabasis*.[35] It assumes an underworld from which people may return as themselves.

The fact that the Chorus treat resurrection as a deed that has already been accomplished, at least once, neatly reverses the meaning of the rhetorical question. Even though Zeus punished the one human who did this in the past, the very reference opens up the continuing possibility of it recurring. Resurrection is one of the potential outcomes attempted by the mourners in the *kommos* scene of the *Choephoroi*, who use the same topographical language to call on Agamemnon (e.g. *Cho.* 489, 496; Chapter 4). Return – if not resurrection – is also thematically related to the ghosts in the rest of the *Oresteia*, for Cassandra declares to the Elders that she sees the dead Children of Thyestes only some seventy lines later (*Ag.* 1095–7, 1217–22), and the Ghost of Clytemnestra affects life in the *Eumenides*. Thus, although the Chorus ostensibly sing of the impossibility of resurrection, this passage, instead, hints at the possibility, actualized in the trilogy, of death not ending life at all.

A fourth and final passage alludes to continuity beyond death through the Greek conceptualization of the soul. It is the only use in the

[33] Cf. *Cho.* 306–14; *Eum.* 230.

[34] ἐπαείδων here clearly refers to supernatural song, as in Cassandra's divinely inspired singing prophecy (θεσπιῳδήσειν, *Ag.* 1161). In an ironic echo, a member of the Chorus later declares that one cannot bring the dead (Agamemnon) back with words (λόγοισι, *Ag.* 1361).

[35] Fraenkel (1950), ad loc., points out that the same verb of leading up is used at *Pers.* 621 for the magical, temporary summoning of Darius' spirit from Hades, whereas the myth here involves the actual return of a person to life.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Agamemnon of the term *psukhē* that can include within its range of meanings "the shade of the dead," and one of only three such uses in Aeschylus.[36] Following Agamemnon's killing, the Elders use the term to indirectly invoke an abstract notion of selfhood, separable from the body (*Ag.* 1543–6):

> ἦ σὺ τόδ᾽ ἔρξαι τλήσῃ, κτείνασ᾽
> ἄνδρα τὸν αὑτῆς ἀποκωκῦσαι
> ψυχῇ τ᾽ ἄχαριν χάριν ἀντ᾽ ἔργων
> μεγάλων ἀδίκως ἐπικρᾶναι;
>
> Will you dare to do it – having slain
> your own husband, to bewail him
> and unjustly perform a graceless grace for his soul
> in return for his great accomplishments?

The Elders deny that Clytemnestra can properly perform the burial rites for Agamemnon, having slaughtered him. The stress of the passage is on the continuation of Clytemnestra's unholy acts. Yet the oxymoron "graceless grace" (ἄχαριν χάριν, *akharin kharin*, *Ag.* 1545; cf. *Cho.* 44) depends on the fact that the Elders are concerned with the postmortem welfare (the "grace/boon," χάριν, *kharin*) of the *psukhē* (ψυχῇ) of Agamemnon, achieved through proper burial ritual. The Elders have already used the term *kharis* in contexts of facing death *without* continuation, both when speaking of themselves and Cassandra.[37] This passage thus contains the hints of a reversal. It plays off of the continuity afforded by funeral rites: The living honor the dead, who become part of the "ancestors before the house."[38]

This is the first known use in Greek of someone fulfilling a *kharis* for someone else's soul.[39] The boon – rather than being about the living – is focused on the dead. The benefit to Agamemnon's soul is the ritual honor owed to one who achieved great things (ἀντ᾽ ἔργων μεγάλων, 1545–6). It contains within it the continuation of selfhood, since it is the dead Agamemnon who can still be honored or dishonored. This conceptually and linguistically separates his soul from his corpse. Here the *psukhē* is neither the image of the dead nor his memory. In fact, *psukhē*, the Homeric

[36] The other two are at *Pers.* 630 and *Eum.* 115 (on the unusual features of which see Chapter 6). Cf. Sullivan (1997), 144–6.
[37] For themselves, *Ag.* 550; for Cassandra the *kharis* is presumably "to die gloriously" (εὐκλεῶς . . . κατθανεῖν χάρις, *Ag.* 1304). See above, pp. 54–5, and Chapter 3.
[38] Who are mentioned in the context of Agamemnon's burial in *Cho.* 320–2. See Chapters 4 and 5.
[39] Sullivan (1997), 145.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

word for what remains of the dead in the underworld, evokes the Elders' previous mention of "being in the unseen places." The Elders' use of "soul" as receiving honor after the body is dead, then, reinforces the idea of personal continuity with both negative and positive possibilities. This becomes a major theme in the *Choephoroi*, half of which occurs around Agamemnon's dishonored tomb, and all of which is concerned with attempts to return his due honor.

Summations/Connections

The Elders' references to death and types of continuity beyond it raise a series of questions: What are the implications of each of their positions for understanding actions in life, both private and political? How do their approaches to the end of life affect a reading of their stage character and its dramatic effects? How does their human perspective condition the divine manifestations later in the trilogy? The structural patterns evident in the analysis above help to answer these. In each of the four passages, the Elders simultaneously emphasize the limits of life and provide some notion of continuity. There are internal tensions in the passages, but, even more to the point, each of these notions of continuity after death differs significantly from the others. Aspects of each possibility are known in Greek culture, so each might seem to be perfectly natural on its own. Nevertheless, attentive audiences might sense the Elders' inability to reconcile the possibilities about which they sing. The contradictions between them thus outline the boundary of human wisdom. Instead of drawing conclusions for life from a consistent notion of the afterlife, or even from death as closure, the Elders continually proliferate conflicting perspectives.

The multitude of contradictory ideas problematizes any connection between their speech as characters and their lyrical allusions to existence after death. The Elders never follow through the implications of their references to a possible afterlife. They remain within the orbit of human knowledge and therefore chained to a limited understanding of causality, even when their speculation touches on themes that manifest as divine concerns later. This restriction can be seen in the first example, that of the dead at their graves (*Ag.* 452–5); the Elders do not allege that their political critique rests on any literal afterlife. In their words, the dead as images ("handsome men") never threaten to be agents in the world, unlike the Herald's mention of the possibility (in the negative) that they could "rise again." In the Elders' lyrics, the living cherish the memories of these men;

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

political action depends only on the families. It is by no means clear that the reaction to the mounting toll of the war would differ at all if the fallen soldiers were spoken of only in physical terms. This is evident in the Argive citizens' anger at the return of the dead as ashes (*Ag.* 441–3). The political force of this former passage is contingent upon neither actual intervention by the dead nor any reference to them continuing in the afterlife. Yet this restriction is belied by the ghostly returns in the rest of the trilogy and even within the Elders' own interaction with Cassandra.

In the second example (*Ag.* 461–8), the Elders allude to punishment after death to condemn unethical action in life. This example fits into a repeated schema in the *Agamemnon*'s choral passages: The gods check human overreaching, specifically mass killing in warfare. Yet the reference is allusive, and nowhere else do the Elders mention continuation of punishment in an afterlife. The clearest sequel ought to be in one of the numerous references to Agamemnon after his death in the trilogy, since he is the target of their critique while living. Throughout the Elders' reaction to his death, however, there is no mention of punishment in an afterlife, but a concern for his soul and burial rites. Moreover, although the *Choephoroi* is primarily concerned with Agamemnon's fate, including numerous references to his possible afterlife, none of these involve divine punishment. This lack of follow-up diffuses the ethical and political force of the Elders' allusion.

Yet as the trilogy progresses, theirs is not the last mention of retribution in the afterlife. The choruses of each play proclaim that transgressions will be punished in the beyond, a structural feature of the *Oresteia* that has yet to be explored.[40] Despite the Chorus of Elders not continuing on the theme, and raising other ideas of continuity after death, afterlife punishment is a repeated ethical-political concern of the *Oresteia*. Thus it is important to see the place of this first example in the larger schema of the trilogy. The Elders raise the theme of afterlife punishment, only to let it fade among other possibilities, after which it returns even more powerfully, to the point at which it becomes part of the revelation of the ethical framework of human life.

The myth of Asclepius raising the dead (*Ag.* 1019–24), the Elders' third perspective on possible continuity, contradicts on its face the closure of death. Through the myth, the Chorus again emphasize living justly and avoiding disaster by not transgressing human limitations. It is in this context that they also insist on an absolute ending to life (τέρμα, *terma*,

[40] Cf. *Cho.* 59–65; *Eum.* 267–75. See Chapter 7.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1002), regardless of any attempts to circumvent it. The focus on punishment in the myth combines the two elements: The harm that Zeus imposes on Asclepius is to chasten the superhuman act, which itself transgresses the rigid life–death boundary. That is, the primary meaning of the myth is that the dead are trapped below and efforts to bring them up again bodily are condemned.[41] The Elders thus first mention the possibility of the dead reentering the world, then distance it from reality. This is the most conspicuous instance of a double move that the Herald also made with the war dead: The presupposition of the example opens the door to human existence beyond death, but their conclusion barricades it again.

As with the above examples, the run of the action uncovers issues with these choral statements shortly thereafter. Most potently, Cassandra's superhuman visions demonstrate the continuation of the dead not only for themselves, but as forces that pressure the living. The Elders refuse to respond to her at the time. Their consistent suppression of preternatural knowledge in her scene demonstrates their attitude toward their epistemic limitations.[42] Instead, they continue to another type of possible continuation in their mention of grace for Agamemnon's soul in the fourth example (*Ag.* 1543–6). Yet the Elders indicate no sentience or continuity of Agamemnon's *psukhē* in the afterlife. In fact, Clytemnestra is the one who refers to his existence in Hades, where she sarcastically imagines his joyous reception by Iphigeneia (*Ag.* 1555–9, cf. 1525–9; Chapters 5 and 6). His continuation in Hades also becomes a crucial element of the mourning for the king in the *Choephoroi* (Chapter 4). The implication of this last example is that the Elders' willful ignorance extends beyond the political issues they face under Clytemnestra, and even beyond the encounter with Cassandra. The Elders never follow through on the meaning of any possible afterlife they themselves broach. The very plurality of ideas from the Elders might indicate that they are airing mere speculations.

Having examined their references to continuity after death, one can turn to the Elders' own actions in relation to their ideas. The Elders' deeds fizzle out, but not for lack of mentions of glory. The benefit they seek for Agamemnon's soul is due to his having achieved great deeds (1545–6). This benefit parallels their extending *kleos* to Cassandra for dying bravely.

[41] After being struck by lightning, Asclepius achieves immortality. He was himself a cult figure by the fifth century, possibly moving from a hero to a divinity over this time. Thus there is a complex interplay of death and immortality in this example, Currie (2005), 354–63.

[42] Goldhill (1984a), 88, draws attention to the paradox that the sure revelations of the future in the Cassandra scene undermine free will, whereas the Chorus's gridlock in the next scene is partly due to their ignorance of the future. Cf. Lebeck (1971), 31–2; and Nooter (2017), 177–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

In the last parts of the *Agamemnon*, their rhetoric of dying in the fight against tyranny ties in with their mentions of a brave death leading to glory.[43] Yet all of these connections in speech are not enough to motivate action. The resistance of the Elders is ethereal; their *gnomai* seem to be marks of a collective wisdom ineffective in times of crisis.[44] It is tempting to assign the impotence of the Elders to their failure to stick to a single afterlife idea. One can diagnose the Elders with a particular symptom, that of systematically subverting their own speculation. They mention neither divine will nor universal justice when they threaten to oppose the *coup d'état*. Could it be that without a unified "ideological" or "religious" motivation, with only the notion of death as oblivion for themselves, the Elders falter in the ultimate moment?

On a structural level, it is worth asking what the inaction of the Elders demonstrates about the *Oresteia*. It is well established that the Chorus of the *Agamemnon* in particular offers a collective countervoice to the heroic tragic characters, and that they refrain from heroic action, as do other tragic choruses. Their ineffective condemnation has also been contrasted to the jurors of the *Eumenides*, whose judgment closes the human action.[45] More specifically, however, their search for a divine framework but inability to act is the counterpoint to the decision-making of individual characters in the rest of the trilogy: Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Orestes make their choices with explicit appeals to divine support. But disastrous events are a crucible for beliefs. The energy needed for violence is a conflagration that the Elders – full of doubt, lacking vitality, never settling on one foundation – cannot sustain. The Elders thus seem to dramatize one human response to uncertainty about divine matters, and specifically continuity beyond death – paralysis.

One must be wary, however, of attempts to find the single "cause" of their inaction, as analyses of specific themes in the *Oresteia* are always in danger of doing. All of the constraints that afflict the Elders of the *Agamemnon* – infirmity, antiphrastic opinions, general uncertainty, fear, and the limits of tragic convention – are aspects of their sophisticated dramatic representation. To make the Elders' opinion on the afterlife the decisive factor in this regard would be overstating the case. There are no direct links in the text between their inaction and their varying speculations concerning the afterlife. Rather, the characterization of the Elders'

[43] This might have been especially resonant in Athens, where Tyrannicides were celebrated as agents of democracy, see the Introduction.

[44] Gould (1996), 223–4, 231–2; *contra* Dhuga (2011), 1–9, 76–117.

[45] Fletcher (2014).

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press

diverging opinions about the fate of humans after death accounts for one aspect of their hesitation. These passages reinforce their speculation about the divinely controlled ethical structure of life on the one hand, and about human values on the other.

The Elders' conflicting views as to the ethical framework of life and whether to include the afterlife in it provide human elements of the background for the divine standoffs at the end of the *Oresteia*. The Chorus mention for the first time the life–afterlife punishment continuum that the chthonic Erinyes later describe in more detail. The universal themes in Orestes' trial and the new law for Athens in the *Eumenides* are already present in the Elders' focus on the ethical and political issues in the carnage of war. The Elders present a dramatically compelling, all-too-human uncertainty concerning the afterlife. Whereas the divine characters of the *Eumenides* bolster their claims with specific references to Zeus and the *Moirai*, the Elders grope for an understanding of divine will more generally. They are left behind as the forces they foreshadow emerge, but their warnings condition the reception of the later revelations.

https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108963862.004 Published online by Cambridge University Press