

*Heroes in the Oresteia***Introduction: Traditional Hero Cult**

The word “hero” (ἥρωας, *hērōs*) is only found once in the extant plays of Aeschylus, in the mouth of the Herald of the *Agamemnon* (*Ag.* 516).<sup>1</sup> Although used in the context of the Trojan War, the word has already changed meaning from Homer’s use of it as a synonym for “lord.”<sup>2</sup> By Aeschylus’ time, it signifies a technical term for a class of semidivine figures who were worshipped alongside the gods as lesser forces.<sup>3</sup> Many are thought to have been nameless local powers that became associated with named figures from mythology. There is also evidence for the hero cult of living figures since the archaic period and in the fifth century.<sup>4</sup> The Herald introduces the term, but this use is not the only example of heroes and heroization in the trilogy. The *Oresteia* makes unmistakable references to the power of both Agamemnon and Orestes after death. This kind of metamorphosis radically alters their dramatic functions, ethical arc, and

<sup>1</sup> The only other attributable use is in *Epigonoí*, fr. 55, 3, τὴν δευτέραν γε κρᾶσιν ἥρωσιν νέμω, “I allot the second share of mixed wine to the heroes,” on which see Sommerstein (2008c), 58–9. Aeschylus’ *Niobe* fragment mentions “those close in blood to the gods,” which seems to be a reference to descendants of divinities rather than heroized mortals. In *Sept.* 587–8, Amphiarus refers to enriching the enemy land through his death as a prophet buried there. Cf. Parker (2011), 108–9.

<sup>2</sup> On the uses of the term in Homer, see Nagy (1999), 114–17, who covers some of the differences in the eighth century between Homeric song, which emphasized Panhellenic *kleos*, and the decidedly local aspects of contemporary hero cult. See Currie (2005), 60–71, for more on the etymological debates and distinction between early religious and nonreligious uses. Cf. Hes. *Op.* 159–60, ἀνδρῶν ἥρώων θεῖον γένος, οἱ καλέονται ἡμίθεοι, and 172, ἄλβιοι ἥρωες; and on the deification of mortals, *Theog.* 942, 949, 950–5, 988–91.

<sup>3</sup> Rohde (1925), 115–38, argues that, despite the lack of early direct evidence, hero cult must have preceded Homer, remained preserved in local traditions of ancestor worship, and reemerged thereafter. Burkert (1985), 203–8, is an updated overview and argues that the epic directly influenced the reemergence of hero cult, which had been peripheral. Bremmer (2006), 15–20, offers a reappraisal of the vocabulary of ἥρωας in Homer and thereafter, arguing that the civic hero cult concept did not really exist before the sixth century. Currie (2005), 47–57, challenges the notion of direct influence of epic on hero cult, preferring to see them as “independent but related.” Cf. Farnell (1921), 280–360.

<sup>4</sup> Currie (2005), 3–9; Jones (2010), 3–47; and Parker (2011), 103–23.

political importance. Both Agamemnon and Orestes were worshipped as heroes in other Greek cities, and Orestes had roles in Athenian religion and folklore, facts that suggest potential effects on Athenian audiences. The role of heroes in the *Oresteia*, however, has not been the topic of focused study.<sup>5</sup>

The contemporary religious conception of heroes requires further specification as background for understanding the dynamics in the trilogy. A hero must be carefully differentiated on the one hand from a god and on the other from ghosts and independent demons.<sup>6</sup> Evidence strongly suggests that heroes are always thought to have once been human beings, now exercising supernatural powers around a locale, often specified as their grave.<sup>7</sup> This accounts for their chthonic aspects. A volcanic metaphor may be appropriate for understanding the cult site: Heroes have a fixed place in the upper world, which at any time may erupt with underworld pyrotechnics. They may be beneficent or malevolent, similarly to Greek divine powers in general, but especially chthonic ones. They are often associated with snakes in ritual art.<sup>8</sup> Much like gods and *daimones* in Greek worship, they are a diverse group. They may be named or unnamed, male or female.

In the lived experience of Athenians and other Greeks, heroes played a vivid and pervasive role. Shrines littered the ancient landscape; civic, family, and pseudokinsship groups organized rituals to honor them. Heroes could relate to individuals, with power over childbirth, healing, or marriage; watch over a group, such as slaves or sailors; or protect whole cities.<sup>9</sup> There are stories of heroes fighting alongside the Greeks at Marathon. At Salamis, the Greek armies prayed to the local heroes to aid them in just such a way.<sup>10</sup> However, between the eighth and fourth centuries BCE, they never serve as a template for thinking about the afterlife for regular humans.<sup>11</sup> Instead, named heroes connected worshippers with local or

<sup>5</sup> Unlike Oedipus in Sophocles, e.g. Bowman (2007), with bibliography.

<sup>6</sup> Currie (2005), 66–70, posits an early, two-tier stratification of the divine world into higher ruling gods and minor deities, the heroes. These latter were always and only objects of cult but developed from a mixture of types: On the one hand, what we would understand as secular “knights,” a closed company of warriors in mythical time; and, on the other hand, as “saints” in modern Western religions, a sacred group that is still open to expansion.

<sup>7</sup> Burkert (1985), 203–5; Kearns (1989), 1–4; and Parker (2011), 103–4.

<sup>8</sup> See Salapata (2014), esp. 231, for an extended study of hero tablets from the sanctuary of Agamemnon and Cassandra, which include numerous snake images.

<sup>9</sup> On the varieties of hero types and their worship, with examples from Attica, see Kearns (1989) 1–102; cf. Burkert (1985), 203–8; Antonaccio (1998); and Albinus (2000), 57–66.

<sup>10</sup> The fact that historical accounts of war include the visible manifestation of supernatural heroes indicates to Rohde (1925), 136–8, that there was a real belief in them and distinguishes them from the gods, who do not appear in this way. Cf. Kearns (1989), 44–6.

<sup>11</sup> Rohde (1925), 138.

Panhellenic myths. The majority were offspring of gods, glorious fighters, founders of cities, or egregious transgressors.

The divinity of Greek heroes is not predicated on right action; Oedipus, Helen, and others received cult worship despite deeds that would appear to ethically disqualify them from praise or desire for imitation.<sup>12</sup> The very fact that they overstepped the limits of humanity in life seems to be the reason for their enhanced power after death. The potential political use of these powerful dead is evident in multiple stories about cities claiming and reburying the bones of heroes, whether of those associated with them or with their enemies.<sup>13</sup> Thus, beyond their quotidian religious aspects, heroes have a connection with the past through myth and perceived political effects. These qualities, along with their ethical ambiguity, are also major themes in the *Oresteia*'s representations of its hero characters.

Both Agamemnon and Orestes were mythical figures with central roles in the Panhellenic songs of Homer, Stesichorus, Simonides, and Pindar.<sup>14</sup> Evidence points to two Laconian hero shrines with claims to being Agamemnon's grave, although whether they were identified with him before the *Oresteia* is disputed.<sup>15</sup> The inclusion of Orestes in an aetiological story for the Athenian *Choes* ritual appears to be part of an earlier tradition of his impurity, which Aeschylus might be rejecting when Orestes insists on his ritual purity by the time he arrives in Athens.<sup>16</sup> Athenian religion had several other stories concerning Orestes as a harmful spirit.<sup>17</sup> These facts suggest a preliminary set of questions: What are the dynamics of the *Oresteia*'s transformations of previously staged human characters into afterlife figures with semidivine powers? How do the afterlife fates of Orestes and Agamemnon relate to the characteristics of the heroes that the Herald mentions, and of heroes in Greek culture more generally? What are the implications of their transformation within the play?

A wide spectrum of heroic characteristics and powers occurs in the *Oresteia*'s examples. Following the treatment in Chapter 4 of the *kommos* scene, this

<sup>12</sup> As Parker (2011), 104, puts it, "piety and moral virtues do not normally make a hero; star quality, exceptionality, newsworthiness are the relevant criteria in the majority of cases."

<sup>13</sup> Kearns (1989), 44–56, with warnings about the use of literature as evidence.

<sup>14</sup> Pindar *Pyth.* II.31–3; *Nem.* II.34, cf. 8.12. Stesichorus and Simonides are each said to have written an *Oresteia* before Aeschylus, on which see Salapata (2011), 40–2. Cf. Brown (2018), 4–7.

<sup>15</sup> Salapata (2011), 27–53, lays out the evidence for Agamemnon's hero cult at Amyklai from the seventh century BCE, from a tradition that preceded his location in Argos in poetry; cf. (2014), 27–44, with bibliography.

<sup>16</sup> On Orestes at the *Choes*, see Burkert (1986), 221–2; and Johnston (1999), 65. Orestes' pollution is used to justify the unique ritual of eating alone and in silence at this festival, an explanation at odds with Orestes' declaration in *Eum.* 443–53.

<sup>17</sup> On Orestes as an undead figure in Athenian religion before the *Oresteia*, see Liapis (2006).

chapter examines how the depictions of Agamemnon as king, father, and afterlife power in the *Choephoroi* relate to Agamemnon's living character in the previous play. It then turns to Orestes' death and afterlife, which involve issues of matricide, the nature of his power over Argos, and his place in the Athenocentric ending of the trilogy. We will see how the memory of their survivors and the references to their postmortem power alter the evaluation of these two characters' life and death, their personality and purview. The manner in which the *Oresteia* pits ancestor worship and hero cult against each other gives specific insights into its approaches to individual and political values.

### The Anonymous Heroes and the Trojan War

Little may be gleaned, ostensibly, from the Herald's fleeting mention of "heroes" in the *Agamemnon*. Unnamed, their functions are merely implied in passing, and they are never heard from again. Unsurprisingly to careful readers of the trilogy, this ancillary mention in the first play echoes with variations in the following ones. The Herald's invocation of heroes sets a baseline by which to measure the characterization of Agamemnon and Orestes as powerful undead acting in the world.

At first glance, the only context for the heroes of Argos is their connection with the expedition to the Trojan War (*Ag.* 513–17):

τούς τ' ἀγωνίου θεοῦς  
πάντας προσαυδῶ τόν τ' ἔμὸν τιμάορον  
Ἑρμῆν, φίλον κήρυκα, κηρύκων σέβας,  
ἦρωσ τε τοὺς πέμπσαντας, εὐμενεῖς πάλιν  
στρατὸν δέχεσθαι τὸν λελειμμένον δορός.

I address all the assembled gods  
and the protector of my own office, Hermes, dear Herald,  
revered by heralds, and the heroes who sent forth,  
may they receive back, with kind intention, the army,  
the remnant of the spear.

The Herald addresses the heroes as part of a larger arc of divine forces, from the land itself to the Olympians. The divinities include Zeus who watches over the land (509) and brings justice or vengeance (525–6). Next comes Pythian Apollo, who oversees disease and its cure (509–13), then the assembled gods.<sup>18</sup> Finally comes his own tutelary divinity, Hermes the

<sup>18</sup> Or "the gods of the Assembly," following Denniston and Page (1957), ad loc.

Herald (515).<sup>19</sup> In this case, mention of the heroes seems only connected with the army (στρατόν, *straton*, 517).<sup>20</sup> The positive aspect of their power involves blessing the departing expedition and receiving it back with “kindly intention” (εὐμενεῖς, *eumeneis*, 516).

The prayer, however, follows directly on the negative aspects of the invoked divinities. The Herald mentions vengeful Zeus and harmful Apollo, as well as Hermes (whose chthonic aspect is evident several times in the trilogy, Chapter 1). The prayer thus has an apotropaic aspect, warding against the malice of divinities, among which are the heroes.<sup>21</sup> It is tempting to see in the term εὐμενεῖς (*eumeneis*) a prefiguration of the title for the *Eumenides* (“the Kindly Spirits,” Εὐμενίδες). There is no mention, however, of the name Εὐμενίδες (*Eumenides*) within the *Oresteia*, only a synonym in Athena’s description of the Erinyes (εὐφρονάς, *euphronas*, *Eum.* 992).<sup>22</sup> Instead, Orestes *does* become a hero with connections to the Argive army and uses the language of kind intention with the same root (εὐμενέστεροι, *eumenesteroi*, *Eum.* 774). Both blessings and hostility are associated with heroes as chthonic powers in Greek culture, which the Herald’s prayer highlights and the rest of the trilogy picks up on.

These heroes are local, not traveling with the army, as is evident from the language of sending forth the expedition and receiving it back.<sup>23</sup> In this respect, it is significant that they are not here connected with domestic flourishing: The Herald makes no mention of festivals, cultic honors, or blessings conferred.<sup>24</sup> This contrasts with the transformed Erinyes at the end of the *Oresteia*, who are promised exactly these, as honors due to local divinities. The Herald also does not connect the unnamed heroes to any specific generation previously, such as the mythical heroes that preceded the Trojan War. Anonymity is a feature of some Greek hero cult sites, which not uncommonly contain dedications

<sup>19</sup> On the Herald sometimes being identified with Talthybius, see Chapter 1. On Talthybius’ heroic powers and cult, related to Hermes, see Parker (2011), 8–9, 107.

<sup>20</sup> See Fraenkel (1950) on the inclusion of local heroes together with gods in prayers, and cf. Hdt. 8.109.3; Thuc. 2.74.3, 4.87.2; Lyc. 1; and Ar. *Av.* 881, where bird heroes are invoked.

<sup>21</sup> Yoon (2012), 49, ties the Herald’s divine invocations to the dark undertones of each divinity mentioned and to heroes as dead humans.

<sup>22</sup> The title *Eumenides* exists only in the material that was later appended to the text. Euripides’ *Orestes* (408 BCE), which calls the spirits that chase Orestes Εὐμενίδες from the start, may be responsible for these identifications, see Sommerstein (1989), 10–13; and Brown (1984).

<sup>23</sup> Note the identical language used in Xen. *Cyr.* 2.1.1 of prayers to the local gods and heroes in one land to kindly send an expedition off and in the next land to kindly receive them: προσευξάμενοι θεοῖς καὶ ἥρωσι τοῖς Περσίδα γῆν κατέχουσιν Ἰλαῶς καὶ εὐμενεῖς πέμπειν σφῶς . . . εὐμενεῖς δέχεσθαι. Cf. Denniston and Page (1957), ad 516.

<sup>24</sup> As Chapter 1 demonstrated, the Herald repeatedly and unexpectedly emphasizes death at his homecoming and never mentions any positive aspects of domestic or civic life.

marked only “to the hero.”<sup>25</sup> Yet this usage contradicts the afterlife continuation of Agamemnon and Orestes, so deeply tied to myth.

I suggest that the indefinite reference to heroes in a military context and the lack of any emphasis on glory have two specific effects later in the trilogy. First, they downplay the natural notion that the living conqueror, Agamemnon, will join these “descendants of Atreus before the house” (*Cho.* 322).<sup>26</sup> His glory was already a problematic theme in the Herald's speech (Chapter 1). Once Agamemnon is murdered and buried without public rites, the vagueness of the reference to heroes allows for significant questions concerning his exact postmortem fate. Secondly, in calling for the heroes to be kindly to the expedition, the Herald sets up the afterlife of Orestes, whose main purview in his hero speech is the military policy of Argos and whose language echoes this passage. Thus, complex familial and civic associations and the ambiguities of these potent undead are introduced into the trilogy with the first, nearly unmarked mention of humans with supernatural powers after death.

### Agamemnon's Power from the Grave

From the praise of Agamemnon in life and at his tomb, and the fact that he was widely known as a civic-military hero, there is an expectation that he will become a powerful postmortem figure. Yet that is far from the outcome of the *kommós*. To best understand the actual status of Agamemnon in the rest of the trilogy, it is vital to pick apart the intricately interwoven references to his power, to his relationships with family and the city, and to the rituals promised at his tomb. Building on the previous chapter's focus on Agamemnon's mourners, the picture of him in Hades, and his failed raising, this analysis focuses on the possibility of his hero cult.

The influence of dead Agamemnon on the living world becomes evident in his children's appeals to aid from supernatural beings. Most pertinent is the language of “power,” exemplified by the only four uses of *kratos* in the *Choephoroi*, each addressed by Agamemnon's children either to him or to a divinity:

- (1) Ἐρμῆ χθόνιε, πατρῶν' ἐποπτεύων κράτη,  
σωτήρ γενοῦ μοι ξύμμαχος τ' αἰτουμένω· (*Cho.* 1–2)

<sup>25</sup> Despite strong material and textual evidence that the locals knew precisely who their heroes were, see Salapata (2014), 4.

<sup>26</sup> For the textual issues with and interpretation of προσθοδόμευς Ἀτρεΐδαις (*Ag.* 322), see Chapter 4.

Or. Chthonic Hermes, watching over paternal power (*kratē*),  
be a savior and ally to me asking.

- (2) μόνον Κράτος τε καὶ Δίκη σὺν τῷ τρίτῳ  
πάντων μεγίστῳ Ζηνὶ συγγένοιτό μοι. (*Cho.* 244–5)

El. Only let Power (*Kratos*), and Justice, with the third,  
Greatest of All, Zeus, be with me.

- (3) πάτερ τρόποισιν οὐ τυραννικοῖς θανάων,  
αἰτουμένῳ μοι δὸς κράτος τῶν σῶν δόμων. (*Cho.* 479–80)

Or. Father, who died in a nontyrannical way,  
give the power (*kratos*) of your house to me asking.

- (4) ὦ Περσέφασσα, δὸς δέ γ' εὖμορφον κράτος. (*Cho.* 490)

El. Oh Persephone, give [us his] beautiful power (*kratos*).

Each of these examples of asking for *kratos* is a prayer, or nearly one. The children require divine aid, since they have lost any living friend who might be a helper (376–7), have been forbidden an army, and have been shut off from other human help by the requirement for secrecy (556–9). What form, then, might this abstraction, “power,” take? The referents are not quite the same. Quotations (1) and (2) solicit the aid of divinities themselves: Hermes, Power (*Kratos*), Justice, and Zeus.<sup>27</sup> By contrast, the phrasing in (3) seeks from Agamemnon the “power of your house” (480), which indicates the desire that he transfer to the children authority over domestic and political affairs. This authority accords with the gist of quotation (2), which invokes a deified *kratos*, together with similarly deified justice and Zeus in his dominant aspect, “Greatest of All,” as qualities necessary for ruling.<sup>28</sup> The main notion in quotations (2) and (3), then, is of an ancestor at the tomb being asked to bless his descendants for the rule of the house and, by the very use of the word “power,” the state.

The term *kratos* is of a different order in quotations (1) and (4). Calling on Chthonic Hermes or Persephone conceptualizes Agamemnon’s *kratos* as that of an underworld spirit who could supernaturally aid his children. This power can be thought of as manifesting in his physical return, a possibility examined in Chapter 4. Alternately, it could be the continuing power of the king in the underworld, who sends his influence up. In the

<sup>27</sup> See Garvie (1986), ad 244–5, for the combination of *Kratos* and Justice.

<sup>28</sup> This is why some editors change the manuscript’s μοι in 245, referring to Electra, to σοι, referring to Orestes, see Sommerstein (2008b), ad loc., with notes.

next section, we examine the dynamics of the latter alternative more thoroughly, together with the mentions of cultivation and worship, as possible indications of Agamemnon becoming a hero. This would account for the connection of *kratos* in quotations (1), (2), and (4) to divinities, both Olympian and chthonic, and in (3) to the house. Yet how do the characters conceive of Agamemnon's power? Does he maintain his political influence over Argos? Considering how Agamemnon has been represented both in the *Oresteia* and in Panhellenic cult, the answers are counterintuitive.

### *Agamemnon as Political versus Domestic Figure*

Since both civic heroes and familial ancestors were worshipped at tombs, it must be specified what type of future sacrifices and eternal honors are offered to Agamemnon at his grave. Along with the above-mentioned mythic, cultural, and political background for the figure of Agamemnon, the specific vocabulary of *kratos* implies that he is a potent figure with influence approaching that of a divinity. One would therefore expect his continuing role after death to be an influential one, related to his kingly power. Supporting that assumption, in the portrayal of living Agamemnon, political concerns definitively predominate over familial ones. Before he arrives on stage, the Chorus sing of his sacrificing his daughter for the army's sake (*Ag.* 104–249).<sup>29</sup> Upon his return from war, Agamemnon tramples his family in a number of ways: He brings back a concubine for his wife to take care of and shows no affection for Clytemnestra, regard for Orestes, or defense of his actions toward Iphigenia.<sup>30</sup> The Trojan War and the rulership of Argos define him far more than his family.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See the Introduction for the debate concerning the ethics of Agamemnon's decision.

<sup>30</sup> Easterling (1973), 7–10, denies that Agamemnon's language in the scene is a mark of a psychologically coherent person. Instead, it is only to be read as typifying a king coming home from a war. Whereas her warning is well taken, several things speak against denying psychological readings altogether in the context of understanding the *Choephoroi* scene: Aeschylus does not create Agamemnon but plays off of a well-known figure. The *Iliad* gives him a distinct set of personality traits, to which other characters react (several of them wishing, for example, that their leader had different ones). Secondly, and related to the first point, the fact that Agamemnon shows no evident care about Orestes in the *Agamemnon* directly contrasts with *Odyssey* 11, in which his spirit is greatly concerned with his son. Lastly, and most relevant here, is the clear disjunction between his figure on stage in the *Agamemnon* and the children's description of him in the *Choephoroi*. One should not be dismissive nor regard it as an inconsistency for the sake of plot, for then one loses the usual way audiences respond to characters, as generally coherent figures. Moreover, one is then denied other ways of interpreting what only *seem* to be inconsistencies, such as new perspectives on a character after their death.

<sup>31</sup> Zeitlin (1965), 495; cf. Peradotto (1969), 237–61.



In light of this characterization of Agamemnon when alive, it is almost a shock that precisely the political aspect dwindles most in references to him following his death. Although the mourners in the *Choephoroi* affirm that Agamemnon's dishonored burial does not befit a king, their requests for his power deemphasize his political ties and link him much more closely to the "house." That Agamemnon's children address him as "father" rather than "king" ought to come as no surprise.<sup>32</sup> Despite the fact that the ruling house is naturally associated with control over the city, it is evident that the mourners emphasize the domestic.<sup>33</sup> Exemplary is Electra's prayer to Zeus in which she is concerned for the withering of the ruling stock (ἀρχικός . . . πυθμήν, 260) and the raising of the house from a small to a great one (ἀπὸ μικροῦ . . . μέγαν δόμον, 262–3). The choral passage that follows creates a subtle opposition between regaining the "paternal hearth" (ἐστίας πατρός, 264) and the political power that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are currently exercising (τοὺς κρατοῦντας, *tous kratountas*, 267). Orestes reinforces the emphasis on lineage later when he asks Agamemnon not to wipe out the seed of Pelops, in order for Agamemnon himself to continue existing (503–4, cf. 236). Throughout the *kommos*, the mourners repeatedly connect Agamemnon with the hearth, the household, and continuity through children but barely mention the citizens or the state.

The emphasis on the domestic severs the former king from political influence in Argos after his death. In the *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi*, Clytemnestra's actions are clearly tactical moves to this effect. She tells the Elders that the burial is not their concern (οὐ σὲ προσήκει τὸ μέλημα, *Ag.* 1551) and is not for those outside the household (τῶν ἔξ οἴκων, 1554). Clytemnestra thus separates the city from Agamemnon and Agamemnon from the city. Electra in the *kommos* refers to this act to condemn her mother and – solely in this passage – highlight the politically shameful fate of her father (*Cho.* 429–33):

ὦ ἰὼ δαΐα  
 πάντολμε μάτερ, δαΐαις ἐν ἐκφοραῖς  
 ἄνευ πολιτῶν ἄνακτ'  
 ἄνευ δὲ πενθημάτων  
 ἔτλας ἀνοίμωκτον ἄνδρα θάψαι.

Woe, woe, hostile,  
 all-daring mother, in hostile funeral,

<sup>32</sup> For the children's emphasis on Agamemnon's role as father, see Chapter 4.

<sup>33</sup> The Chorus of Slave Women repeatedly address him as master (e.g. ὀλομένῳ δεσπότη, 153; ὦ δέσποτ', 157), but this is tied to their concern with the household, not the city *per se* (cf. the juxtaposition of δόμων and δόμους with δεσποτῶν in 50–4).

a king without the citizens,  
without lamentations and unmourned  
you dared to bury the man.

Clytemnestra has attempted not only to preemptively block Agamemnon's ability to rise from the dead by mutilation (*Cho.* 439) but also to deny him the honor due to a king after death by preventing the customary funeral rites. In the *kommos*, even as the children and Slave Women more properly mourn Agamemnon, Clytemnestra's political hold continues to affect the form in which the rites are finally performed: There are still no citizens present. Throughout, the lamentation is a household affair.

This schism between Agamemnon's political character when living and the domestic character given to him after death is evident in Orestes' approach to vengeance as well. Immediately before the *kommos*, Orestes describes his motivations as divine, personal, financial, and political (269–304). Most relevant is that he distinguishes “my great grief for my father” (300) from the motivation of freeing the citizens (πολίτας, *politas*) from subjugation (302–4). Thus Orestes' action diverges into two different themes, only one of which he and Electra return to. When praying to Agamemnon, Orestes specifically refers to *kratos* over only the house (δὸς κράτος τῶν σῶν δόμων, 480). He even attributes the glorious conquest at Troy to the citizens (302–3), thus eliminating the separation between king and people, between Agamemnon's individual decision for war and citizen anger at him. Since Orestes must accomplish his plot, by command of the oracle, nearly alone (556–9), he neither involves a foreign army nor rouses the citizens. Orestes himself must rescue the citizenry; yet he never requests any help related to the city from his father in the *kommos*.

Once Orestes has murdered his mother and Aegisthus, he declares them to have been double tyrants (διπλῆν τυραννίδα, *diplēn turannida*), father-killers, and ravagers of the house (*Cho.* 973–4). Each accusation divides the familial murder from the simultaneous act of the *coup d'état*, for each is easily categorized as belonging to either the domestic or the political sphere. The *Eumenides* contains a subtle actualization of the separation: Orestes claims that Clytemnestra committed *two* polluted acts in killing Agamemnon (δυσὸν . . . μiasμάτοι, *duoin . . . miasmatoin*, *Eum.* 600). One might expect a neat separation between the domestic and political aspects of the act, ascribing to Clytemnestra the murder of both her husband and the king. The meaning is not self-evident, though, for the Erinyes ask for clarification (601). In his answer, Orestes defies expectations

by specifying that Clytemnestra killed her husband and his own father (πατέρ' ἐμόν, *pater' emon*, 602), thus doubly emphasizing the domestic at the expense of the political. The discussion continues to focus on mothers and fathers until Apollo takes over; it is up to the god to impress on the judges, at great length, the fact that Clytemnestra killed a powerful *king* (625–39). Therefore, while the ideational ties between Agamemnon's domestic and political character always exist, the mourners and Orestes himself continually minimize the relationship of the dead Agamemnon to the state. For a figure universally known as “the great king” from poetry, and one promised eternal glory for conquering Troy in the *Agamemnon*, this shift is deeply significant.

*From Dishonored Tomb to Ancestor Cult*

The subtle terminological differentiations that mark Agamemnon's loss of political power after death set up the matter of his postmortem rites. Agamemnon's tomb burgeons in the opening scene of the *Choephoroi* from a place of almost unholy dishonor to a site of worship. Yet what kind of worship? This is a matter that has not been discussed enough in considering Agamemnon's arc within the *Oresteia* as a whole.<sup>34</sup> It demonstrates a sweeping transformation of Agamemnon's afterlife status and spheres of influence.

At the play's start, the tomb is a symbol of corrupted ritual, which denotes Clytemnestra's unchallenged domestic and political authority.<sup>35</sup> The mourners' struggle against this situation begins with deliberation over ritual. Electra seeks advice as to how best to dispose of Clytemnestra's libation (*Cho.* 84–105): Should she pray on behalf of a “loving wife,” ask for repayment in kind against Clytemnestra, or even regard the spot as a permanently dishonored one (ἀτίμως, *atimōs*, 94 [96])? Following these alternatives, references to the tomb itself begin to assume the vocabulary of cult. Even before the first mourning ritual the Chorus indicate the path forward (106):

αἰδομένη σοι βωμὸν ὡς τύμβον πατρός

Respecting your father's tomb as if it were an altar

<sup>34</sup> Exemplary is Gagarin (1976), 106–7, who claims that the transfer of Agamemnon to Argos allows for an easier identification between the *oikos* and *polis* in the context of the treaty. The fact that Agamemnon plays no role in the treaty indicates that statements such as these elide important differences between father and son, domestic and political, as will become evident.

<sup>35</sup> Zeitlin (1965), 504–5; and Hame (2004), 521–3.

The Slave Women specify that their “respecting” or “being in religious awe” (αἰδουμένη, *aidoumenē*) does *not* mark Agamemnon's tomb as an altar, but precisely the opposite: They are acting *as if* (ὡς, *hōs*) it were one.<sup>36</sup> They indicate that it is not a holy site, at least not yet. Electra picks up on their reverence concerning the tomb in verse 108 (cf. 200), and both parties pray to the gods, not least to bring back an avenger (124a [165]–163). When these prayers are ostensibly answered by Orestes' appearance (212–13), the tomb becomes far more of an altar. Together the mourners supplicate the gods in the *kommos*, sometimes conjoining Agamemnon to them as a supernatural power. Through the introduction of the term “altar” and the implied efficacy of prayers uttered there, the spectators are privy to an incipient cult.

What kind of cult this is becomes evident shortly thereafter. Just as Electra's prayer to Zeus links the god's worship to raising the house of Agamemnon again (*Cho.* 260–3), so the children ply their dead father with sacrifices to gain his help. Mixed in with the other themes of the *kommos* is the restoration of his dishonored tomb to its rightful status among the family resting places. The prayers to Agamemnon, with a reference to “the descendants of Atreus before the house” (322) rather than the anonymous heroes of the Herald (*Ag.* 516), turn his tomb into a place of ancestor cult. They thus help redeem Agamemnon's dishonor through lineage rather than military valor or civic honor. This is specified most clearly in Orestes' and Electra's promises of rituals to Agamemnon (*Cho.* 483–8):

Or. οὕτω γὰρ ἂν σοι δαΐτες ἔννομοι βροτῶν  
 κτιζοίατ'· εἰ δὲ μή, παρ' εὐδείπνοις ἔση  
 ἄτιμος ἐμπύροισι κνισωτοῖς χθονός.  
 Ηλ. κάγώ χοάς σοι τῆς ἐμῆς παγκληρίας  
 οἶσω πατρῶων ἐκ δόμων γαμηλίου,  
 πάντων δὲ πρῶτον τόνδε πρεσβεύσω τάφον.

Or. For this way the customary feasts of mortals  
 could be established for you; but if not, you will be  
 dishonored among those feasting well  
 on the smoking burnt sacrifices of the earth.  
 El. And I will bring wedding drink offerings  
 to you from the full inheritance from my father's house;  
 and I will honor this tomb first of all things.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> For questions of staging and the denial that the tomb was represented by the festival altar, the θυμέλη, see Garvie (1986), xli–xlvi; and Brown (2018), 15–16.

<sup>37</sup> Lebeck (1971), 121.

Orestes and Electra offer only family cult, with weddings and sacrifices for the dead at the tomb.<sup>38</sup> They negate Agamemnon's possible future dishonor (ἔση ἄτιμος, *esē atimos*, 484–5) with future honor (πρεσβεύσω, *presbeusō*, 488). Since this passage falls between the last two requests for Agamemnon's *kratos* (480, 490), the omission here of any political reference is particularly significant. The children do not offer Agamemnon civic festivals, nor do they mention any others coming to worship him, whether Argive citizens or outsiders. The children's promises of specifically family rituals in verses 483–8 delimit the future sphere of influence of the deceased Agamemnon. These elisions correspond with never claiming that Agamemnon would offer supernatural protection of Argos. His cultivation, and therefore afterlife potency, is reduced to the domestic.

Throughout the rest of the *Oresteia*, Agamemnon's supernatural influence is similarly up for interpretation. As shown in Chapter 4, since Agamemnon fails to rise, the one form in which his power might seem to manifest itself is the dream of Clytemnestra.<sup>39</sup> Orestes interprets the snake-dream as an omen and immediately offers prayers to the Earth and the tomb of Agamemnon for its fulfillment (*Cho.* 540–1). This implies that the dream is a manifestation of Agamemnon's chthonic power, a connection that may be greatly strengthened by the close symbolic association of snakes with heroes.<sup>40</sup> Yet there is no continuation of this theme; the causal connection between Agamemnon and the dream remains in the realm of inference. In the rest of the *Choephoroi*, the tension and triumph rest on Orestes acting nearly alone. Supernatural aid, including that of Agamemnon's spirit, is limited to implications, prayers, oracles, and the interpretation of dreams.

The reduction of Agamemnon's afterlife potency in the *kommos* and the rest of the *Choephoroi* extends into the *Eumenides*. Agamemnon's power goes unmentioned, except for one anomalous line. When Orestes seeks protection against the Erinyes' cross-examination and savage threats, he declares that his father's spirit will assist him (*Eum.* 598):

ἄρωγὰς δ' ἐκ τάφου πέμψει πατήρ.

My father will send help from the grave.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> For the familial aspect of these promised rituals, see Hame (2004), 529–34.

<sup>39</sup> *Cho.* 510–13. *Contra* Whallon (1958), 271–5, who only associates the dream with Clytemnestra and Orestes. Cf. Roberts (1985), 283–97.

<sup>40</sup> See further Garvie (1986), xx.

<sup>41</sup> I use the future πέμψει, as read by the scholiast, which is restored by Scaliger from πέττει and followed by Sommerstein (1989).

By this point in the trilogy, the prayers for success seem to have been fulfilled by Orestes having accomplished his plot. Moreover, Clytemnestra herself has already risen from the underworld at the start of the *Eumenides*, spurring the Erinyes to action and demonstrating the sinister potency of the dead. Yet Agamemnon's help never manifests in the *Eumenides*. There are several interpretations available within the play for this puzzling truancy. One is given in the Erinyes's response: They immediately dispute the possibility that *any* dead would succor Orestes, because he killed his mother (*Eum.* 599). Despite their status as chthonic divinities, their reasoning should not be taken as definitive. They offer tendentious interpretations throughout the *Eumenides*, and other divinities contradict and eventually defeat them. The second possibility stems from the similarity of this entreaty to the *kommos* where Agamemnon is so often beseeched to aid; subsequent to that scene, Agamemnon's impact on the world is stunted, not only in words but also in action.

Through the mourners' domestic vocabulary as well as Agamemnon's failure to directly manifest, he becomes, by the end, an ancestor figure. This is clear from the cult offered to him and from his curtailed influence in the remainder of the trilogy. The inverted fate of the hubristic conqueror and child-killer tells us much about the trilogy's rewriting of character after death on the ethical and political fronts, as well as the possibilities it opens up for the next generation.

### *Revaluing Agamemnon's Life and Death*

Distancing Agamemnon after death from political influence in Argos and from supernatural power more generally leads to several counterintuitive consequences, all having to do with the assessment of his life. Once he is dead, the narrative and value of Agamemnon's life are out of his control. However, the *Oresteia* shows that they are still subject to contestation in the living world, as well as in the underworld: Clytemnestra's judgment on him is opposed by the actions and memorialization of his children. Yet, as we saw, the children rewrite Agamemnon differently than he would, focusing on his familial role. To better understand the postmortem transvaluation of Agamemnon, it is necessary to first briefly revisit statements concerning the value of life made by or about him before his death. Then one must examine how his legacy interacts with these standards and the ethical and political representations of his character. This comparison gives a better perspective on the specific patterns through which he is reconceptualized after death.

In the *Agamemnon*, the paradigm announced for judging the life of a king only concerns the glory of his deeds. When announcing the return of the expedition, the Herald ties Agamemnon's worth to his destruction of Troy (*Ag.* 529–32):

τοιόνδε Τροίαι περιβαλὼν ζευκτήριον  
 ἄναξ Ἄτρείδης πρέσβυς εὐδαίμων ἀνὴρ  
 ἦκει· τίεσθαι δ' ἄξιότατος βροτῶν  
 τῶν νῦν·

Throwing such a yoke on Troy  
 the king, the elder son of Atreus, a blessed man,  
 has arrived. He is the worthiest to be honored of mortals  
 living now.

The values of epic glory are paramount in the Herald's speech. Victory in a massive campaign and the destruction of a city are the criteria of being both "blessed" (εὐδαίμων, *eudaimōn*, 530) and worthy of honor (τίεσθαι . . . ἄξιότατος, *tiesthai* . . . *axiōtatos*, 531). Clytemnestra, in the tapestry scene, takes to a sacrilegious extreme this "honoring" of Agamemnon. To the unctuous strewing of divine offerings under his feet Agamemnon responds by cautioning that he is not to be praised excessively while living, especially not as a god (*Ag.* 916–27).<sup>42</sup> He goes on to deny that he can be labeled fortunate, insisting that only after the ending of life can one know its value (927–9):

καὶ τὸ μὴ κακῶς φρονεῖν  
 θεοῦ μέγιστον δῶρον. ὀλβίσιαι δὲ χρῆ  
 βίον τελευτήσαντ' ἐν εὐεστοῖ φίλη.

And not to think badly  
 is the greatest gift of god. It is necessary to deem a man blessed  
 who has ended his life in welcome prosperity.

Type of death affects reputation; appraisal of a human must account for the whole of life. Agamemnon's sentiment is seen as a traditional Greek value by commentators.<sup>43</sup> Its immediate dramatic effect, however, is deep irony,

<sup>42</sup> Scodel (2006), 122–3, 128–31, masterfully draws out the aspects of "social memory" in public praise in the *Agamemnon*, with its dark contrasts to the previous anger of the citizens at the casualties of war and Clytemnestra's open contest with Agamemnon. On the "persuasion" or "fabric" scene, see further Konishi (1989); and Morrell (1996), 141–64.

<sup>43</sup> The similarities to Solon in *Hdt.* 1.32 and numerous later examples from tragedy are often pointed out, see Denniston and Page (1957); Fraenkel (1950); and Medda (2017), ad loc.

since he is ingloriously butchered so soon after its utterance. His life's end in a bloody tub, his mutilated burial, and the queen gloating that these are the just rewards for his own actions all destroy any notion of his ending his life "in welcome prosperity." The reversal of everything he stood for in life would be permanent under the criteria Agamemnon himself laid out. In the trilogy, though, the poetics of the beyond offers possibilities of redemption for which the endpoint of life does not account.

The struggle over Agamemnon's postmortem reputation has a broader scope than the problem of his military glory. At stake is whether Agamemnon is even honored as a person. In one of the last lines of the *kommos*, Orestes cautions that Agamemnon will remain dishonored in the future unless the proper chain of events occurs. Agamemnon's afterlife, memory, and cultic honors are out of his control. Everything depends on his children, whose task it is to avenge him, restore his reputation, and perpetuate rituals on his behalf. There is no further mention of the citizens glorifying Agamemnon. The reliance on his children's actions compels further scrutiny concerning Agamemnon's negative relationship to his own family.

The *Oresteia* never represents any interaction between Electra or Orestes and their living father. Both children, however, maintain their focus on Agamemnon as an unproblematic father figure. Such a transformation involves a dubious set of linguistic substitutions, as the main anxiety concerns his murder of his own daughter, their sister. The polluting act that leads to his own murder serves as an obstacle to Agamemnon's ethical desert for familial honors above and glorious kingship below. Clytemnestra has already reconnected Iphigeneia with Agamemnon in the afterlife, imagining the daughter hugging and kissing her father. Clytemnestra explicitly declares that Agamemnon's child-murder destroys the possibility of heroic status in the afterlife ("let him not boast gloriously in Hades," *Ag.* 1525–9, 1555–9). Yet nowhere do the children ever consider Iphigeneia's afterlife, nor that she could problematize her father's fate.

Instead, Electra, in a shocking reversal, suppresses the act of filicide (*Cho.* 235–42). Describing the deed, Electra uses the evocative oxymoron "the sister ruthlessly sacrificed" (τῆς τυθείσης νηλεῶς ὁμοσπόρου, *Cho.* 242).<sup>44</sup> The ethical effect of her grammar is immense; her seemingly unmarked use of the passive voice (τυθείσης, *tutheisēs*) with no agent obfuscates Agamemnon's responsibility for the unholy sacrifice.<sup>45</sup> In the

<sup>44</sup> Sacrifices, requiring ritual purity, can neither be ruthless nor involve human victims in standard Greek religion. Cf. Zeitlin (1965).

<sup>45</sup> Garvie (1986), ad 255, points out the ironic echo of the child-sacrifice when Orestes, just thirteen verses later, calls Agamemnon "the sacrificer (θυτήρ) who greatly gloried [Zeus]."



first play of the trilogy, the Chorus and Clytemnestra both harp on Agamemnon's culpability. Electra's use of "ruthless" in the *Choephoroi* demonstrates that her evaluation of the act has not changed, but she has altogether erased the actor.

In this same stanza, Electra repeatedly uses the terms "father" and "paternal" (235, 237, 240) without qualification. She thus continues to gloss over Agamemnon's crime against his family and his own continuity.<sup>46</sup> Going further, Electra explicitly *replaces* her sister with Orestes (238–43). Since Electra is the only living female child and has been representing the household in Orestes' absence, her ouster of Iphigeneia is a potent erasure of the dead. From the surviving children's perspective, it annuls their mother's justification for murder and camouflages their father's crime.<sup>47</sup> This move to clear Agamemnon contradicts the treatment of ethical transgressions in almost any afterlife reference in the rest of the trilogy.

In fact, the next reference to Agamemnon's afterlife implies the disquiet of his spirit. Clytemnestra's Ghost places Agamemnon in the underworld as the implied referent of "those I killed," who hound her soul (*Eum.* 96–7, Chapter 6). This reference to his spirit conflicts with the pacific image of the great king on his throne in the underworld. Moreover, if she is to be believed, Clytemnestra's story implies that she is suffering in some way for her murders above.<sup>48</sup> Such an afterlife punishment for those who transgress greatly is a repeated theme of each of the choruses of the *Oresteia*, especially the Erinyes, who themselves hand the shedder of kindred blood to the judgment of Hades.<sup>49</sup> Why, then, would Agamemnon not suffer in the same way? Do his children somehow free him from punishment for familial murder? The implication of the *kommos* is that ritual action and vengeance will change Agamemnon's state below. Yet there is no follow-up. The last mention of Agamemnon, Orestes' request for his help, is scoffed at by the Erinyes (*Eum.* 598). Agamemnon never directly manifests his power and is never cleared of wrongdoing. His ethical crimes remain an unresolved problem, since they lead to Orestes' further kin-killing, regardless of the valorization of the father–king–hero.

The effect of Agamemnon's murder of his child and heavily criticized war deeds does not withstand the intense rewriting of Agamemnon's legacy

<sup>46</sup> Note that the word for sister that Electra uses is literally "same-seed" (ὁμοσπόρου, *Cho.* 242), echoing her description of Orestes a few verses earlier as "seed" of the house (σπέρματος, *Cho.* 236, cf. 503–9) in the context that children continue the familial line.

<sup>47</sup> Zeitlin (1965), 490–2.

<sup>48</sup> On the Ghost of Clytemnestra's rhetoric and its believability, see Chapter 6.

<sup>49</sup> *Ag.* 461–8; *Cho.* 59–65; and *Eum.* 267–75.

in his mourning scene.<sup>50</sup> Such a new, blank-slate characterization of Agamemnon liberates his children and the Chorus to categorically condemn Clytemnestra for his murder. If Agamemnon is clean of blood, the vengeance against Clytemnestra is free of the ethical complication of her act.<sup>51</sup> The laundering of Agamemnon's reputation remains effective for the duration of the trilogy. Not even Clytemnestra, in her self-defense, disinters the family crime of Agamemnon, only charging him with sexual faults of his own (μάτας, *Cho.* 918).<sup>52</sup> The children win the fight over his legacy; they turn Agamemnon into a morally unproblematic ancestor worthy of worship.

Thus, after Agamemnon's death, there is both a struggle over his reputation and an overall revaluation of his living status. Clytemnestra does everything she can to his corpse, reputation, and living children to undercut the kingly glory Agamemnon explicitly sought in life. Her complete dishonoring requires a struggle to return some honor to him, which takes up fully half of the *Choephoroi*. Moreover, for Agamemnon as father not to be polluted as their mother is, his children must erase his transgressive deeds. They never, in fact, restore kingly honors to Agamemnon. They consider this absent father figure only on a familial level.

The reduction of Agamemnon's honors resonates greatly with religious and political notions about him. Within the *Oresteia*, unlike in contemporary religion, Agamemnon never receives wider cultivation. Despite all the possibilities for an aetiology of a hero cult that his *kratos*, ties with divinities, the previous mention of heroes, and Orestes' later heroic powers suggest, Agamemnon at his tomb only gains funerary rites in the restrictive sense of familial devotion. Although the reference to him as a king below seems to maintain his politically honored status, the language and context suggest it is only a *potential* outcome. Beyond the implied ascription of Clytemnestra's dream to Agamemnon, there is no evidence after the *kommos* of his continuing supernatural power in the living world. In the *Eumenides*, it is explicitly denied. Thus, references to Agamemnon after his death defy all previously stated criteria for the evaluation of his worth,

<sup>50</sup> *Contra* readings that end their ethical or moral evaluation of Agamemnon with his murder, such as Peradotto (1969), 249–61.

<sup>51</sup> On the erasure of Clytemnestra's justifying arguments before her murder in the *Choephoroi*, see Foley (2001), 230–1.

<sup>52</sup> This charge against Agamemnon is answered by Orestes' references to the man's toil and labor (*Cho.* 919, 921) and dies with Clytemnestra. It is not one of the Erinyes' arguments. Garvie (1986), ad loc., ascribes the restriction of Clytemnestra's defenses in the *Choephoroi* to the imperative to avoid arousing sympathy for her, lest her murder be seen negatively.

including that of ending life well, of earning glory from kingship and war, and even of being condemned for destroying his own family. From the moment of his demise, there is a struggle over rewriting not only his legacy but also the structure of his postmortem existence. Instead of the glow of glory or the civic honor of hero cult, by the end of the trilogy Agamemnon's possible afterlives merely smolder. They give off nothing but the vaporous outlines of his life.

### Orestes: Suicide, Tyrannicide, Hero

Only one living character in the *Oresteia* deliberately confronts their own afterlife: Orestes prophetically declares his postmortem transformation into a semidivine figure (*Eum.* 762–77). The supernatural powers he claims correspond to the attributes of a hero figure, although he does not call himself one. Through him, Aeschylus forges links between a mythic character and two *poleis*, Argos and Athens, in both mythical and historical time. In the process, Aeschylus geographically dislodges the contemporary historical claims on the power of Orestes the hero. To get the full range of the ethical and political effects of his transformation, we first examine earlier statements concerning Orestes' own death in the trilogy. These lead to an analysis of his heroic status. The final sections contrast Orestes' and Agamemnon's afterlives, demonstrate interactions with contemporary cultic ideas, and establish the significance of Orestes' heroism for the mythical Athens of the trilogy.

#### *Orestes' Deaths*

Orestes describes three different types of death for himself. Each declaration creates a relationship to human death that provides both the foundation and contrast for his last pronouncement, that of heroic immortality. The first instance comes as a wish to die. Midway through the *Choephoroi*, Orestes yokes his end to the act of matricide (*Cho.* 438):

ἔπειτ' ἐγὼ νοσφίσας ὄλοιμαν.<sup>53</sup>

When I have removed [her from life], may I perish!

In expressing the wish to end his own life once he has taken Clytemnestra's, Orestes melds two themes. First, he implies that the deed is so great that it

<sup>53</sup> See Garvie (1986), ad loc., against the OCT addition of <σ'> as an object for the participle, although the following arguments remain the same regardless.

will fully deplete his very existence;<sup>54</sup> secondly, he implies a promised sacrifice of himself in order to accomplish the killing.<sup>55</sup> Each resonates differently with related statements from other characters and with the dynamics of death as closure.

The first theme is closely linked with other “wishes for death” in the *Oresteia*, especially the exclamations of the Herald, the Chorus of Elders, and Aegisthus in the *Agamemnon*.<sup>56</sup> These characters never act on their ostensible wishes, marking the statements as instances of a rhetorical trope – with varying significations. The Chorus of Elders declare that they are ready to die in action, yet their vociferousness merely heightens the irony of their impotence (*Ag.* 1362–5, 1652). The Herald and Aegisthus, on the other hand, seem to be declaring a readiness to let go of life itself as a way of marking the immensity of their just-completed effort. Ostensibly, Orestes’ sentiment is closely related to the latter two declarations, especially that of Aegisthus, who plotted the murder of kin. Having given his backstory and described his role in the plot, Aegisthus closes his speech with the sentiment that now he could happily end his life (*Ag.* 1610–11):

οὐτῶ καλὸν δὴ καὶ τὸ κατθανεῖν ἐμοί,  
ἰδόντα τοῦτον τῆς Δίκης ἐν ἔρκεσιν.

Even dying is therefore noble for me,  
having seen this man in the nets of Justice.

Aegisthus rhetorically conjoins his death to the accomplishment of his life’s task, the avenging of his dead siblings and what he sees as the usurpation of the state (*Ag.* 1577–1609). The sight of justice accomplished provides him a sense of closure to life. This is analogous to the logic of the Herald’s remarks at the accomplishment of his *nostos* (*Ag.* 539). Yet Aegisthus is not, in actuality, ready to die or even to disappear into the life of a private citizen. In response to the Chorus’s threat of armed uprising and civic turmoil, he avows that he will maintain his and Clytemnestra’s rule by force (*Ag.* 1637–42). Instead of dying happy, Aegisthus continues to contend for life and power.

<sup>54</sup> Zeitlin (1965), 496, contrasts the zeal with which other avengers in the trilogy kill to Orestes’ reluctance and inner conflict: “Orestes is aware of the repulsive nature of his task. He wishes just to do the thing and then die himself.” Cf. Lebeck (1971), 200–1.

<sup>55</sup> Goldhill (1984b), 170; and cf. Neitzel (1979), 133–46.

<sup>56</sup> See Chapters 1 and 2. Garvie (1986), ad loc., gives *Hy. Aphro.* 153ff. and several examples that postdate Aeschylus for the theme of “when I have achieved my object let me die content.”

Like Aegisthus, Orestes defends his murders, does not end his life thereafter, and assumes rulership over Argos. Unlike Aegisthus and the Herald, though, Orestes announces his willingness to die *before* the act is accomplished. He is thus dissimilar to the Chorus of Elders as well, since they twice proclaim their willingness to die in resistance to tyranny yet fail to launch their undertaking. Moreover, Orestes continually wrestles with the horror of his deed; thereafter, he suffers what can be seen as internal psychological repercussions.<sup>57</sup> This is in contrast to Aegisthus, who never critically scrutinizes the ethics of his action, is clearly self-satisfied at his vengeance, and openly proclaims that he will maintain control of Argos through violence. These distinctions help put Orestes' "wish for death" in context. For the characters of the *Agamemnon*, the expression of such a wish is generally a mark of a desire for peace (the Herald), of truncated action (the Chorus), or of unrepentant violence (Aegisthus). In Orestes' speech, it marks the ethically repulsive deed demanded of him.<sup>58</sup>

The other undertone of Orestes' first declaration about his death is as a pledge of his own life. The optative of wish (ὄλοιμαν, *oloiman*, "may I perish!") implies a link to prayers to the divine for fulfillment with a future sacrifice.<sup>59</sup> In this case, it is a self-sacrifice.<sup>60</sup> This corresponds with other instances of the corrupted sacrifice motif, especially that of the Erinyes threatening to sacrifice Orestes after his act.<sup>61</sup> The problematic ethical nature of the matricide shows itself in that it potentially demands a life in return. Whereas Orestes is not explicitly offering himself to the gods, this moment resonates with his later afterlife status. At that point, too, his death transcends individual concerns and involves both a promise and a threat of further violence.

The second example of Orestes depicting his own death is part of the plot to enter the palace. Deceptively bearing the news of his own demise symbolically removes Orestes from the realm of the living as a necessary

<sup>57</sup> See Brown (1983), 13–22.

<sup>58</sup> For Orestes' ethical quandary as he is about to kill his mother, see, among others, Zeitlin (1965), 496; Lesky (1966), 80; Peradotto (1969), 258–61; Vellacott (1984a); Rehm (2003), 65–7; and Lawrence (2013), 89–100. None of these analyses, however, takes into account Orestes' afterlife.

<sup>59</sup> See Garvie (1986), ad loc., for the weaker suggestion (following Lesky) that ὄλοιμαν is Orestes indicating that the act will lead to his own destruction.

<sup>60</sup> Parker (2005a), 75–6, mentions that all Greek oaths involved conditional "self-cursing," but denies that this is the same notion of "consecration" that happened in Ancient Rome. He does not address any examples from the *Oresteia*, however. On Orestes as fulfiller of prophecies, and thus offering ritual closure, especially as τελεσφόρος (*Cho.* 212–13, 540–1), see Roberts (1985), 285; and Goldhill (1984b), 170–2.

<sup>61</sup> *Eum.* 303–5. See Zeitlin (1965), 485–6; and Chapter 7.

step for his return to his rightful place.<sup>62</sup> It also foreshadows his transformation into a hero; in both instances, Orestes unnaturally stands apart from the end of his life. A proleptic echo of his future power is found in the culmination of the plot, in the enigmatic cry that “the dead are killing the living” (*Cho.* 886). It is a knot whose threads interweave many themes in the trilogy, but whose local significance Clytemnestra untangles instantaneously: It refers to Orestes, back from the dead, against whom she arms. The irony of this moment only intensifies at the start of the *Eumenides*, when the dead character who continues exercising violent effects on life is Clytemnestra herself. The deaths of Orestes’ parents and his own fabricated demise each includes at least the possibility of a bloody return. These anticipate Orestes’ power from beyond the grave.

The third instance of Orestes speaking of his own death as a type of closure comes as he awaits the verdict of the jurors. He marks this as the moment of consequence for himself with a seemingly unambiguous dichotomy of life and death (*Eum.* 746):

νῦν ἀγχόνης μοι τέρματ', ἢ φάος βλέπειν.

Now it is the end of a noose for me, or to see the light.

The emphasis of the statement is on finality, including the linguistic play with the “end” (τέρματ', *termat'*) of a noose. Yet a significant elision complicates this disjunctive statement: Does a guilty verdict mean Orestes is still subject to the blood-sucking death that the Erinyes threaten, or will the new, civic law execute the murderer? Orestes’ meaning is clarified by a consequential cultural detail: Greek law never contained any provision for hanging.<sup>63</sup> With his words, therefore, Orestes testifies that, regardless of whether he is subject to death under the old law or the new law, he will hang *himself*.<sup>64</sup> Were he to be found guilty, Orestes would be unable to control his death’s meaning in the way he did for Agamemnon through promises of honors, sacrifices, and familial continuity. There

<sup>62</sup> Both the Eleusinian Mysteries and the ephebic rituals contain symbolic movements out of life and a return to society. On these rituals and tragedy, see the Introduction; and on Orestes partaking of these initiatory patterns, see Goldhill (1984a), 166.

<sup>63</sup> Sommerstein (1989), ad loc.

<sup>64</sup> Suicide is unusual in Greek tragedy, with Ajax who actually falls on his sword as the notable exception. It is considered to be a woman’s death, especially suicide by hanging, on which see Loraux (1987), 3–18. Aeschylus’ Chorus of Suppliants, for instance, twice threaten to hang themselves if there is no escape (*Supp.* 154–61, 784–91). As usual, Euripides plays off of the *Oresteia* brilliantly, having the condemnation of the citizens end in Orestes *begging* to kill himself, and being offered the choice of sword or rope, with other strong linguistic echoes of this scene (*Or.* 945–54).

would be no heir to the house. Instead, Orestes would close the circle of vengeance with his noose.

Orestes' three mentions of his death are oriented toward ending; he never indicates the possibility of an afterlife.<sup>65</sup> They are focused, instead, on either the plot to kill Clytemnestra or its consequences. Their poetics maximizes the psychic pressure on Orestes, and consequently on audiences: the pathos of his pretended death, the frisson of his dead-man-walking vengeance, and the stakes of his murder trial. None would work as well rhetorically, dramatically, or as plot points were there simultaneous mentions of the continuity of Orestes' influence beyond death. The cycle of vengeance ends in a twist, however: The new law does not claim Orestes' life; rather, it *requires* his afterlife.

### *Orestes the Civic-Military Hero*

After the trial, Orestes' language becomes confident and god-driven. He claims powers beyond human abilities, begins to fulfill promises, returns to rule Argos, and establishes an eternal alliance with Athens. Of all the examples of the afterlife in the trilogy, Orestes' ethical transformation is most clearly manifest, and his powers are the most imbricated with politics, both within and without the drama.

The trilogy radically rewrites Orestes' character after the trial through his relationship to death. Specifically, he no longer needs either to pledge his life or to fear his end. Orestes frames his immediate relief in Olympian terms: He thanks his divine benefactors Apollo, Athena, and Zeus for restoring his rule over the house in Argos (*Eum.* 754–61). Tellingly, he does not propitiate the chthonic powers that he and Electra had invoked for vengeance from the very start (e.g. *Cho.* 1–2, 490, 540), or Agamemnon's spirit, to whom he often appealed (including at *Eum.* 598). Although these chthonic forces are spurned, the power of the dead is far from forgotten. Orestes abruptly turns to his own future potency from the grave in his final speech (*Eum.* 762–77):

ἐγὼ δὲ χάρα τῆδε καὶ τῷ σῶ στρατῷ  
 τὸ λοιπὸν εἰς ἅπαντα πλειστήρη χρόνον  
 ὀρκωμοτήσας νῦν ἄπειμι πρὸς δόμους,  
 μή τοί τιν' ἄνδρα δεῦρο πρυμνήτην χθονὸς

<sup>65</sup> Note that Hades is prominent in other examples of hanging: The *Odyssey* contains a similar conjunction of themes and language, when Oedipus' mother goes down into the house of Hades by hanging herself but leaves him to the woes of a mother's Erinyes (*Od.* 11.277–80). Each example of a hanging threat in the *Suppliants* mentions Zeus of the Dead or Hades: Ζῆνα τῶν κεκηκῶτων ἰσόμεθα, *Supp.* 158–9; Αἴδας ἀνάσσοι, 791.

ἐλθόντ' ἐποίσειν εὖ κεκασμένον δόρυ.  
 αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἡμεῖς ὄντες ἐν τάφοις τότε  
 τοῖς τὰμὰ παρβαίνουσι νῦν ὀρκώματα  
 ἄμηχανοῖσι πράξομεν† δυσπραξίαις,  
 ὁδοὺς ἀθύμους καὶ παρόρνιας πόρους  
 τιθέντες, ὡς αὐτοῖσι μεταμέλη πόνος·  
 ὀρθουμένων δὲ καὶ πόλιν τὴν Παλλάδος  
 τιμῶσιν ἀεὶ τήνδε συμμαχῶ δορὶ  
 αὐτοῖς ἂν ἡμεῖς εἶμεν εὐμενέστεροι.  
 καὶ χαῖρε καὶ σὺ καὶ πολιτισσοῦχος λεώς·  
 πάλαισμ' ἄφυκτον τοῖς ἐναντίοις ἔχοις,  
 σωτήριόν τε καὶ δορὸς νικηφόρον.

I now depart towards my home  
 having sworn an oath to this land and to your people  
 for the whole fullness of future time  
 that no helmsman of my land coming here  
 will bring against you a well-equipped army.  
 For we ourselves being in our tomb then,  
 against those who transgress my present oath  
 will bring inescapable misfortunes,  
 making their marches spiritless and their paths ill-omened  
 so that they regret their undertaking.  
 But if it is rightly maintained, and  
 they always honor this city of Pallas with an allied army  
 we would be kindlier to them.  
 So farewell both you and your city-dwelling people.  
 May you have an inescapable wrestling trick against your enemies,  
 one that saves and brings victory for the army.

Orestes' promise to act from beyond the grave runs counter to his previous approaches to the end of his life. The tomb is connected to his power; it is somewhere he can simultaneously "be in" (ὄντες ἐν τάφοις, *ontes en taphois*, 767) and yet act from. That is, "being in the tomb" is not being dead but now means being a hero at his shrine. Although he does not specify where it would be located, he speaks of acting against those on the way to Athens (δεῦρο, 765; ὁδοὺς, πόρους, 770).<sup>66</sup> More generally, Orestes describes the punishments or beneficence he would mete out as only directly affecting the people of Argos. Each of these aspects accords in general with Greek notions of hero cult.

<sup>66</sup> Sommerstein (1989), ad 767, notes that neither of the two known tomb sites of Orestes (Tegea and Sparta) is near the path from Argos to Athens.



Yet numerous peculiarities distinguish this heroization from previous allusions to heroes or cult in the *Oresteia*. First, it is neither divine fiat nor worship given by others but Orestes' own prophecy that effects his transformation.<sup>67</sup> Orestes' words constitute a double speech-act: He swears an oath (ὄρκωμοτήσας, 764) and claims he will enforce it "for all time" (εἰς ἅπαντα πλειστήρη χρόνον, *eis hapanta pleistērē khronon*, 763). This is an astonishing declaration from the mouth of a human character, not least because there are two Olympians on stage with him. It accords with the previous promise of alliance between Argos and Athens, in which Orestes has already broached the language of the future, and even eternity (ἔς τὸ πᾶν, *es to pan*, *Eum.* 291). Orestes is also echoing Apollo's words to Athena (669–74), promising Argos as an ally "for all time" (ἔς τὸ πᾶν χρόνου, *es to pan khronou*, 670; αἰανῶς, *aianōs*, 672). Crucially, however, neither of the previous mentions of the alliance with Athens contained any hint of Orestes' heroization. In the first, Orestes merely names his Argive people (τὸν Ἀργεῖον λεών, *ton Argeion leōn*, 290) as the allies, whereas Apollo specifically refers to Orestes' descendants (τοὺς ἔπειτα, *tous epeita*, 672). With the new information in the hero speech that Orestes himself will enforce the oath, he takes control of his own postmortem existence. Orestes' use of future-oriented language, reserved in the trilogy for divinities and prophets, seems to give him agency over his own destiny and to exemplify his superhuman powers.<sup>68</sup> The form of his declaration already marks its efficacy.

The language of the hero speech implies supernatural powers. Orestes evinces the ability to directly intervene in human affairs, as opposed to the Ghost of Clytemnestra, who must act through the intermediary Erinyes. This is evident in his claims that he will affect the *thumos* (as "spirit" or "courage") of men and the omens given to them (ἄθύμους, *athumous*; παρόρνιθας 770). Ideationally tied to the language of divine forces as well is his promise to be more kindly (εὐμενέστεροι, *eumenesteroi*, *Eum.* 774) to those who keep his oath. It echoes the Herald's prayer to the heroes to be kindly to the returning army (εὐμενεῖς, *eumeneis*, *Ag.* 516). The promise also serves to reconnect Orestes to the Erinyes, but only to their transformed version, whom Athena asserts will be kind-minded to Athens

<sup>67</sup> As Sommerstein (1989), ad 767–71, points out, this is opposed to the later tragic treatments of heroes with tombs and cults in Attica: Oedipus in Soph. *OC* 574–628, 1522, and Eurystheus in Eurip. *Heracl.* 1032–6. Goldhill (2000), 52–5, draws attention to just how strange this self-heroization is, on the literary, cultic, and political levels. See Kearns (1989), 50–2, 189, 208–9, on Oedipus as hero and the multiple traditions concerning his tomb; and 49, 164, on Eurystheus' disputed burial and cult.

<sup>68</sup> On Cassandra's language of the future, see Chapter 3. On Athena's, see Chapter 7.

(εὐφρονας, *euphronas*, *Eum.* 992). Thus, Orestes' language of transformation not only means he will continue in the afterlife but also asserts specifically superhuman powers over the living.

Orestes has committed a crime for which he barely escapes madness, demonic punishment, and a guilty verdict in court, yet he emerges as a civic hero. The issue of Orestes' release therefore has a political dimension to it. This even relates to his release from pollution. In response to Orestes' claims, the Erinyes deny that human purification could ever cleanse him. It is, in fact, the civic trial that is responsible for the final purification.<sup>69</sup> Gone is Orestes' matricide; there is no mention of further expiation. One of the most unusual features of Orestes' heroization is that there was another afterlife in store for him, replete with retribution for his crime. Immediately before his first promise of an alliance to Athens, Orestes was threatened with underworld punishment in Hades, despite all human cleansing and Apollo's protection (*Eum.* 267–75, Chapter 7). This is labeled the common lot of any mortal (τις . . . βροτῶν, 269) who violates sacred relationships. Yet for Orestes, the civic trial and resultant heroic afterlife replace underworld retribution for ethical transgressions.

Instead of suffering continual punishment, Orestes the hero becomes a pillar for the Athenian military future. The Athenian dimension to the oath provides insights into the specifics of his heroization. For Orestes' transformation from person to hero also enacts a momentous reversal of his domestic and political relations. In a countermovement to Agamemnon's arc, which reduced a conqueror in life to a family cult figure, Orestes' hero speech refers to the household only before his death (*Eum.* 754–61). He is concerned with what humans, specifically other Greeks, will say (τις Ἑλλήνων ἐρεῖ, 756), relates himself positively to Argos after long exile (Ἀργεῖος ἀνὴρ αὖθις, 757), and emphasizes enjoying the goods of the paternal house (ἔν τε χρήμασιν οἰκεῖ πατρώοις, 757–8). Once the speech reaches Orestes' heroic powers, though, its contents upend his living relationships to the household and the city.

The hero speech contains a dominant military theme, which Orestes has never displayed in life. As a young man returning nearly alone to his home country, he was explicitly barred from bringing an army by Apollo's prophecy (*Cho.* 556–9). This frees him from the stain of waging war against his homeland, the act that haunts Polynices, both living and dead. But it is also symbolic of Orestes' lack of the Homeric glory that defined his father's

<sup>69</sup> Meinel (2015), 135–9, discusses some perspectives on the problem that purification rituals do not seem to lead to release (λύσις) for Orestes.

deeds. By contrast, Orestes' hero speech is crammed with martial vocabulary. He calls the "people" of Athena her *stratos* (τῷ σῷ στρατῷ, *tō sō stratō*, *Eum.* 762), a term that was used exclusively for a military expedition in the *Agamemnon*, including in the Herald's hero prayer (στρατόν, *straton*, *Ag.* 517).<sup>70</sup> Further, Orestes uses the synecdoche *doru*, "shaft/spear," for "army" three times in eleven lines of this hero speech (*Eum.* 766, 773, 777), which again echoes the Herald (δορός, *doros*, *Ag.* 517). This is by no means an unmarked usage. The Herald's mention of the spear was in the context of the decimation of his companions in war. Orestes himself emphatically declared that Athena would win his and Argos' allegiance *without* the spear (ἄνευ δορός, *aneu doros*, *Eum.* 289). Both of these earlier uses focus on the destructiveness of warfare. This is far from the case in Orestes' hero speech, which ends by equating salvation with victory in war (δορός νικηφόρον, *doros nikēphoron*, *Eum.* 777). Athena and the Erinyes will pick up on precisely these militaristic notions, with similar vocabulary, in the final portion of the trilogy.

The transformation of Orestes triggers a vast political shift. Argos, so prominent a few lines earlier, sinks from preeminence as soon as Orestes mentions his afterlife. His supernatural powers manifest only in respect to the oath and civic alliance. Moreover, Orestes' abilities manifest clearly as threats, but he only gives vague hints of possible rewards (*Eum.* 772–4). Yet this duality signals more than simple Greek concern about the ambivalence of divine powers, especially chthonic ones. Orestes literally threatens his own people (*Eum.* 768–71) but promises their military prowess for the exclusive benefit of Athens (*Eum.* 772–7). Although both the previous plays take place in Argos, which is now free, aiding Athens in warfare will determine the prosperity of Argos now and "forever."<sup>71</sup>

The heroization of Orestes contains a further, subtle thematic link to Athens. For the city did have a cult to two aristocrats known as the "tyrannicides."<sup>72</sup> The language of tyranny may seem unmarked at times in the *Oresteia*.<sup>73</sup> Yet there are certainly links to the negative overtones tyranny would have had in contemporary Athens.<sup>74</sup> Orestes, for instance,

<sup>70</sup> On the change in meaning of *stratos* from "expedition" in the *Agamemnon* to "people" especially in Athena's speeches in the *Eumenides*, see Chapter 7.

<sup>71</sup> Chiasson (1999), 139–61, highlights the chronological melding of past, present, and future, bringing heroic events up to the present moment of the Athenian audience and beyond. See Chapter 7 for further discussion on Athena's use of eternity.

<sup>72</sup> See the Introduction.

<sup>73</sup> E.g. Orestes describes the manner of his father's death as "nontyrannical" (*Cho.* 479), the earliest use of the adjective τυραννικός, see Garvie (1986), ad loc.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Griffith (1995), 91 n. 101, 94 n. 109.

never calls himself a tyrant. He boasts of killing the double tyrants (τυραννίδα, *Cho.* 973). The Chorus of the *Choephoroi* describe this same act as liberating Argos (ἤλευθερώσας πᾶσαν Ἀργείων πόλιν, 1046) through cutting the heads off the two snakes (δρακόντοι, 1047). The deliverance from tyrants, with its understated connection to Athenian democratic folklore, may color the political aspects of Orestes' actions. He may come off to some members of the audience as being a political liberator by virtue of being a tyrant-killer. The reverse is true as well: Orestes' trial in Athens justifies his act of kin-killing as a political one. In this view, Orestes the hero and ally supersedes Orestes the mother-murderer.<sup>75</sup> Yet both of those positive aspects have to operate at a remove from Athens. The fact that Orestes is due to resume his monarchical inheritance demonstrates his "otherness" from this aspect of Athenian political thought.<sup>76</sup> He will be a king in another state. The powerful connection promised to Athens is thus focused on the time after Orestes the human being has died.

### Summations/Connections

A politico-religious struggle over cult is clearly in progress both within the *Oresteia* and, as a number of scholars have suggested, in contemporary Greek history. The move by Athens to incorporate the cults of other cities from around the Greek world, even the festival of Dionysus itself, is congruent with Athenian political ambitions, already evident during the period in which the *Oresteia* was written.<sup>77</sup> Whereas gods could have numerous worship sites, hero cults were generally restricted to one or a few locales, even for such widely known figures as Agamemnon. The local and human aspects of hero cult enabled it to take on a political significance in the

<sup>75</sup> Vellacott (1984a), 151, draws attention to the fact that the appeal in Euripides' *Orestes* to the possibility of taking Clytemnestra to court is already implied in the *Agamemnon's* citizen condemnation of the tyrants. The *Oresteia* itself thus hints at ways of punishing and possibly regaining political power other than matricide. This possibility is given little attention in the *Choephoroi*, only appearing in the negative, when Orestes declares that he is to come secretly, that is, without bringing an army or rousing the citizens (*Cho.* 556–9).

<sup>76</sup> Seaford (2012), 104, suggests that the hostility of tragedy to Thebes as an "elsewhere" is partly due to its historical support of Athenian tyrants.

<sup>77</sup> Kurke (2013), 101–75, argues for a contest of genre and ritual between Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Pindar's mini-*Oresteia* of *Pyth.* 11. The latter she dates, with substantial evidence, to 454 BCE, a few years before Aeschylus' trilogy (although see Medda (2017), 1.26–7). She suggests that Pindar's *Oresteia* is part of his attempt to restore cults to their proper, geographically specific origins, in response to Athenian tragedy's appropriation of them for Athens. This occurred just as the city itself was attempting to assert hegemony over surrounding territories, in the so-called "first Peloponnesian war" of 461–446 BCE; cf. Thuc. 1.107–13. By contrast, Sourvinou-Inwood (2003), 102–4, denies the idea of an Athenian annexation of rituals connected to tragedy.

struggle between *poleis*, although one of indeterminable value. There is external evidence, for instance, that a connection to Agamemnon was central to Laconian claims of preeminence over the Peloponnese.<sup>78</sup> In addition, Herodotus' story about the Spartan requisition of Orestes' bones for reburial demonstrates that there was political value – whether internal, external, or both – to associating with these named figures as protective heroes.<sup>79</sup> The *Oresteia* treats the afterlives of Agamemnon and Orestes much differently, however, from the historical and cultic evidence mentioned. Thus, Agamemnon's and Orestes' movement from stage-character to afterlife object of cult must be examined on the terms of the trilogy, to which other interpretations, such as the interaction with the politics of contemporary Athens, must be subordinated.

The three instances in the *Oresteia* of cult to the dead are distinct in their patterns. In the *Agamemnon*, the heroes are anonymous, colorless ancestors supplicated for kindness on behalf of the army; in the *Choephoroi*, ancestor cult is promised to Agamemnon with an emphasis on the continuity of the house; and in the *Eumenides*, Orestes foresees himself as the supernatural guardian of a military alliance for Athens, without any mention of cult. Examining the purview of Agamemnon and Orestes after death uncovers the striking, and little-discussed, transformation. The trilogy radically dislocates their living ethos and their relation to political themes. The two transitions from living characters to heroic figures demonstrate an erasure of ethical consequences, seemingly contrary to all the vengeance-driven statements within the play.<sup>80</sup> Although Agamemnon was murdered and Orestes nearly killed, there is no repercussion past the threshold of death for their crimes against kin. The unfathomable horrors of family murder give way to afterlife heroism.

The mechanisms of clearing away living transgressions differ for each character. The children's memorializing of Agamemnon ends the conflict over his glorious reputation. Clytemnestra had already subverted it with the stage-managed sacrilege upon his return, his murder in a tub, the gloating over his death, the distancing of citizens from his funeral, and the mutilation of his corpse. Since he has children who rewrite his memory and return his

<sup>78</sup> On this point, Kurke (2013), 144, quotes Syragos of Sparta (Hdt. 7.159): "Indeed, greatly would the Pelopid Agamemnon groan were he to learn that the Spartiates were deprived of the leadership [lit. hegemony] by Gelon and the Syracusans!"

<sup>79</sup> Hdt. 1.66–8; cf. Huxley (1979). On the political use of mythical hero figures, see Kearns (1989), 44–56; and Boedeker (1998). Salapata (2014), 38–9, sees heroes as part of both internal community-building and external propaganda; *contra* Parker (2011), 117–22.

<sup>80</sup> Especially the repeated theme that "he who does must suffer" (*Ag.* 1564); cf. Gagarin (1976), 57–86; and Sommerstein (2010a), 193–7.

burial rites, both Agamemnon's crimes and his dishonorable death seem to evaporate. The contest over his afterlife status, however, is one without sure knowledge. Clytemnestra, the Slave Women, and Agamemnon's children all lack divinely supported insight. The children's mentions of honors are therefore not focused on the underworld. They do not address the claims of Clytemnestra about his reunion there with Iphigeneia nor the Slave Women's depiction of him as a great king below. Instead, the children treat Agamemnon as a figure of domestic cult. In a generally unrecognized move, they thus minimize both his effect on the rest of the trilogy and his militaristic glory – the latter of which depends on a specific type of memorialization. Agamemnon's whitewashing is part of ending the foul familial legacy, allows an ethically simpler vengeance for Orestes (since Clytemnestra is less justified in her own killings), and permits familial praise. The substitution of father figure for glorious warlord has far-reaching political consequences: The Trojan War is minimized in the political discourse of the rest of the trilogy, and the great conqueror gives up his power to protect his state.

This transformation of Agamemnon after death thus opens political space for Orestes to grow into. Just as there was no glory in Agamemnon's dying at the hands of his wife, Orestes claims no glory for killing his mother. Likewise, he participates in no military expeditions to put him on par with his father.<sup>81</sup> Finally, the subtle implications of tyrannicide in its Athenian meaning in the *Choephoroi* are not marked in the *Eumenides* as a political accomplishment. Orestes thus comes off as decidedly unwarlike and unpolitical until the end of his life. Yet it is the reduction of Agamemnon's political potency in the afterlife that lets Orestes take up the position of Argive civic-military hero.

A ritually purified, forensically cleansed Orestes transitions the political focus of the trilogy from Agamemnon's epic glory to Athenian militarism. Orestes can only become a civic hero due to his acquittal in Athens and after multiple promises of help to the Athenians. His personal arc means that he owes favors to a foreign city, and his hero speech therefore diminishes Argos in favor of Athens. One might ask, would a powerful conqueror like Agamemnon allow such a subordination? Orestes' metamorphosis funnels into the trilogy's Athenocentric ending.

Heroization marks the final consummation of Orestes' prophecies, a theme associated with Orestes from his first arrival on stage. Yet there

<sup>81</sup> Peradotto (1969), 257–9, distinguishes between Agamemnon's emphasis on the glory that makes mortals jealous and Orestes' victory being "unenviable" (ἄζηλα, *Cho.* 1017).

is a break. Once Orestes becomes a hero, his acts and words are impossible to interpret psychologically. These types of analytical tools assume human paradigms, desires, and limits. As Orestes receives his own release and fulfillment, he leaves the stage. His departure marks the end of the individual, human portion of the trilogy, which then concerns itself with purely divine and political themes.

Following out the afterlife of characters in the *Oresteia* demonstrates that they may continue to be rewritten, even multiple times. Some, like Agamemnon and the war dead, are reconceptualized by the living, others, like Orestes and Clytemnestra (Chapter 6), speak for themselves. The poetic power of these afterlife transmutations warps the framework of human life and death, upends easy ethical ideas, reverses the themes displayed by characters while living, and radically alters the politics of the trilogy. In the case of Orestes' trial, justification of his acquittal through supernatural benefits to Athens draws attention to a double aspect of his heroization. On the one hand, it is grounded in Athenian desires for divinely supported, continual victory. On the other, it raises questions concerning that desire by linking it to inhuman acts, suspect reasoning, and the bellicose themes that had been deeply undercut earlier in the trilogy. The treatment of heroes is thus another crucial component of the *Oresteia*'s self-aware challenge to ethical norms and political desires, just at the moment it seems to embrace them.