

Athena as Founder and Statesman in the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus

John Alvis
University of Dallas

The Oresteia develops upon three levels: the theological, the political, and the ethical. The theological development moves from divisiveness among the gods to the consolidation of the rule of Zeus; the political development moves from Troy to Argos to Athens; and the ethical development moves from will without restraint, to will subject to responsibility, to self-rule fully responsible to religious, familial, and political obligations.

The agency driving this threefold development is human effort in partnership with divine purpose. The Athena of the third play provides the executive, personal agent who, in founding a polity, gives over divine to human providence. The great question provoked by the trilogy is the question of assigning ultimate causality, since from beginning to end throughout the course of the trilogy we view human, divine, and physical agents all contributing something to the momentum and direction of plot in the three plays. Then, within the realm of human agency, we observe human beings acting in four modes, i.e. as individual characters, as characters strongly marked by male or female predisposition, as members of families with a familial history, and as citizens participating in particular polities with their particular constitutions and having, as well, distinct histories.

To which of these agencies does Aeschylus seem to attribute the most decisive weight? To restate in philosophical terms, which of these intermingled agents emerges as the dominant efficient cause? Further, can we identify a final and a formal cause, a telos or purpose, and what of the formal means to achieving that purpose? My thesis: the efficient cause Aeschylus has conceived is human intelligence acting in the political mode, the final cause is the good life conceived as individual self-government, and the formal cause is the best political constitution combining legal and religious provisions



supervised and maintained by a deliberative assembly. Finally, the idea of tempering or the analogy of weaving affords the key to imagining this coordination of causes.

I propose to attempt an explanation of the foregoing synopsis by focusing upon the end of the trilogy examining the various actions of Athena in the final trial scene while from time to time reflecting back upon passages in the preceding action in *The Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and the earlier portions of *The Eumenides*.

I. Public Trial by Jury as Political Refounding

In her conduct of the proceedings with which *The Eumenides* concludes, we perceive Athena simultaneously presiding over a trial and a founding, adjudicating a particular contention over justice while exemplifying principles of justice, of statecraft, and of constitution making. To do so requires that she attend throughout to the three dimensions of justice as these come to be recognized by a philosophical tradition most explicitly set forth by Aristotle. Athena must attend to justice in its *retributive* form. The question before her court is what retribution for matricide should befall Orestes. In addressing this issue Athena must also manage an issue of *commutative* justice. Can there be discovered a punishment for the matricide that in some respect equates with the punishment the plaintiffs demand yet substitutes for the capital punishment a retribution more in keeping with extenuating circumstances as well as accomplishing some positive good?

These are considerations familiar in judicial litigation. Yet Athena also seeks equity in its third dimension, of *distributive* justice. Distributive justice pertains to allotting limited goods with respect to desert, goods identified with economic property, with honors, or with political offices. We see her intent upon exhibiting principles bearing upon distribution and actually inventing institutions—jury trial, as well as the Areopagus—to embody and secure the principles she has employed. We may even incline to say that Athena indicates more interest in the distributive than the retributive outcome, or to say that she uses the occasion for deciding retribution for the sake of the benefits she means to extend by her scheme of distribution, that is to say, by modeling a



new constitution for the city named for her, thereby securing justice not just for the occasion but in perpetuity. (572)

Both activities are novel in the context established by the preceding action of the trilogy. In this case the obvious is significant. Of the numerous conflicts between divinities, individual human beings, families, and cities not one has sought resolution in a trial at law. A legal contest requires a law subject to violation, a judge, and a proceeding by presentations of evidence and argumentation from both prosecution and defense. The first offense to which Aeschylus alludes—that of the first murderer Ixion—finds its issue in a summary judgment delivered by Zeus. But evidently this establishes no precedent for human beings in their dealings with crimes. Victims or the kinsmen of victims take retribution against the perpetrators of the crimes attributed to members of the family of Atreus. Atreus famously punishes Thyestes with the terrible banquet whereby the father is made to feed on the flesh of his sons. The surviving son assists Clytaemestra in the killing of Atreus' son Agamemnon. Agamemnon's son Orestes thereupon slays in private (i.e. within the royal *domus*) both Aegisthus and Clytaemestra.

Between cities retribution is exacted in the same manner, namely, summarily and by force exerted by the victim or his kinsman (by both victim and brother with Menelaus and Agamemnon destroying Troy for the crime committed by Paris and abetted by Priam and his family). Among the gods as well there seem to be no trials. We infer Zeus deals with crimes committed by divinities in the same manner he had dealt with the human criminal, Ixion. (441) Nor are there trials when the offense is charged to a city and the offended parties are divinities— Troy the case in point, and perhaps Argos if we are to understand that the victors have offended the gods in the course of sacking Troy.

Presumably, summary judgment by kings had also been the practice under Theseus and his successors in Athens. Since Athena mentions Theseus twice by name (402, 686) and records his battle with the Amazons in the second mention, Aeschylus adheres to the traditional accounts which credit Theseus with founding Athens by



assembling tribes under his kingship. We must then consider Athena presently to be engaged in a refounding. What has happened to Athenian kingship we are not told. It appears that something on the order of the polis is to replace a government that had not differed from the unlimited kingship of Troy and Argos. But if Aeschylus understands polis more in the sense of a constitutional government, then this second founding he may deem more decisive than Theseus's gathering of originally scattered tribes. It is more decisive in distinguishing this city from other sites of human habitation. For that we have Athena's express declaration when she says of the judicial body she establishes: "If... you righteously fear an august body like this, you will have a bulwark to keep your land and city safe such as no one in the world has." (700-702)

II. Jury Trial as Political Tempering

In any event, jury trials are consistent with the principle the classical polis serves in tempering the passions of the chief constituent elements of the urban population. The institution of public trials contributes to tempering the passions that drive private retribution for two reasons. First, deciding issues by trial entails elevating speech over inarticulate spasms of violence, and, second, action by trial introduces a wider perspective upon matters of contention. Not merely the loves and enmities within or between families, but the concerns of the city at large, enter into the decision. Even, as here, concerns extending to external relations with other nations may enter in.

By contrast, although the welfare of all inhabitants of Troy and Argos had been affected by deeds committed within ruling families, the people at large had no voice in addressing these deeds. In the first two plays of the trilogy we see cities subjected to catastrophe emanating from the ruling family. But since the inhabitants of Troy and Argos are subjects, not citizens, they can only witness and await an outcome determined by others who neither consult them nor act with a view to the public welfare. The chorus of elders of *The Agamemnon* doubt that the war to regain Helen has a benefit to the public at all proportionate to the losses in lives suffered by the public. At moments the elders are disposed to act against Aegisthus and Clytaemestra, but they



divide in their counsels because they cannot deliberate or take action through an institution designed for just such a purpose. Argos evidently has no public institutions that can oblige its royal family to consult those it governs. Agamemnon speaks of canvassing certain of the populace for information regarding the condition of his kingdom (*Ag.* 845-846), but his gesture does not proceed from a sense of constitutional obligation. Although in hesitating to tread on the costly fabrics Clytaemestra has spread before him he contrasts himself with a Priam he considers a barbarian despot, Agamemnon shows himself attentive to no more formal limits upon his unilateral authority than Priam had observed.

Consequently, in addition to introducing judicial arbitration, Athena's establishment of the Areopagus provides what has been lacking in the previously depicted regimes as well as what cities other than Athens continue to lack, a permanent institution to insure trials but also a permanent forum for public deliberation on all matters for which provision can be made by legislation. She conceives of this body of select elders as a sort of combination of Supreme Court and Senate, a guardian of the Athenian constitution, which she emphasizes by stating explicitly that it should sustain the old laws against innovations. Her imagery for this conservative function bears noting. "Do not," she warns, "mix the clear water with mud." (693) Not every mixing produces a tempering. A mixing that is a proper tempering combines opposites in such a way as to create a compound that adds strength to strength while diminishing the characteristic weaknesses of the constitutive elements.

It seems Aeschylus through his Athena has advised a further tempering that addresses the fundamental problem besetting Athens during Aeschylus's life, and the one most prominent in Aristotle's analysis of constitutional tensions a century and a half later, namely, the problem of apportioning power arising from the competing claims of democrats and oligarchs. Aeschylus's Athena, by instituting the Areopagus, delivers her city from subjugation to a ruling family and thereby elevates the public over the private. Nevertheless, she does not identify the public with the democratic, with the rule of the majority of freemen possessed of equal votes. She makes it clear that



membership in her favored institution must be selective. But on what principles selective? If we go by the only criterion Athena mentions when she chooses the eleven jurors who will share with her judgment upon Orestes's case, she says simply "men without fault" (475) and "the best from among my citizens." (487)

The division between the many and the few ordinarily gets expressed in the terms most visible to every eye: the many are the relatively poor, the few the relatively wealthy. Athena, however, in designating the "best" employs the alternative identification of the few, that which designates the aristocrats. She does not insist upon property qualifications as the oligarchs would, or upon equality as democratic partisans typically do. Moral and intellectual virtue without further prerequisites evidently suffice to qualify a citizen for membership in this select council. The implication may be that tempering the perennial opposition, pitting rich against poor, will either produce the best men as the only mediating element acceptable to both of the partisan interests, or will enable the better among the citizenry to side with one or the other party as justice may dictate. If this is a proper inference we can see that efficient and final cause of the best regime coalesce, that moral and intellectual virtue in those who make law and judge by law promotes in the citizenry such moral and intellectual strength as individual citizens are capable of attaining.

III. Athena as Personified Political Prudence

Besides these institutional provisions, Athena also says she intends her words and actions in presiding over the trial to illustrate justice in a complete form. Aeschylus thus puts the goddess on display as his chief exhibit of a mind at work in achieving a just resolution of contending interests. How does his Athena proceed? She proceeds first by an exhibition of self-control that distinguishes her from her fellow Olympian, Apollo. From Apollo's reaction to his first sight of the Erinyes at the outset of the play we appreciate the good effect of Athena's composure. Apollo had recoiled in disgust at first sight of the band of Furies, as had the priestess of his temple. Athena's spontaneous reaction on their first appearance would have been the same had she not immediately



checked her first aversion, (410-412) deciding on second thought to consider beyond appearances and greet them respectfully.

The Furies will complain several times of what appears to be inveterate disdain expressed toward them by the younger gods who, the Furies protest, accompany loathing of their ugliness with disregard, if not ignorance, of the benefit the Furies provide. These vestiges of the oldest strata of divinity claim they function as a sort of cosmic sanitary service exercising a distasteful but indispensable function in punishing human crimes against blood kin. Though they spare the Olympians from having to take on this task they are unappreciated, indeed reviled, as they just experienced when Apollo wanted to eject their band from his temple precincts. Athena's deference to them they receive as a novelty portending better prospects. They must regard Athena's welcome as something momentous because apparently upon no other grounds do they assent to her assuming jurisdiction over the matter of arbitrating their dispute with Apollo over Orestes's fate, this the second most astounding of their speeches.

Athena's discretion has made possible a revolution in the relations among gods and between gods and men. In the first place, divinities of both generations of gods—the ancient descendants of Night and the most recent Olympian generation—now become participants in a legal process to the outcome of which they submit themselves. Second, the more extraordinary of the revolutionary aspects, the divine litigants will in effect be subject to the judgment of human beings. That is the consequence of Athena's unnecessarily associating herself with this first human jury to judge a homicide.

We must add that her arrangement includes submitting herself to human judgment since (unless she counts on some unannounced management of the ballots) she cannot depend upon the tie vote that does eventuate. When one thinks through the implications one realizes Athena has contrived a reapportionment of power between men and gods in its magnitude of consequence comparable to that following upon the technological revolution Aeschylus ascribes to Prometheus's gift to mankind of Zeus's fire. Neither the Furies nor Apollo give their consent from motives of philanthropy.



Both parties think they serve their respective self-interest and are quite disposed to ensure the desired outcome by threats and bribes. Not until the conclusion of the trial, if even then, will they be aware of the consequences they will have assisted in producing by conferring their prior consent.

But such is the nature of statesmanship. The wise statesman makes use of partisan interests and partisan short-sightedness in order, by tempering partisan views, to arrive at non-partisan justice. Whether Athena herself works from partisan self-interest—she obviously benefits from Athenian alliance with Argos—depends upon how Aeschylus estimates Athenian contributions to mankind as distinct from her favor to Athens.

Here I must interrupt this account of Athena's statesmanship and founding in order to note a problem familiar to everyone who attempts to grasp how the Greek poets regard their portrayal of gods. The poets insist upon the personal character of the divinities they represent in speeches and deeds. These same poets insist equally upon the modalities embodied in the various divine persons they depict, their association, or indeed identification, with features of nature—earth, sky, sea—or of human nature, sexual desire, warfare, technology, prudence, music, and so forth. From our attempts to understand poetic theology problems arise for discerning just how to adjust instance by instance this bifocal presentation.

In the matter of the trial scene of *The Eumenides* one baulks at accepting as credible the idea of divine persons acquiescing to a proposal that human persons similarly situated would be likely to reject, or, having once unthinkingly accepted would be unlikely to honor once the consequences of assenting had become clear. Much easier to accept is a generalized proposition looking only to modalities: kinship bonds are strong, beneficial for the weak young and the weak old (the Furies' strong suit), yet they are beneficial only as part of a whole and thus subject to regulation with a view to the whole. Obligations incurred in contractual marriages are beneficial to man and ought to be respected, in some circumstances should be honored even at expense of obligations incident to kinship, Apollo's brief. But these more voluntarily assumed bonds also ought to give way to adjustment by reference to an entire field of obligations.



Perhaps the resolution to this problem consists in observing that the Aeschylean gods need not conform to probabilities attached to human persons because they are images of persons only in quite a restricted sense. Excepting Athena the Aeschylean gods are images of minds and wills so reduced in complexity that should we encounter human beings of such character we would consider them inhumanly simple, one-track consciousnesses, even specimens of what another era will term neurotics. An actual human being displays a variety of dispositions, affinities, projects, and obligations. You could say an individual human being resembles an arena in which various “gods” contend for a prize consisting in seizing that temporary priority of allegiance which from case to case, moment to moment, determines the human being to choice and action.

The gods are to be conceived as more monolithic. Nothing puts them at variance with themselves. Hence they behave in the manner of partisans who must be governed by intelligences that can recognize the partisan, the one-track-minded, as such. In Homer and Hesiod that co-ordinating intelligence is Zeus. The intelligence capable of such understanding of the partial by reference to the whole can experience dilemma. Among gods given stage presence, only Athena is shown to reflect upon the sort of dilemma that human beings experience all the time, and which previously in the trilogy *Agamemnon*, then Orestes experiences in the acute form we recognize as tragic. The chorus of *The Agamemnon* as well as the chorus of slave women in *The Libation Bearers* confront dilemma in a form distressing enough though not so acute as that of the King and his son, both divided as they are between obligations of blood and what they suppose to be political obligations.

Apart from Athena, we see the gods provoke dilemmas they do not themselves experience as such. Artemis cherishes the young and reacts to the rending of the pregnant hare signifying the destruction of Trojan children by becalming the fleet. But it is left to Agamemnon to agonize over the conflicting emotions occasioned by Artemis’ requiring Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his own young daughter if he would get his ships underway to exact retribution upon Troy. Artemis will not agonize over requiring



destruction of the young in her resentment of destruction of the young. Orestes must debate with himself over slaying one parent to avenge the other, but Apollo so depreciates the female “on principle” that he will not admit that claims of motherhood usually better grounded than in the case of Orestes’ mother should weigh upon deciding Orestes’ case. Then of course the Furies can boast, truthfully, of providing for family cohesion yet are unaware that by depreciating marriage unions, the Furies themselves would actually undermine the integrity of the family. Again like their opponent Apollo, on their own insufficient notion of “principle,” the Furies, if they prevail, will strike against the very institution that enables awareness of blood relation. Athena must perceive what they do not, that blood relations depend upon the political institution of wedlock between a man and woman of different blood.

To this point I have neglected to treat the particular issue that must be adjudicated in the trial: what to do with the confessed homicide, Orestes. That is because Aeschylus has so designed his trilogy that we can see the case does not allow of the sort of determination one expects in a proper trial. A proper trial would have to determine whether the killing was a justifiable homicide. This trial does not address the issue. It can’t address the issue because the necessary evidence is unavailable. There are no witnesses to the deed. Aeschylus’s audience has witnessed a deed that no participant in the trial except Orestes has observed. If Athena had observed the confrontation between matricide and mother she declines to make the fact known. If the prompt appearance of the Furies to Orestes upon his committing the deed implies their presence at the moment of Clytaemestra’s death, the Furies do not now perceive the importance of bringing forward the circumstances.

So, as members of an audience we find ourselves in the interesting position of knowing more than anyone on stage knows as well as of apprehending the pertinence of that knowledge. Itemizing what we know of the circumstances may lead us to conclude that a verdict in favor of Orestes is at best problematic. We know that Orestes slays his mother only after he has destroyed Aegisthus who commanded the palace guards. From the message delivered by a servant that informed her of the killing of



Aesgisthus, Clytaemestra had called for “an axe to kill a man” (889), the audience knows the mother means to kill her son. Yet Orestes does not hear that report, and Clytemaestra confronts her son alone, without the axe she had called for. In any event, Orestes had felt himself compelled to pause before striking and ask Pylades whether he should strike. (900-901) Need he kill his mother?

I am supposing that even knowing as much as we have been given of circumstance, we as audience do not know enough to judge. Aware of this persisting uncertainty we are disposed to accept Athena’s casting vote for acquittal and give Orestes the benefit of the doubt because Orestes has demonstrated a compunction superior to the narrow perspectives of both his opponents and his partisan Apollo, then attested compunction in a practical manner by undergoing numerous purification rituals. Just as important, or more so, Argos needs a ruler. In acquitting, Athena consults a more comprehensive distributive justice recognizing that uncertainty prevents a more exacting retributive settlement. But she also arranges thereby to demonstrate another benefit Athenians will enjoy from the institution of trials. At least within her city, future trials of crimes can have better prospects of determining circumstances pertinent to arriving at fair retributive judgments. Trials within the vicinage of the indicted will have the advantage of better discovery and information.

IV. Athena as Reconciler of Law and Piety, State and Family

To complete this examination of Athena’s statecraft, we can consider its second installment whereby she seeks to appease the Furies. As she had in the first installment Athena accompanies her ostensible effort to appease with a further project of constitution making. This time she directs her founding activity to concerns combining the political and the religious.

Once the acquitted Orestes departs in company with his advocate Apollo, the Furies vent their outrage and threaten reprisals. Notable in respect of their repeated threats is that they envision consequences for the most part “natural” to the course of human affairs, not sensational, as would certify divine agency. That is to say, the



reprisals would occur without any positive action on the part of these supernatural agents. The bad prospects the Furies foretell for Athens will follow as a matter of course from the bad precedent set by the acquittal. Partisan zeal for kinship pieties now gives way to partisan despair over the likelihood of preserving the kind of piety that favors the old. Parents can expect no reverence from their children. The children will abuse the weakened fathers and mothers to the general ruin of everyone.

Athena responds in such a way as to indicate that she neither expects the result the Furies anticipate nor intends to go beyond a certain point toward appeasement. She reminds them, or at any rate claims, that in having at her disposal the thunderbolts of Zeus she can suppress by force if need be. (826-82) Political life differs from such other modes of human interaction as commerce or friendship in that it necessarily acts by means of the sovereign's monopoly upon coercion. That reminder is salutary for citizens whether the Furies credit Athena's declaration or not.

On the other hand, Athena's persistence in seeking to pacify the Furies indicates she tempers reliance on force with an intent to placate founded on appreciation of the partial wisdom underlying the partisan exaggeration. She seems to credit the losers with an imperfect sense of moral probabilities she can adjust to more reasonable dimensions. Athena looks to a perennial necessity in order to make from her present act of diplomacy an enduring institution devised to accomplish an enduring alliance between the city and parents. The best constitution requires parental authority to accomplish what the laws cannot, chiefly to transmit to children who will become citizens the habituation in law-abidingness which the parents acquire by living under laws applicable directly only to adults.

Athena co-opts the Furies by giving them a cave and a cult. Their new habitation is well considered. Daughters of ancient Night, they like the dark. Pacified or not, they will retain their fearsomely uncouth appearance, so to assign them precincts underground will spare citizen sensibilities while keeping the Furies close enough to instill wholesome dread. Yet they will exert their influence from a distance sufficient to prevent gerontocracy. The older generations will receive due respect but not to the



extent Kronos thought he could assume when he devoured his offspring. The principle: children are to be reared with a view to their being citizens in the making, not with a view to their functioning as property at the disposal of parents.

As contrivance, the subterranean temple is clever enough, but it might prove inert without the cult Athena also takes care to establish. With Athena's introduction of a cult in reverence for the Furies, the trilogy moves from theology (study in the nature of the gods) to religion, (public observances in honor of gods). Religious practice promises, however, profoundly to affect Athenians' conception of their gods and even to effect changes in the conduct of gods toward human beings. Like Prometheus's innovations in sacrifices and like Athena's previous judicial and legislative provisions the cult will produce a revolution in divine-human relations. I suggest that a consideration of the features specified for the cult will support this contention.

This time although Athena repeats the courteous mode of address effective earlier, so intense is the Furies' outrage that they can only voice it in two identical strophes combining half articulate protests with spluttering noises. When at last they subside sufficiently to take note of what Athena has twice offered them they respond favorably, first, to its novelty. Belatedly the sisterhood realizes Athena has promised them a local and honorable habitation. And she has assured a publicly accessible place situated near the public site for Athena's own worship. The Furies realize one of the chief of the younger gods has finally appreciated their previously despised prerogatives. Their gratitude for this honor appears warm enough to cause them to overlook the consequence that being housed they are thereby confined.

In addition to enjoying the new deference accorded them by an Olympian, perhaps the Furies can afford to accept confinement because the cult ensures them of wider, more dependable, and more enduring honors to be had from the Athenian citizenry. Hitherto such honors as have come their way have had their source in individuals like Clytemaestra or Electra who for their momentary need dispense their sacrifices out of the relatively restricted means of households. The Furies can anticipate more ample and more punctual rites of deference. For the first time the sorority has



cause to perceive its self-interest is bound up with the safety and prosperity of a city.

Athena's appreciation of the benefits to be had from this new alliance presumably accounts for her extravagant expectations for Athens' future. She anticipates the Furies will not merely secure parental piety but will operate to inspire patriotism. She prays the sisters will act upon the citizenry to make them spirited, yet public-spirited, not clannish. Athena would have her citizens resemble game-cocks, reputedly so aggressive that the sons would fight sires. She wants her people not to fight their fathers, of course, but to direct that game-cock temper against the city's enemies. Athena wants a warlike people. She wants frequent wars and indicates no concern to restrict war to just defense. Yet she does not commission Athenians to assemble an empire. One can imagine that as she had shown herself aware of one stern fact of politics when she had earlier alluded to the city's resource of coercion she now recognizes another.

Whatever other provisions for citizen solidarity may assist, nothing so effectively consolidates citizens as their putting aside competition with one another to mount campaigns against a common enemy. Athena trusts she can make her revised cult serve this practical political purpose. Yet on the basis of their argument during the trial one had supposed the Furies were concerned exclusively with vengeance upon crimes against blood kin. Now, in other respects as well, the Furies appear to expand their field of operation. Once won over to Athena they begin to speak of their intent to contribute to the territory's agriculture, to good weather, to the fertility of Athenian wombs. (956-960) This seems to be too much of a good thing. Does Athena expect the Furies to alter, redirect, or somehow adapt to political needs their very modality? This after Aeschylus has accustomed us to think of a difference between human beings and gods as the inflexible adherence of the particular gods to their particular ordained spheres of action?

Consider the following solution. First, we are not to suppose the Furies now reveal an expanded range of modalities previously concealed. They do not suddenly disclose they have direct management of agricultural and human fertility. Rather we should understand their assurances of bounty as hyperbolically asserted predictions of the



effects of human effort once Athenians respond to Athena's new constitution of which the Furies are now a part. The new cult will engage the Furies in their old modality of fostering well-knit families through their ministry of fear. The benefits accrue in successful cultivation of the land and in procreating many children and raising them well. Athenians then make better use of whatever good weather befalls them and can better mitigate the losses inflicted by bad weather. Second, the Furies doubtlessly consider such benefits owed to themselves, whereas Aeschylus instructs us they follow from an intelligent statesmanship that makes use of the Furies and of the family affections with which the Furies are associated. Athena makes use in the sense of allying with the Furies while also subordinating and limiting their authority. That means she also subordinates and limits the authority of the family and the affections and disaffections the family generates. She means to mix family affections with civic attachments and thus temper and redirect the former for the sake of the latter.

If this is how we should understand what occurs in the second installment of Athena's constitution making, are we not led to the conclusion that what Athena has accomplished with respect to the Furies could be duplicated with respect to the entire panoply of divinities presented in the trilogy? From the outset the various gods and goddesses have been at odds among themselves whether in regard to oppositions connected with Troy or with respect to conflict in Argos, and in the trial at Athens. These oppositions pitting divinity against divinity mirror the oppositions between human beings. In every opposition we here observe there is something to be said for each of the contesting parties and something against each. That is because, whether they be human or divine, all the contestants act from a conception of justice but from a partial conception thereof, and the partiality of their conceptions owes in the human contestants to their very characters, while in the divinities to the very modalities which are the divine equivalents of characters.

A complete political constitution would incorporate a religion which looks to honoring the various gods in proportion to their place within the whole. This would accord with laws and constitutional provisions that aim to distribute honors to citizens



in proportion to *their* contribution to the well-being of the city. Zeus, never appearing though constantly mentioned, seems to stand for attainment of a justice not partial. But the Zeus of Aeschylus never deals directly with human beings. Zeus may be Aeschylus' conception of a standard of justice never attained, or it may be we are supposed to believe Athena's claim to act as her Father's plenary representative. The final words of *The Eumenides* do seem to endorse her claim since they declare that "Zeus and Moira are at last reconciled." *Moira* can be translated as "Fate" or "the Fates," a divinity also, like the Furies, the offspring of the Mother Night. But, alternatively, *Moira* can be translated as "Portion," as the word is employed when one means to indicate distributive justice, all receiving their proper portion or treated in proportion to their deserts.

V. Athena, Mistress of Political Weaving

I save for last what strikes me as the most extraordinary feature of Aeschylus' presentation of the Furies. The Furies urge upon the citizens of Athens the principle they state as a warning: "Refuse the life of anarchy; /refuse the life devoted/ to one master." (525-527) One hears their prescription with astonishment, not for what it says but because it is *they* who say it. Not for what it enjoins because soon thereafter Athena herself abjures her citizens with almost identical words: "No anarchy, no rule of a single master." (696) Indeed the prescription expresses succinctly all that Athena has done as judge and founding statesman. For that matter it expresses the perennially sound political sense one recognizes, for instance, in Madison's reduction of government to the twofold purpose of giving to government sufficient authority to protect the rights of citizens from one another while seeking to enable those who govern so to rule themselves such that they do not themselves violate those rights.

Yet for the Furies to command such wisdom must surprise us, and for two reasons. First, neither from what anyone previously in the trilogy has said nor from what the Furies say of themselves in this play would one suppose they concern themselves with politics. They have previously manifested themselves only as agents of retribution for crimes perpetrated against blood kindred, and, in reply to Orestes they say they had not



tormented Clytaemestra because the murderess had not been bound by blood to the husband she killed. (605) Does it suffice to say that Athena has induced the Furies to reconceive themselves simply as result of her arranging a change in setting and forum: they find themselves in a public place rather than in a house, and must address a forum composed of men not kinsmen?

Second, Athena has maintained throughout the trial scene and thereafter in her diplomatic effort to placate the Furies that she obeys Zeus in all she does. Yet there has been hitherto no indication that Zeus employs the Furies in executing his justice. From Hesiod's account in the *Theogony*, we would incline to think Zeus would not approve Athena's overture since Hesiod keeps strictly separate the line of gods descended from Earth and Sky from the line descended from Mother Night. Hesiod's Zeus makes two marriages from alliance with goddesses beyond his generation as well as sexual connections other than marriage. But his miscegenation never extends to Nyx or her progeny. In the *Eumenides* Apollo bespeaks the resolute antipathy we expect from Olympians and from Zeus.

If Aeschylus otherwise operates from the same assumption we must conclude he imagines Athena so far departs from it that, for the sake of the constitution she is fashioning, she will break ranks and perhaps break with her father. Perhaps she does so because she identifies the beautiful with the useful more than does Zeus who in his alliances with females requires beauty in its erotic aspect whereas virgin Athena, as she says, does not. (737) Or perhaps we are to infer that Athena would deny she departs from the precedent set by Zeus, that in fact she has merely extended the scope of Zeus's strategy of alliance and co-optation. To found Olympus Zeus had required no mingling with the aesthetically obnoxious branch of the gods. But human beings are in their corruptible natures closer to the children of night as well as more distant from Olympians subject to Zeus's management on Olympus exercised near at hand and without intermediaries. Thus Athena would act in accord with her father's example, only accommodating his art to the less receptive human material it must work upon.

The principle Zeus observes in Hesiod's account of his statesmanship is the



principle guiding Athena in her work upon Athens. It is the principle of weaving. In addition to her connections with prudence and intelligent conduct of war Athena is patroness of the craft which creates strength in fabric by crossing the strands of the warp with the strands of the woof. One application of this principle in the field of human management produces strong families from the intersection of the human male and human female in the political institution of marriage. Another application produces political economy by intersecting the many laboring citizens who are relatively poor with the relatively rich who provide material to be labored upon and tools with which to multiply the effect of labor.

Another application appears in dispersing the powers of government such that officers of the polis rule yet are also subject to rule, each having authority sufficient to defend his rights yet insufficient to encroach upon rights of others. Yet another application causes inhabitants of a polis to view themselves as members of families bound by blood, but also, simultaneously, as bound by the mutual interests of common citizenship and by laws applicable to all. And a final application introduces a civil religion in accord with which the several gods receive public worship on analogy with the dispensation of public honors to citizens. All gods are honored; no god is honored exclusively; a religion as cult is publicly observed and regulated if not indeed confined to obligatory and public observances.

That is to say, why not consider the cult designed for the Furies as a model for the city's practice of religion in every respect and with regard to all the gods? Prudent reverence, if not indeed religion reduced to prudent recognition of timeless necessities, is personified in images of personal gods.

With the aforementioned amendment introduced by Athena, the entire ensemble resembles Zeus's government of Olympus in its main outlines. The question arises whether such an arrangement supplants the gods altogether, though in the name of properly worshiping them. However that may be, there remains one signal difference between what Athena contrives and what Zeus has exemplified. Zeus's statesmanship extends universally whereas Athens must survive among contending regimes. Hence,



as earlier observed, Athena expects, indeed hopes for, frequent wars. What can be hoped for in the way of weaving diverse interests within a nation is much easier to say than achieve. But that aside, such a prospect seems fantastic even to hope for, once one looks beyond national boundaries. The best Athena can hope for is that wars, predictably frequent, whether wished for or not, may help Athenians patch the abrasions that must always prevent citizens from becoming friends in the fullest sense.

What is the significance of all of these observations and speculations? Suppose we try to imagine how Aristotle would view them. I think he would say something like the following: Aeschylus has portrayed a political development in which the uninhibited rule of the *pambasilea* gives way to rule of law. In consequence political power is rationalized and decentralized. Kings must share their authority with other institutions. Then religious observances supplant private dictates of kings and fathers alike as the chief means to formation of pious citizens. The aim of politics becomes the benefit of the governed, to be effected by securing not just the conditions of subsistence, national independence, and prosperity, but a fostering of the good life understood as individual self-government. It remains to be asked of Aeschylus as one asks with respect to Aristotle, whether a city so dedicated exists for the sake of proper worship of gods or whether it exists for proper cultivation of what Aristotle terms “that which is most divine in us.”

