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War and Nature in Classical Athens and Today: Demoting and Restoring the Underground Goddesses

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A gendered analysis of social and religious values in 5th century BCE illuminates the Athenian decline from democracy to bully empire, through pursuit of a faux virility. Using a feminist hermeneutics of suspicion, the study contrasts two playwrights bookending the empire: Aeschylus, who elevated the sky pantheon Olympians and demoted both actual Athenian women and the Furies—deities linked to maternal ties and nature, and Sophocles, who granted Oedipus, his maternal incest purified, an apotheosis in the Furies' grove. The latter work, presented at the Athenian tragic festival some 50 years after the first, advocated restoration of respect for female flesh and deity. This redemptive narrative placed the life of Athens—democracy and empire—in the wider context of Nature. Present-day parallels are drawn.

Keywords: *Erinyes, Furies, Eumenides, mythological defamation, feminist, archetype, Athens, Minoan, Eleusinian, Clymenestra, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Oedipus, masculine, gender, ecology*

Dedication

Much of this study was conceived during Spring of 2010, the time of the British Petroleum oil spill off the coast of Louisiana. The Furies are said in Hesiod's *Theogony* (ll 186-7) to be daughters of Gaia, and are often portrayed with the wings of birds. They bring on madness for oaths foresworn and the spilling of kin blood. As I watched with horror images from the spill, pouring through in the day and revisiting in my dreams, I knew it was time to offer this homage—to the Furies and to Gaia desecrated, in hopes of restoration. The

study concerns itself with two matricides, Orestes and Oedipus (the latter as the indirect cause of his mother's suicide). On a present-day collision course with nature, the people of the world risk our own kind of matricide. Let the Louisiana gull depicted here serve as the tutelary deity of this study, standing in metonymy for the pre-Olympian chthonic pantheon—the matristic network of the Furies, Gaia, Demeter, Persephone, and more—and for the living beings of the planet.



Figure 1. Laughing gull coated in heavy oil from BP spill, June 4, 2010, on East Grand Terre Island. (Wim McNamee/Getty Images News/Getty Images)

This study examines, from a gendered perspective, the history of the Golden Age of Athens, from the early middle to the closing of the 5th century BCE, from after the great Greek victory at Salamis over the Persians (472 BCE); through the solidification of the fledgling democracy of Athens; the rise and fall of its empire; and then the skitterish survival of the city-state after the Athenian defeat in the Peloponnesian War (404 BCE). A central focus is on the function and character of the goddesses known as the Furies, while reference is also included to the mother-daughter deities, Demeter and Persephone. Demeter regulated agricultural fertility on Earth or Gaia (Demeter's grandmother); her daughter, Persephone, reigned part-time in the netherworld; both goddesses, like the Furies, claimed pre-Olympian incarnations. In contrast with the Mt. Olympus, sky-congregating gods, imported by Indo-European invaders,¹ Demeter and Persephone, along with the Furies, extended back to an earlier pantheon of earth and chthonic (pronounced "kthonic") deities that preceded absorption into what became the pantheon of 5th century BCE classical Greece, ruled by a martial Zeus of the thunderbolt. Due to this lineage, the goddesses help illuminate the interplays and oppositions of war and nature in the Athenian Golden Age, throwing onto them a pre-patriarchal light.

There are ongoing controversies about the exact lineage of these goddesses; they stretch back indubitably to the Bronze Age or 13th century BCE, and this study will suggest that they have roots in the Minoan Crete of approximately 15th century BCE. It will analyze the goddesses, however, more locally as they are depicted within two sets of 5th century BCE tragedies. One set, *The Oresteia*, a trilogy by Aeschylus, captured first prize at the sacred Dionysiac tragic festival in 458 BCE; the second set, known as *The Theban Plays*, was a trilogy by Sophocles dealing in large part with the story of Oedipus. This latter was written over the decades stretching from the 440s BCE to the time when the empire saw its destruction in 404 BCE. The last of the Theban plays was not produced until after the death of its playwright, then 90 years of age. By then, Sophocles had witnessed the rise and fall of his beloved Athens, and the proud imperial navy had been stripped down to two ships by the Spartan victors. Thus *The Oresteia* trilogy and *The Theban Plays* bookend the Golden Age.

The key works for examining the goddesses in question are Aeschylus' last play of his trilogy, *The Eumenides*, and Sophocles' last play, *Oedipus at Colonus*—

although summaries of all plays in the trilogies will be provided as context. In *The Eumenides*, Aeschylus chose to depict the underworld goddesses, the Furies, as preternaturally ugly. In the *Colonus*, by contrast, these same goddesses manifested as an uncannily beautiful grove, one linking the weathered Oedipus not just to his own magical apotheosis but also to these goddesses and their earth-based network. As with Aeschylus, Sophocles lived within a primarily patriarchal religious and social tradition; why then did he heal his Oedipus through reconciliation with feminine and natural presence? This study proposes that his long overview of the rise and fall of the Athenian empire afforded him an augmented wisdom about the need to rebalance gender relations—through restoring the status of females both in the flesh and in presiding deities.

It is fruitful to examine the dynamic between social and religious structures of 5th century BCE Athens, rather than either the sociohistory or the religion alone. A gendered sociopolitical life interacted, *in a reciprocal dynamic*, with religious beliefs and practices. Gender roles in pantheon and society are neither due strictly to pantheon's influence on society—as in Daly's famous saying: If God is king in heaven, then man is king in the home—nor to the projection of social morés onto the Greek pantheon (Harrison, 1903/2010).

The meeting point between the society and the religion is to be found in the gendered attitudes and values of Athenian males—as these had bearing on both actual women and feminine deities. The work of the two repeatedly prize-winning playwrights must have aligned with that of the mostly male audiences at the Dionysiac tragic festivals; in return, the plays, as a crucial public media event, did more than reflect citizen views, they *shaped* them (cf. Plato's assertions in *The Republic*, c. 380 BCE, 410c-412b, 595a-621d). While this reading requires inferences and assumptions, these opinions are informed by laws, historical accounts, popular religious and civic myths, and the testimonies of archeological remains that led up to and paralleled those times (cited along the way). How did the values and attitudes show themselves in history? How did they evolve? What effect did they have on the fate of the bold new Athenian city-state, cradle of democracy, and on the maritime empire which grew from it? How did the attitudes supply a context or even a dynamus for citizen behavior as Athens fell and in its subsequent moment of choice as to whether and how to survive the decimation of empire?

Furthermore, there are likely parallels between the Golden Age and our Western contemporary times. David Grene suggested, although along different lines from my own, “that our affinity with the political life of fifth-century Athens is ... striking” (1950, p. vi). I will extend the parallel he draws into the 21st century.

Remarks on Methodology:

Mythological Defamation

Produces an Athenian Charter Myth

Before entering more fully into the content of the trilogies, it is imperative to introduce as context the dynamic of mythological defamation, the means

by which Aeschylus promoted the thunderbolt god, Zeus, and downgraded the Furies in his *Eumenides*. He accomplished this defamation through a reframing of divinity, thereby crafting a charter myth that blessed Athens’ newly-flourishing democracy. The Furies, seemingly placated, are forced into accepting a name-change—the title of Eumenides,² or Kindly Ones. It would *seem* that these older goddesses had been properly re-fashioned at the hands of the newcomer Olympian deities, made gentler, re-named accordingly. Yet this camouflaged a subversion. For two and a half millennia this story of a proper defeat and makeover

Literary Events	Dates	Historical Context
<p>Aeschylus in <i>The Oresteia</i>, Sophocles in <i>The Theban Trilogy</i>, draw on established myths and pantheon figures, vary them</p>	<p>Written in 5th century BCE</p>	<p>Myths refer to heroic figures (Orestes, Oedipus) in Founding Times culture, 13th century BCE: Bronze Age</p> <p>During 6th-5th century BCE: Golden Age</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • democracy solidifies • Athenian empire rises and falls • late 5th sees emergence and re-emergence of Mystery cults—Demeter, Persephone, Dionysus: counters secular/rational developments
<p>Homer in <i>Iliad</i> and <i>Odyssey</i>, Hesiod in <i>Theogony</i>, coalesce myths and pantheon, projecting back to 13th century BCE heroic figures of the Bronze Age and, in Hesiod, to Earth as creatrix</p>	<p>Written in 8th century BCE</p>	<p>Myths and pantheons have sources in pre-Bronze-Age and evolve through 5th century BCE Golden Age. May be traced through layers and eras:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matrifocal religion—Vestiges from 15th century BCE Minoan Crete and earlier, goddesses with a chthonic emphasis, earth and underground; Hesiod later absorbs them into his pantheon tales, acknowledging they created the world • Patrifocal religion—13th century BCE onward, Minoan/Mycenaean syncretic religion forged by Indo-European invaders; invaders absorb Minoan goddesses, and other deities from East, to enhance the sky-congregating Olympian pantheon they bring with them into Greece; Olympians divide up the world they conquered, but do not create it • Patrifocal religion extends into 5th century BCE and beyond—Indo-European pantheon of Olympians, with contributions from Doric invaders (the latter disputed), jells further during Homer’s 8th century BCE and carries over into Golden Age writings of Aeschylus, Sophocles

Table 1. Chart of literary events with historical contexts, spanning Bronze Age through Golden Age

of the goddesses was largely accepted at face value. Not until the late 20th century did such views come to be questioned, often by the feminist classicists, both female and male, or their sympathizers (Komar, 2002; Powers, 2000; Zeitlin, 1978; Campbell, 1991). Rather than being inducted into a superior identity within a superior socio-religious arrangement, the Furies were demoted—a demotion that functioned to the detriment of what became an increasingly belligerent society, cut off from roots in nature and bloodline provided by feminine deity.

There are three Ds that evoke the dynamics of demotion: mythological *defamation*, the *demonization* that helped to perpetrate it, and the historical *distortion* that ensued. Obviously Aeschylus in *The Eumenides* was not creating single-handedly the demotion of the chthonic goddesses at the hands of Olympians. He pretended only to be documenting how such things occurred 800 years before his own contemporary moment (Table 1 clarifies the chronologies). One might picture Charlton Heston enacting the Moses tales from the Bible, advocating American values with a seemingly ancient and sacred underpinning. The changes in values had of course been evolving for millenia before Hollywood seized on the story. Likewise with Aeschylus: What he pretended to transmit was a re-framing driven by agenda.

Aeschylus was amplifying the effect of demoting influences by constructing *The Oresteia* as a propaganda piece for the increasing masculinization of the Greek pantheon; the masculinized religion he presented would do valiant service as a civic religion, peculiarly fashioned to the (imagined) best purposes of the newly ascending democratic city-state. This theatrical trilogy came to function as what Lillian Doherty (2001) has called a “charter myth” (p. 100)—blessing a given arrangement through narrating its hallowed founding events. As David Grene has said (L. Doherty, personal communication, December 19, 2011): Watching *The Oresteia* would be like witnessing what began in the Garden of Eden and ended with the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Aeschylus’ trilogy is thus typical of a charter myth—one which in this case made a defaming portrait of feminine deity its stepping stone.

Countering the Three Ds:

A Feminist Hermeneutics of Suspicion

In using the acronym of three Ds to represent the dynamics of defamation, I extend the work of Joseph Campbell (1991) and Meredith Powers

(2000). Campbell’s reputation fares better among transpersonalists than among classicists, due to the occasional lapse in detailed accuracy, unsurprising from such a far-ranging generalist; his methodology, however, contributes well in this instance. My own study, in the spirit of a feminist *hermeneutics of suspicion* (Gross, 1993), attempts to reverse the historical distortions by undoing the inevitable whitewashings perpetrated by a dominant population, those that give history as a tale told by the victors. Feminists aim to discover “an accurate and usable past” (p. 30), one which undoes androcentric bias. Feminist scholarship is often for women and about women, but based on a social vision of bringing women into full respect for the purpose of accomplishing the same for all beings.

De-coding Defamation:

Understanding Myth as Cluster

The originating myths from which the relevant Greek tragedies were constructed are not uniform narratives. These source myths are instead clusters of variants (Harrison [1903/2010] drawing on Durkheim); the tragedian then selects from the myth-cluster a variant that serves his or her aims, and sometimes even innovates to this end. Especially in *The Oresteia*, both the selections and innovations helped shape a city-state religion—to serve as prop and propaganda for a new civic ideology.

Aeschylus contributed to the coalescence of a religious myth that affirmed new and recent institutions in the Athenian *polis*, or city-state, institutions that expanded the evolution into a male democracy while contracting the status and rights of women. Solon’s sumptuary laws initiated the confinement of women socially and politically in the early 6th century BCE; the Ephialtic reforms of 562 BCE, four years before the production of *The Oresteia*, marked a step forward for the demos men in their challenge to aristocratic clans but, again, no advancement for women. The Athenian polis, emerging triumphant from a war with the Persians, David to Goliath, was evolving its self-affirmations: We won because we are the freedom-lovers and they, those Persians, the tyrant-ridden barbarians. From Zeitlin (1978) identified additional binary oppositions in *The Oresteia*: We Athenians are not just *Greek vs. barbarian* but also *light vs. dark, new vs. old, orderly vs. chaotic, reasonable vs. unreasonable, male vs. female*. In short, the gods are on our side for all these reasons, and not just any gods either, but the shiny new patrifocal ones.

Campbell (1991), to illustrate mythological defamation, discussed the Mesopotamian myth in which Tiamat, primordial ocean goddess, decorates the chest of her first-born, who is, in the usual early configuration, her son/consort, preparing him to war against challengers to her hegemony:

The reader will have recognized here the pattern of the Greek war of the Titans³ and gods, the darker brood of the all-mother, produced of her own female power, and the brighter, fairer, secondary sons, produced from her submission to fecundation by the male. It is an effect of the conquest of a local matriarchal order by invading patriarchal nomads, and their reshaping of the local lore of the productive earth to their own ends. It is an example, also, of the employment of a priestly device of mythological defamation, which has been in constant use (chiefly, but not solely, by Western theologians) ever since. It consists simply in terming the gods of other people demons, enlarging one's own counterparts to hegemony over the universe, and then inventing all sorts of both great and little secondary myths to illustrate, on the one hand, the impotence and malice of the demons and, on the other, the majesty and righteousness of the great god or gods. It is used in the present case to validate in mythological terms not only a new social order but also a new psychology. (pp. 79-80)

This late work of Campbell portrayed a sociocultural context that evolved in contrast with what might otherwise be misperceived as universal truth on the part of a religiously believing population. Campbell suggested, by contrast, a context and portrayal that morphs the archetypes, instead of keeping them static and universal. He also discerned the political purposes to which a patrifocal culture supplanting a matrifocal one would put its own new narratives.

Further Socioculture Setting:

The Gender War in Athens as Pivotal

Frederick Adam Wright (1923) opened his book *Feminism in Greek Literature from Homer to Aristotle* with the following remark: "The Greek world perished from one main cause, a low ideal of womanhood and a degradation of women which found expression both in literature and in social life" (p. 11). Known through textbooks as the cradle of democracy, this city-state evolved, or rather devolved, into a society in ruthless pursuit of empire. In short, one might say that the Athenians developed a

The Furies Demoted and Restored

masculinity insufficiently tempered by women's wisdom, a *hypermasculinity*.

In the light of the historical analysis by Thucydides (411 BCE/1951), who was equipped with not only the military expertise of a general and the vantage point of a contemporary witness, but also, one may assume, a knowledge of at least some tragedies at Athenian festivals, Athens lost the Peloponnesian War due to its having grown in *hubris*. The word, often translated to mean an insolence or blinding pride, was punishable by law and was understood by some to characterize tragic heroes.⁴ Thucydides treated *hubris* as an overreaching while acting upon a longing for what one does not have [3.39.4, 5]; this may be matched with his later description of values in Corcyra [3.82-3.83]). Such fatal overreaching manifested in the Sicilian Expedition in 415 BCE, which contributed greatly to the empire's downfall. This was reckless risk-taking, against the advice of Pericles before he died, undertaken more for the short-term repair of the bruised Athenian ego than for long-term prospects of lucre. Furthermore, the mistake was foreseeable; Athenian values had been careening downhill⁵ (cf. Thucydides, 411 BCE/1951, Melian dialogue [5.17]; Corcyra analogous to Athens [3.82-3.83]).

The Oresteia:

The Olympians vs. the Chthonic Goddesses

What follows are brief plot summaries of the three plays in *The Oresteia*, with commentary both in the process and the wake of the summaries. The accounts are cast in present tense, for the sake of vividness.

The Agamemnon

Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, have ruled a stable Argos for more than a decade; nevertheless, the chorus of old male clansmen, left behind by the Trojan War, resent "the man-minded" woman (Aeschylus, 458 BCE/1903, l. 11).⁶ Clytemnestra plans to avenge herself against Agamemnon, upon his return, for his having sacrificed their virgin daughter, Iphigenia, to put wind in the sails of the Greek expedition. Her paramour carries his own grudge; he is the surviving son of the man to whom Agamemnon's father fed the flesh of his own children. In return, the paramour's horrified father pronounced a curse, bringing the gods into play. Here are themes of war versus nature—Agamemnon the hero, returning from his Trojan expedition, vs. the bloodline offenses that eventually enlist the Furies to execute kin justice.

There are complexities regarding Clytemnestra's motives: jealousy as Agamemnon brings home a war booty mistress; lust for her own paramour, and so on. Which motives are uppermost? Aeschylus has underplayed a motive that affords her the greater dignity, her intent to avenge her daughter's sacrifice. Nevertheless, she holds the stage as the most charismatic and complex character in the drama. She and Aegisthus kill Agamemnon, with the Queen taking the lead; she assures Aegisthus that they will rule and thrive.

The Libation Bearers

Electra, Clytemnestra's daughter, discovers that her exiled brother, Orestes, has returned in secret; they can now avenge the murder of their father. Most of the play occurs at Agamemnon's grave. The chorus of female slaves help the children gain resolve through drumming up with characteristic mourning, uncanny in its ululations, the angry ghost of the unavenged father (Holst-Warhaft, 1995). To say *characteristic* is to highlight that this resembled the way much mourning was handled in the purported era of *The Oresteia*, through the hiring of professional women (for which the slaves stand in), women trained to lament with vehemence. This custom served in addition as part of the old justice system, the one for which the Furies were a cornerstone; the angry ghost once roused was the initiator of retributive actions, including the Furies' maddening pursuit of a kin murderer. In the trilogy, there will soon be the depiction of a transition in the justice system—addressing purgation from pollution and the redressing of blood-debt; that is to say, *The Eumenides* will institute new deities and sociopolitical institutions, due to Olympian reframing, for presiding over purgation and justice. Clearly, however, in this second play of the trilogy, the old system prevails. Orestes manages, in the wake of the ghost rousing, to kill both Aegisthus and his own mother. But the end of the play sees him—having satisfied and held at bay the father's Furies—unable to reclaim the throne, beset instead by the *mother's* Furies, who attack his sanity.

The Eumenides

The third play, *The Eumenides*, focuses directly on these underworld goddesses, still known, when the play begins, as the Erinyes, the furious ones.⁷ As mentioned before, it tells the story of their forced conversion into subordinate and tamer powers, the Eumenides or Kindly Ones, under the new Olympian patriarchs. The play opens at the Delphic oracle, with the priestess soon

entering the inner sanctum and then recoiling in horror from what she has seen, crawling out. She stammers:

A dreadful troop of women. / No, I won't say they were women, but Gorgons. / No, not that, either; their shapes did not seem to be / like Gorgons' shapes.... These I saw now / were wingless, black and utterly repulsive. / They snored, the smell of their breaths was not to be borne, / and from their eyes there trickled a loathsome gum. (Aeschylus, 458 BCE/1989, ll. 47-55; Greek ll. 47-54)

Aeschylus has conjured the Furies—indefinite in number though tradition would later curtail them to three—as a stunning and memorable theatrical premise; he even himself invented their horrific masks (Verrall, 1908). Snakes for hair completed the picture, which Orestes had perceived as they pursued him, at the close of *The Libation Bearers*. Aeschylus, I contend, was here stacking the cards against the old female gods and, by implication, the theacentric goddess network, including Earth, Demeter, Persephone, and all those, above and below earth, interconnected with the Furies. (I will eventually argue the relevance of the network.)

After the scene at the Delphic Oracle, Orestes, with the Furies in pursuit, arrives to stand trial at Athens, even though, as he argues, he murdered his mother in obedience to Apollo. His motives, in truth, had been multiple, as were Clytemnestra's; he aimed not just to obey Apollo and take vengeance but also to claim a patrimony. He and the goddesses are to undergo an adjudication over which Athena—portrayed as an Olympian (cf. note 1)—will preside. The Furies seem to give consent rather than collide with the new set of gods, holding back on what is usually their immediate and implacable retribution for kin murder, *whatever* the motives or circumstances.

Athena will submit the issue to a jury, her novel invention for city-state life, but will make up the rules as she goes along; she warns that a tie means she casts the deciding vote. The jury, naturally, ties. She votes to pronounce Orestes free and clear,⁸ due to extenuating circumstances; but due, most of all, to what is newly declared in the course of the trial, the preeminence of the male over the female, even in bloodline matters.⁹

In response to his vindication, the Furies threaten to blight the Athenian earth and wombs, as is within their power and purview. Athena musters all her persuasive charm, in a ritual back-and-forth with them,

to reassure that they are not being insulted; they really and truly have received recognition—after all, the vote was tied, and they shall, any minute, find themselves well recognized and recompensed if only they relent. She will grant them a localized shrine by the Areopagus, the now newly founded law court for homicides, with an underground portion, as would please them; she will grant them ultimate authority as guardians of the oaths taken in the court, of the oaths taken in marriage as well, and of womb and land fertility. In fact they will soon be seated in some metaphorical sense right next to the ascendant Olympian Zeus, glorying in their power, for they will preside over Fate (all the gods, even Zeus, shrink from overriding Fate; cf. the Homeric epics). They will enjoy this new description of themselves: “They bring to perfection for all to see / what they have provided; / for some, occasions for song; / for others, a life rich in tears.” (2010, ll. 952-954; Greek ll. 954-955). They need only relent.

They only *seem* to assent without coercion, perhaps, because of the quantity of argument, as if they were already transported from the 13th century BCE heroic setting of this drama into the world of 5th century BCE Athenian law court and assembly debate (Ober & Strauss 1990, p. 238). The play ends with their shedding old black garments for new red ones and accompanying an honorific procession, mostly female, out through the theater audience toward their new sanctuary. To convert to their new status they need only leave to languish the ghost of Clytemnestra, who had appeared to them at the Delphi sanctum, spurring them on as proper avengers of matricide. Her matricide—its importance, its cry of blood for blood—is now consigned to pre-patriarchal history, for the patriarchy has eclipsed her mother-right.

Olympic vs. Chthonic:

Shiny and Civilized Over Dark and Irrational?

Aeschylus made choices—because, as explained earlier, there was not just one myth to dramatize but a cluster of variants, from which he selected and upon which he even innovated (e.g., creating the horrific masks, also portraying them as wingless [cf. Jane Harrison’s assertions, *Prolegomena*, 1921/1962, pp. 221-232] that this too-human form made them all the more contemptible). *The Eumenides* seemed to tell the tale of the triumph of the new young Apollonian and sunlit Olympians, advocates of reason, over the old haggish underworld goddesses. The Olympians promised to bring with them a new system of purification (Greene,

1989), a new subtler set of legal considerations as to guilt and innocence, one that would acknowledge, quite rationally after all, extenuating circumstances.

Example of a Variant Construction: The Furies

Just as Aeschylus had chosen from variant descriptions of Clytemnestra—Homer’s, for instance, gave her a role as accessory rather than prime mover in the killing of Agamemnon, and afforded her stature by way of her landed background—so Aeschylus made choices as he characterized the Furies. To demonize is to exercise a certain creativity. The Furies need not have been cast as first and foremost *promoters* of vendetta. They might instead have been viewed as circuit-stoppers (Visser, 1980). In *actual* practice, a family could, by making suit to them at their shrine, lay the responsibility for retribution at their door; the family could thereby abstain from perpetuating a tragic intra-familial feud, like the one portrayed, for instance, in *The Oresteia*.

Also, were the Furies properly presented as embedded in their matrifocal network, rather than isolated as if they were a sheer monstrosity, they would disprove Apollo’s portrait of them as pariahs (cf. his attack: “To such a flock as you, no god feels kindly” [1989, complete version, l. 196; Greek, l. 197]). Implied throughout *The Oresteia* is the battle between the new he-gods and the old she-gods. The Furies, in the history and myth implied but mostly suppressed by the trilogy, are networked in the old pantheon with the well-loved Demeter, who tracks back to her grandmother and their mother, the oldest goddess, Gaia or Earth; the underworld extension of the network would include the maid as well as the mother, Kore / Persephone, daughter of Demeter, and include netherworld spirits such as the various *keres* (ghosts of the dead, with their roots likewise back in Minoan religion), whom Harrison (1903/2010) viewed as transmuted and expanding into the Furies. The Erinyes or Furies sometimes had reciprocal resonance with Demeter, in, for example, the worship of Demeter Erinys of Megara, so characterized because of her fury in the wake of Poseidon’s having raped her while she desperately sought out her abducted daughter. Demeter is also called Demeter Chthonia. The old chthonic goddesses, in short, embedded Athenians in an earthly and netherworld existence—and much of that existence had roots to be found in the culture of Minoan Crete (cf. note 17). Such figures as Earth (Gaia, Ge) and her granddaughter Demeter were, in the first instance, the very ground itself, giving birth to Titans,

or were otherwise conflated with what found root in the ground, given that Demeter presided over agriculture; such figures as Demeter's daughter Persephone, the Furies, and the Fates, lived part- or full-time below.

The Olympian gods, those sky invaders, most likely arrived in the train of invaders-in-the-flesh, pastoral warriors from the North and Northeast, the Indo-Europeans. Their gods never pretended to have created existence as Earth had created it. They were instead invading hunter-warrior gods, who divided up the spoils (Burkert, 1991). Zeus took heaven for himself, distributing the waters to one brother, Poseidon, and the underworld to the other brother, Hades. The gods raped and plundered in the spirit of the human crew who carried them into the conquered territories; some critics would interpret their celebrated rapes as metaphors for conquering and absorbing goddesses, one after the other, sometimes by offering a pretense of marriage, sometimes not; frequently propagating by the indigenous goddesses to enhance the new pantheon (Campbell, 1991; Spretnak, 1992).

In their old incarnations within the chthonic network, the Furies had already possessed the powers Athena pretends to award them in *The Eumenides*. She catalogues consolations should they

yield to the shift in status. But they, like Earth and Demeter, had already been accustomed to affecting the fertility of womb and land. If, for instance, unredressed kin blood polluted the earth, sterility in the land and womb would in fact result; so too would plague. One sees such consequences in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*: unredressed patricide issues in plague. There is a sleight-of-hand, then, in the seeming generosity of Athena,



Figure 2. Greek Wine Bowl: Orestes pursued by the Furies. Circa 340-330 BCE. Retrieved from Southern Italian Greek colony. Orestes, with Fury above him, addressed by Athena. Apollo turns to a Fury wielding a snake, Clytemnestra, above left. (©Trustees of the British Museum)

who awards to the Furies those powers of preventing or fostering fertility that they already possessed. There is mythological defamation as well in denying them both

their place in the theocentric network and their own power to offer sanctuary (Visser, 1980); in *The Oresteia* only Apollo or Athena, in their sunlit generosity, offer the sanctuary that the Furies grant when Sophocles has later restored them to dignity. The sanctuary they come to offer Sophocles' Oedipus was one they could also offer in the historical religion (Visser, 1980).

As to their sheer primitive ugliness, this too is a choice Aeschylus made. Pindar preceded him in this, but Aeschylus might have relied instead on a very different version bequeathed by his predecessor Heracleitus. Heracleitus portrayed the Furies as august enforcers of justice who exercised their power throughout what one might call his natural philosophy universe. The Furies are that force which keeps each aspect of the universe in its proper path, confines it to its proper function. Said Heracleitus: "If the sun were to stray from its course, the Furies would put it right" (B94).

In some sense, then, Aeschylus was innovating, not just by creating horrific masks for the Furies but by associating the goddesses with the monster crew—Gorgons and Harpies and so forth. After his horrific portrayal, vase painters nonetheless chose to portray them as lithe and beautiful young women with wings on their shoulders or on their hunting boots—aiding in their swift pursuits—sometimes with snakes for hair but not necessarily repulsive ones. Goddesses were often accompanied by snakes, especially in the old networks; this was the case even in the immigrating healing cult—to which Sophocles attached himself—which had Asklepius as a healing (male) deity. The Asklepian cult had a live tutelary snake which Sophocles was said to have hosted during a transition period, while the shrine was being moved to Athens. In the 2nd century CE, Pausanias (c. 143-177 CE/2001), touring Greece, remarked: He saw the Furies' statue with snakes for hair, but the latter were not a perturbing sight (1.28.6). In the 4th century BCE, a ceramicist portrayed Orestes, with Apollo and Athena flanking him, and Furies both above and to the side of Apollo; there is no hint of the ugliness suggested by Aeschylus (Fig. 2).

How rational is rational? There are at least three arguments used by Athena and Apollo to beat down their chthonic opponents. One is slyly ensconced in Athena's more civilized blandishments and has been missed by too many critics: Athena lets the goddesses know that she herself is the only deity to have inherited the thunderbolt of Zeus her father (Aeschylus, 458

BCE/1989, ll. 827-829, complete version; Greek, ll. 826-828). All the appearances of rational persuasion pale beside this veiled but decisive threat against them.

Beyond this, having set up a juried court, Athena makes the rule that if the jury ties, she breaks the tie. They do and she does. She explains her tie-breaking vote in favor of Orestes as follows: I was born from Zeus' forehead and have no mother; except for marrying one, I'm all for the male. Therefore it matters less that Orestes killed his mother than that he was taking vengeance on his father's behalf. I will vote for the male because that is what I do.¹⁰

Apollo drives the nail home. He says: Furthermore, the mother only nurses the seed; the real parent of the child is the father alone. This purports to be a presentation of the latest scientific certainties. It establishes that the mother has no rights because the child is not hers. In addition, he rebuts the Furies' argument that their job is to redress the violation of blood bond, not marital bond. He pronounces that there must be a primacy of the woman's bond to her husband, the marital bond, over her bond to the children (Aeschylus, 458 BCE/1989, ll. 657-671; Greek ll. 667-666).

The legal arguments are on the whole taking place in abstraction: One might as well ask why Clytemnestra should feel bound to Agamemnon, a man assigned to her and not of her choosing, a man who, as myth had it (though not one selected for *The Oresteia*), had killed both her first husband and infant before claiming her in marriage. Agamemnon is a husband who sacrificed their virgin daughter, then went off to war for 10 years at a time and returned with his war booty concubine in tow. If one were to wonder what would attach her to such a man more than to her child, one might end up simply baffled—unless one posited, as Freud (1924) did with a scientific poker-face, that woman's basic nature is masochistic.

Apollo's assertions ignore the fact that a woman risks her life to give birth. Adding salt to the wound, he maintains that the child's obligation, first and foremost and without hesitation, should be to the father. Apollo's foundational argument for this is that the womb is no generator, but a mere nursery; he purveys this notion as if it were the latest incontrovertible scientific discovery. In fact this argument, and its counter-arguments, were a living controversy of the times, with different philosophical and medical writers chiming in for or against the mother's role in reproduction; at the heart

of this controversy was the issue of whether Athenian women should have full citizenship (Wiles, 2002). Instead, Athenian women would continue to watch as each new layer of men, from aristocrats to oligarchs to common men, received voting rights, but neither full citizenship nor voting rights came to women. The intensified foreign exchanges that accompany war, as demonstrated in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, would make accessible the knowledge that women in most Greek city-states other than Athens (and the rest of Ionia) enjoyed greater rights. By contrast, the one-third of the population who were male Athenian citizens rested their great freedom on the backs of the one-third who were women and one-third who were slaves and metics. The women's increasing frustration with exclusion, with the men's misogyny and with their sheer incompetence in governing as they brought on increasing ruin through war, would eventually surface in Aristophanes' three plays, *Lysistrata*, *Thesmophoriazousae* (Women at the Festival), and *Ecclesiazusae* (Women at the Assembly); similarly, it appears in the last Greek tragic play that survives from that time, Euripides' *Bacchae*. This finds resonance with what Sophocles had to say in his *Oedipus at Colonus*, at about the same time as *The Bacchae*—50 years after Aeschylus helped celebrate and shape the newly triumphant city-state.

The Sophoclean view on gender differed significantly. It not only rehabilitated and even foregrounded feminine deity—in the personae of the Furies and the Eleusinian earth deities of Demeter and Persephone—but also rehabilitated figures like the daughters of Oedipus, who brought their wisdom, courage, and support to the aged Oedipus, receiving praise from the same father who excoriated their brothers. One daughter, Antigone, had even earned, in an earlier Sophoclean play by the same name, her own place in heroic history.

Returning to *The Eumenides*, Apollo's crowning argument is this: Athena stands before the jury as child of no mother, sprung from her father's head—therefore mothers are superfluous. This is reasoning by way of fairy tale. No reader revisiting such arguments can honor the pretense that they usher in a bold new age of rationality.

There is, however, one new thought-provoking argument by Athena: The justice system should retain the Furies, in however subordinate a manner, because fear is a necessary cornerstone to civic life; otherwise citizens run amuck. In this way the Furies remain both

in fiction and in fact guardians of Areopagus oaths taken to abstain from perjury.

A new era of judicial rationality. Here, by the way, is a real-life note on the leap of progress implied by the founding of the court: Recent archeology has turned up an area near the court filled with masses of carved shards inscribed with the names of defendants, and pronouncing curses on them and their dear ones (Hughes as historian-narrator in Copestake, 2007). The curses, it seems, hedged the plaintiffs' bets; one might obtain results even should the rational prosecution fail, through enlisting divinities. It was also the case that prosecution of murder remained outside of the state's jurisdiction. A family member of the murder victim still had to initiate a lawsuit in the court; this indicates that, first and foremost, the unavenged kin blood was at issue. It was true that the crime could threaten the society; the pollution, which could be contagious, must be stemmed. This risk of contagion might be why the Areopagus murder trials were not held indoors but rather outdoors. At the same time, if the victim pronounced forgiveness before dying, the family could refrain from prosecuting and the state need not take action. Thus, if one follows the drama out into the streets of 5th century BCE Athens, the notions regarding pollution and the setting right of a cosmic upset had not changed all that much.

The positive development reflected both in *The Eumenides* and later in Sophocles' *Colonus*, is that extenuating circumstances pressing on the suspect were gaining relevance. For example, Orestes was merely obeying Apollo, and Oedipus was unaware of parental identities. The relevance of both circumstance and intention were surfacing in the new justice system. The negative impact was that the sophists, itinerant educators delivering philosophical perspectives and pragmatic tips that, together, comprised political education, had troubling lessons for the young men who would rise in Athenian politics, argue in the assembly, and prepare argumentation for plaintiffs in the law courts; these lessons were about the persuasive argument, and not at all about scruples or truthfulness. An example of this can be found in Plato's (380-360 BCE/2008) *Republic*, the sophist Thrasymachus as he argued throughout in favor of unscrupulous manipulation of the populace (cf. Thucydides, 411 BCE/1951, 3:82–3:83). Socrates' incessant campaign against the sophistic teachers had much to do with this destructive tack of theirs. Oddly enough, the Athenian populace prosecuted and

ultimately executed Socrates because they mistook him for a sophistic-type teacher rather than a dedicated enemy to their ruthless doctrines.

How rational then was the new leap into rationality? Was one instead leaping into an increase not in reasoning but in *rationalizing*? If something may have been gained by transition to the new order, certainly something was being lost. The great new approach using the logos, the argumentation, entailed misusing it more often than not. What arguments persuaded the male demos to vote for military action during at least every other year throughout the 5th century empire (Hughes, 2010, p. 139)? The much-touted cradle of democracy had instead become a *warocracy* (term coined by M. Plazewski, personal communication, December 22, 2010), addicted to calculative reasoning in the service of self-furthering. Granted, an expanding Athens seemed to need ever more grain—and land to grow it on. The challenge was to discern between real need and sheer appetite, and to refrain from reading opportunity and seeming need as license to exploit.

Chthonic Goddesses, Women, and the Political Use and Abuse of the Dead

In the middle play of Aeschylus' trilogy, *The Libation Bearers*, one sees an old social dynamic that was being gradually suppressed, one associated with treatment of the dead and observance of the demands of underworld divinity. As already described: With their lamentations, the foreign women drum up Agamemnon's angry ghost, rouse him to play his role in the redress of his spilled blood. Solon's 552 BCE legislation (Holst-Warhaft, 1995) began to confine women's mourning to less loud, less public displays, in keeping with his eliminating women more generally from public life (Wiles, 2002). Eventually what replaced the lavish displays of grief was the kind of funeral eulogy given by Pericles during the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides, 411 BCE/1941, 2.35.1-2.43.1, if this re-construction of Pericles' speech may be believed). The eulogy was best suited for recruitment of new soldiers into ever-new military actions. In it Pericles praised the fine citizens and their fine city, uniquely worthy of defense; and the Athenians' ability, though living a life various in its pursuits, to take resolute military action in search of renown. He then assigned to women their proper nature and role. Their nature was to remain silent; their best behavior to earn commentary neither for ill *nor* for good. If those who were listening had lost sons in the war, they had best bear more sons to sacrifice.¹¹ In short, women of

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the Golden Age suffered a corrosion of their rights and role—as guardians not just of birth, but also of death.

Additional Oresteian Examples of Mythological Defamation

While not every instance of defamation in Aeschylus' trilogy can be named, the following examples round out the evidence presented here.

Example 1: Genealogy of ownership at the Delphic Oracle. The last play, *The Eumenides*, relies throughout on the authority of the Delphic oracle; as the play opens, before she enters the inner sanctum and views the Furies, the priestess of the oracle recites its ownership history.¹²

First, in my prayer, I give to Earth first place / Among the gods; first prophetess was she. / Second, Eternal Law—second was she / To sit on her mother's oracular seat, as the story goes. / In third allotment, one more Titan / Daughter of earth sat there, / Phoebe—a willing successor, not perforce. / She gave the oracle to Phoebus, / A birthday gift—his name, too, echoed hers. (Aeschylus, 1989, ll. 1-9; Greek ll. 1-8)

The priestess asserts that Phoebus Apollo came into possession of the oracle through voluntary and amicable transfer from Phoebe. A feminist such as Spretnak (1992), or a mythologist with Campbell's (1991) insights, might well object that the oracle was not *gifted* to Phoebus but rather *conquered* by him: Phoebe was a Greek Titan—and the matrifocal Titans were overcome by the patrifocal pantheon in Greek genealogies. This kind of re-framing of charter myth by replacement of the female by the male occurred also in the Mesopotamian tales of Tiamat (Campbell, 1991); surely this was a conquest rather than a gift.

Example 2: Clytemnestra defamed and demonized. Clytemnestra was demonized in Aeschylus' telling of the tale in the trilogy's first play: She was the princess of a wealthy, landed family; her sister, Helen, was half-divine by birth and had a history, before patrifocal cooption, as a goddess in her own right. These women were established royalty, not the nouveaux riches to which Clytemnestra disdainfully refers in the course of the *Agamemnon*.

It is a great paradox that at a time when women's rights were at their nadir, playwrights were creating very large female figures such as Clytemnestra, Medea, Antigone, Hecuba, and Electra (cf. Zeitlin, 1990),.

What explains this paradox? In the case of Helen and Clytemnestra, if Sarah Pomeroy (1975) was accurate, the 5th century BCE figures carried traces of women from the Bronze Age, 13th century BCE; these were women of greater stature, with their feet planted in a society more hospitable to their power. Their stature survived even in the 8th-7th century Homeric epics (see Appendix A), in which the brothers Menelaus and Agamemnon seem to have gone to the realms of their prospective brides in order to claim Helen and Clytemnestra. This would suggest a matrilineal, even matrilineal system. It is possible that Menelaus had acquired lands and kingship through marrying Helen and then launched the Trojan War so as to retain them (Atchity & Barber, 1987). In other words, the Bronze Age times seem to have included matrilineal as well as patrilineal varieties of marriage (Powers, 2000).¹³ These mixed social structures may have characterized Greek society as it evolved from the 13th to the 5th century BCE, not just in Clytemnestra's Mycenae, but also in the environs of Athens. Foley (2002) has noted that "in [such] narrowly oligarchic, aristocratic, or monarchic states, women who belonged to the elite have often wielded considerable power, even if illegitimately" (p. 78). Athenian legislation gradually reduced the power of the landed aristocratic families (e.g., 462 BCE laws diluting their power in the Areopagus), diminishing at the same time the rights of such women.

An additional but very different approach to this paradox—women of stature onstage, constricted at home—can be inferred from *The Glory of Hera* by Philip Slater (1968). His version was psychological, but he addressed also a 5th century BCE social situation that had "legalized social stratification by gender and class" (Powers, 2000, p. 91):

The social position of women in Athens had reached its nadir. Respectable women, the mothers of Athenian citizens, lived in Oriental [sic] seclusion. They were allowed only limited social interaction, and had few legal or political rights. . . . They were married prematurely [ages 12-16] into patriarchal families to husbands twice their age, cut off from their own kin, and subject to a system in which they could visit relatives only when veiled, could not remain in the main room of the house when their husbands entertained other men, could not even appear in the windows of their own homes. (p. 91)

Women's wombs could be re-deployed if needed by their family of origin, and along with the ability to perform menial labor, were their primary recommendation to the families that acquired the women—provided the wombs engendered sons, of course. Despite these contributions, women were characterized in the tradition of Hesiod and Semonides as parasitic.

If aspects of Slater's (1968) psychoanalytic analysis of 5th century society were correct, one may infer the following: The women, left behind in the locked quarters, with their men out for years at a time to war, would have both admired and resented inordinately the gender, the literal sexual equipment, of their sons; in the psyches of those same sons might well be the looming figure of a mother too accessible with no rival around, too needed as support, and too dangerous as well—too large altogether. This, then, is a second possible explanation for the large figures on stage.¹⁴

In sum, although the development of the newly ascending democracy in Athens should be assigned to a progress spanning 6th through 5th century BCE, with notable landmarks of military and legislative victories in the decade preceding the plays, still the Aeschylean formulation of a charter myth for the following developments gave them impetus: He asserted that a "necessary" subordination of the female figures had occurred, making obsolete the rights of flesh-and-blood figures, and the autonomous powers of the goddesses as well. The latter were still to be honored as vestige goddesses in the patrifocal religion—but they would make way for the ascent and ascendancy of the polis.

From *The Oresteia* Through *The Theban Plays*:

The Historical Transition

Toward Sophocles' Last Play

The Periclean eulogy for the fallen in the Peloponnesian War reflected the transition from newly fledged victors in a defensive war against the Persians to rulers of an empire. Its focus was on an expansive pursuit of renown; few pretensions were made to being in the right. Here is where a hermeneutics of suspicion must question a textbook view of Athens. How just and fair was it as a culture? Surely it was admirable in some ways: admirable for the brilliant initiating of philosophy, the beginnings of science (some of it, such as Democritus' atoms, quite sophisticated); the development of the various arts as well as of legal and political theorizing and experimentation. Yet inquiring into the dark half of the Athenian history serves an important purpose, contributing to a truer comprehension of democracy then and now.

For instance, was the Peloponnesian War necessary? As Thucydides portrayed in his best approximation of deliberations between Corinthians and their Spartan allies (411 BCE/1951, 3.36-50), the Corinthians were arguing that the decision to make war should not hang on minor Athenian provocations. The decision should focus on the fact that Athenians had become a people who gave neither themselves nor anyone else any rest. Only from the outside could they be stopped.

The question here of the Athenian character bears centrally on my argument. I cite Thucydides and Sophocles to demonstrate that the increasingly distorted notion and embodiment of virility at the secular and sacred level, and a deficit as well of a counterbalancing female perspective and contribution, sent Athenians into a downward spiral. They certainly did not appear to advantage in the dialogue between their own envoy and the Melian rulers, as re-created by Thucydides (411 BCE/1951, 5.17). The rulers of the little island of Melos were protesting as follows: You never have had any claim on us; you cannot just barge in and take us over; this would be unjust. The envoy replies that justice plays no role whatsoever between a big power and a little one; it barely plays a role between two big powers—only when all other factors are equal. Melos must surrender or be decimated. (There has been dispute about how typical such a ruthless aftermath of conquest was for the Athenians: Bettany Hughes [2010, pp. 223-224] contended that the harsh treatment, either decimation or enslavement of males, and enslavement of women and children, was characteristic.) What is interesting about the envoy's argument is that it lacks the usual political patina of respectability; it is bald-faced and brutal and speaks to an Athenian realpolitik evolved, or devolved, beyond all concern for appearance. This is reason taken down to sheer calculation, without an ounce of alignment with virtue—very much along the line of the most up-to-date 5th century sophistic teachings, as glimpsed in, for instance, Plato's (380-360 BCE/2008) *Republic*.

It is important to view the breakdown in morals as Thucydides (411 BCE/1951) examined it on Corcyra, for he meant this breakdown to apply to what was happening among Athenians as well. One can infer this from reading the text as a whole. The reader will notice that Thucydides himself gendered these developments. His analysis portrayed virility gone wrong, associating this also with the denigration of kinship ties (often sanctified by the female divinities):

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People altered, at their pleasure, the customary significance of words to suit their deeds: irrational daring came to be considered the “manly courage of one's loyal to his party”; prudent delay was thought a fair-seeming cowardice; a moderate attitude was deemed a mere shield for lack of virility, and a reasoned understanding with regard to all sides of an issue meant that one was indolent and of no use for anything. Rash enthusiasm for one's cause was deemed the part of a true man; to attempt to employ reason in plotting a safe course of action, a specious excuse for desertion. One who displayed violent anger was “eternally faithful,” whereas any who spoke against such a person was viewed with suspicion. ... Indeed, even kinship came to represent a less intimate bond than that of party faction, since the latter implied a greater willingness to engage in violent acts of daring without demur. (411 BCE/1951, 3:82–3:83)

A Psychospiritual Version of Gender

Campbell (1991) traced these behaviors not just to their historical and sociocultural sources but to their roots in the psyche. The characterizations need not be taken as absolute portraits of each gender for now and all time, but are nevertheless useful ones:

The battle ... as though of gods against Titans before the beginning of the world, actually was of two aspects of the human psyche at a critical moment of human history, when the light and rational, divisive functions, under the sign of the Heroic Male, overcame (for the Western branch of the great culture province of high civilizations) the fascination of the dark mystery of the deeper levels of the soul, which has been so beautifully termed in the Tao Te Ching, the Valley Spirit that never dies:

It is named the Mysterious Female.
And the Doorway of the Mysterious Female
Is the base from which
Heaven and Earth sprang.
It is there within us all the while... (p. 80)

The Theban Plays of Sophocles

While *The Oresteia* was written in 458 BCE, the authoring of the three Oedipus plays spanned from *Antigone*, in 441 BCE, through *Oedipus Tyrannus*, presented in 426 BCE, to *Oedipus at Colonus*, written circa 408-406 BCE (shortly before the death of Sophocles

at 90) and staged by his grandson in 401 BCE. *Antigone*, though written first, would, narratively, have happened last. *Oedipus Tyrannus* would go first in terms of the narrative; then the *Oedipus at Colonus*, about the old man dying in a sacred grove in an Athenian suburb; then the *Antigone* in which his daughter, after his death, survives to address the miseries left behind at Thebes.

Who Was Sophocles and Why His Vision?

Sophocles had lived to see the victory over the Persians and the consequent strengthening of the fledgling democracy mid-century. He watched the maritime alliance, supposedly in defense against possible return of the Persians, grow into the tribute-collecting and, eventually, brazen empire of the Athenians; he watched the venture of the Peloponnesian War turn fatal with the overextension into Sicily, and the loss along the way of leaders such as Pericles and Alcibiades; he eventually witnessed the arc toward defeat. Now, as he wrote near his 90th birthday, all could see that Athens was doomed at the hands of the Spartan Alliance; soon after his death, the surrender treaty of 404 BCE was indeed signed. After that, at the tragic festival of 401 BCE, his last testament to Athenians was played posthumously, in the form of *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Sophocles was in a position to view matters from a fresh and original perspective. He had been elected as a general for one of the expeditions but joked to his co-general, Nicias, about his own mediocre talents in this regard; he was perhaps less than enthusiastic about exercising military leadership. He had a reputation, on the other hand, as a bon vivant. He had room to view and re-view gender matters since, in addition to his wife and family, and a courtesan consort who gave him illegitimate offspring, he enjoyed his beloved young men. He was clearly quite serious and devoted to his playwright's craft. He was likewise devoted to his position in the cult of Asklepius, with its sacred snake, a figure of regenerative healing, that, as mentioned before, he hosted for a while in his own home. After his death, and after that last play about the Oedipus hero (and so, implicitly, about the Oedipus cult as worshipped in the actual grove of the Furies), the Athenians made Sophocles himself into a hero and instituted a cult. This extraordinary life renders us an extraordinary perspective—not a woman's perspective, yet given its incomparable scope, a crucial one.

Oedipus Tyrannus

Oedipus attempts to evade the Delphic Oracle's prediction that he would kill his father and marry his

mother. He changes venue from Corinth to Thebes and must solve the Sphinx's riddle, a foreshadowing of his urban career as king and his scripted rendezvous with the cosmos as prophet. One might interpret the healing of Oedipus to have begun at the same moment as did his terrible self-discoveries: There is the encounter of the young Oedipus with the feminine as devouring mother, the Sphinx—he must conquer or be devoured. There are the victory prizes he receives: They prove near-fatal because, accompanying the vacated throne, is the widowed queen. He assumes the kingship and mates with a woman who, unbeknownst to him, is his mother. He encounters feminine energies, not only by sleeping with that queen but again, years afterward, by coming into conflict with the prophet Teiresias. Oedipus the King ends up cursing the revered prophet as blind, old, weak, and suborned to pretend to paranormal powers in the employ of some political faction. In outraged response Teiresias gives Oedipus what he has demanded and the prophet dreaded delivering; he points to the identity of a polluting murderer, the one who causes disease to ravage the King's city: Teiresias delivers the clues to the unfortunate King's own real identity as unwitting patricide and incestuous lover to his mother. 'Before long, ' replies Teiresias, 'you too will be old, blind, and weak,' traits you mock in me. Teiresias fails to mention that along with the debilitation will come paranormal powers, genuine rather than fake ones. Oedipus will be a prophet like Teiresias himself. Teiresias, as told in myth well-known to the Athenian audience of the play though not mentioned in the play itself, had spent adulthood alternating between 7 years as a man and 7 as a woman. So Oedipus adds a new encounter with feminine energies, not just on the outside but also on the inside, as effeminacy.

The encounters have been high tragedy for Oedipus. This is in the middle period of Sophoclean production, well before Athens loses her nearly 30-year war with the Spartan-Theban Alliance but after a decimating plague such as the one Oedipus insists on curing through his inquiries into the cause of pollution. Oedipus falls like an oak and the universe seems to collapse with him. In the late years of Oedipus, however, and of Sophocles who would tell the old king's story in *The Colonus*, the healing actualizes fully in the hero's dying, death, and afterlife. The healing of Oedipus, including the augmenting of the hero to his destined size, had begun paradoxically with the seeming miseries,

including those three encounters—Sphinx, mother, prophet—with the feminine.

The *tyrannus* in the play's title poses the question of how far the politically expedient purposes and actions of the despot can go—given actions which challenge divinity's pre-eminence (Greene, 1991/1994). What is too much mastery, too much virility? On the other hand, Jocasta, the King's older wife gives advice on relating to the feminine: "Before this, in dreams too, as well as oracles, / many a man has lain with his own mother" (1991/1994, ll. 980-982; Greek ll. 981-982); you must take this matter less seriously, leave off inquiring. Of course Oedipus disregards her warning, with perhaps too much masculine recklessness, perhaps too much attraction to the taboo feminine. He pursues instead, as he feels he must, the truth. She commits suicide. He plucks out his eyes.

What follows is a summary of *Antigone*, and finally of *Oedipus at Colonus*, which, written last, distilled the long retrospective of the Sophoclean vision. According to some, *Oedipus Tyrannus* paralleled Oedipus in his pride with Athens in her own heyday, towering above the other city-states, but then struck with a decimating plague (Greene, 1991/1994, p. xxii; Knox 1998; L. Doherty, personal communication, December 14, 2010). *Oedipus at Colonus* depicted an exhausted and battered Oedipus, perhaps resembling Athens near her fall after repeated Spartan invasions. Greene went on to observe that nevertheless old Oedipus is "possessed of a mysterious inner strength and a spiritual power that receive ultimate recognition from the gentled, if still terrible, goddesses of the grove" (p. x). *Oedipus at Colonus* portrayed a kind of survival—for protagonist and polity both. The Furies bear witness to it; and more, they are somehow benevolently implicated.

Antigone

The *Antigone* is noteworthy because so frequently misinterpreted by critics. Granted, as critics say, the plot bears somewhat on individual conscience as it holds out against state dictum. Antigone's brothers have fought for the throne of Thebes in the wake of their father's exile and have killed each other, in accord with Oedipus' curse on them. Creon, brother of Oedipus' late royal wife and mother, inherits; he declares one dead brother a criminal and lays him out to fatten the vultures. Antigone instead defies Creon's law, throws dirt on the body. The point, however, is this: Her action, rather than primarily an individuating one, is taken

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in compliance with the chthonic pantheon and their family-affirming burial customs. Antigone clarifies this:

Yes, it was not Zeus that made the proclamation [Creon's against burial];/ nor did Justice, which lives with those below, enact / such laws as that, for mankind.../ These are the laws [the proper religious ones] whose penalties I would not/ incur from the gods, through fear of any man's temper." (Greene, 1991, ll. 494-503; Greek ll. 450-460)

Here, as in the *Oedipus Tyrannus*, a person, though he or she be head of state, may not concoct religious procedures, violating what the gods have stipulated, just as no king may fly in the face of the prophet Teiresias, aligned in Sophocles with both Olympians and the old gods. Creon brings punishment down on his own head. Thebes has its laws, says Antigone, "not of today and yesterday; / they live forever; none knows when first they were" (ll. 500-501; Greek ll. 456-457). The ruler's hot temper—challenging the gods through challenging Teiresias—issues in his inability to put a timely stop to Antigone's decreed death: Creon's son then replicates the preemptive suicide of his beloved Antigone, and Creon's wife follows suit. The curses on the house of Oedipus, some of them self-levied, have worked their way through the family from top to bottom.

Oedipus at Colonus

I will deliver the synopsis, interspersing commentary along the way—pointing out the visibles and the invisibles, the social dimensions and the sacred, that both ran through the play and put it in a larger context. *Oedipus at Colonus* provided a retrospective on the birth of democracy in Athens, and also on the polis' rise and fall as the hub of an empire. It did so in seeming parable, in fairy tale, rather than in a history like that of Thucydides. But this was no simple parable; it was a late vision, coming from the 90-year-old playwright Sophocles, seen, in accordance with late style, in the light of death (Schavrien, 2009). It was likewise a late vision in terms of a culture's apogee and decline: It had the many earmarks—a piece that tended to look backward and inward, in terms of historical foundations (being set in the Athenian Bronze Age of the 13th century) and of depth psychological foundations; at the same time it took a long look forward, prophetically, since the outcome of the plot supposedly offered Athens invulnerability in war into the foreseeable future.

It offered a true archetypal grasp as does many a late vision—in this particular instance, it offered the archetype of the hero in Oedipus and of the good leader in Theseus. It also left in place the seemingly irreconcilable threads in the fabric of life. In the Sophoclean vision, there was Oedipus' astounding precision and accuracy in cursing his blood relations, who were nevertheless, as he rightly guessed, planning treachery; there were on the other side, the most intimate exchanges, with their poignant details, between Oedipus and Antigone: "Lean your old body on my arm," says Antigone, "it is I who love you" (Greene, 1954, ll. 200-201). Both the acerbic and the tender gave naturalistic touches to the fairy tale, making this, again, a peculiarly late vision, in which imagination and daily reality mixed as almost equal partners. The irreconcilables, expressed in Oedipus' difficult character and reflected in his terrible prior treatment at the hands of the gods, intersected with a mood of sweet serenity often found in late vision; Oedipus' loving benevolence toward his daughters and Theseus, and the great blessing he bestowed on Athens, amplified a mystery attached to the grove in which he died.

He died in the grove of the Furies, with its nightingales that never stop singing, a grove as timelessly beautiful as nature could ever be; he died having seemingly outwitted a terrible outcome should his trespassing have proven taboo, and having aligned with the grove's blessing instead. His alignment with the Furies, and through this with the feminine, ushered in a certain serene assurance for the Athens of the play.

The Athenians would identify: There were strands in the play that put the imperiled Oedipus into a parallel with the actual *fin de siècle* Athens; the latter would die, soon after the play was written, as an empire. As a city-state, when in 401 BCE the actual population came to view the play, Athens would be enjoying a momentary stabilization but would still suffer the threat of an outburst from internal factions—having recovered its democracy after oligarchic takeover in 411 BCE and, again, after the oligarchic installation by their conqueror, in 404 BCE. Such parallels would surely have been appreciated by those who sat to watch the Sophoclean last testament.

In sum, as to the late vision of the play, personal and cultural, it mixed the cantankerous with the serene: It was not *purely* a serene vision, as some late visions are, but did and does offer a potentially serene vision in which to dwell, as one might dwell in the timeless grove; nor

was the vision purely focused on the irreconcilables as are some other late visions. In this paradox Sophocles' vision might be compared to that in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: sophistication, even life-weariness, paired in both plays with a post-pollution return to innocence. There was the Eden that lived in the mind and it was no mere fantasy but a real force in human living. Both visions matched great sophistication with magic at the root.

To convey that actuality and that magic, Sophocles brought the sacred invisibles and the secular visibles together; he intermixed them. This is, then, the venue for my ongoing exploration of a dialectic between facets of society and of the pantheon, as the former projected onto the latter and as the latter shaped the former.

What are the Beings and Doings of *Oedipus at Colonus*?

The play was and is too strange to yield to a conventional plot summary. Although very much embraced by audiences at the time, it has been less popular since then; probably, as Markantonatos (2007) suggested, because moderns find it too episodic. The unifying threads are not really those of plot. In his excellent book, *Oedipus at Colonus: Sophocles, Athens, and the World*, Markantonatos ventured the following about the grove which received Oedipus: "The sacred precinct of the Eumenides [Furies] has been aptly recognized as perhaps the most evocative of meaningful connections with fifth-century Athens in the context of Greek tragedy" (2007, p. 74). He went on to say:

Apart from the settings of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the disputed *Rhesus*, which, we should think, present an unequal match to the shifting succession of awe-inspiring images of landscape simplicity and tranquility evoked in the last play of Sophocles, the setting also gradually shows itself to be another exceptionally important strand, woven as it is in the complex thematic web of the play. As the action unfolds, it will unpredictably prove to be extremely redolent of contemporary associations with foremost Athenian institutions. (2007, p. 39)

In his view, the play highlighted two sets of institutions: the leadership of Athens; through Oedipus' death in this grove, the moderate and decent, yet valorous leadership of Theseus was confirmed; furthermore, though a king, he nevertheless would sometimes consult with citizens. Rule by Theseus, one

may infer, would serve as a model for Athenian handling of polis factions as it moved forward, stripped of its empire, but needing to regain stability as a city-state. The other set of institutions cited by Markantonatos (2007) was the Eleusinian Mysteries, in which most if not all Athenian citizens were inducted once in their lifetime. These were Mysteries accenting the story of Demeter and her daughter Persephone—the daughter’s abduction by Hades, the mother’s search and partial success in demanding her return from the underworld for most of the year; thus, the mournful sterility in one season and the regeneration in another. (There are controversies over what season is the setting for regeneration; desolation may have been in the heat of Summer and regeneration in Autumn, in keeping with agricultural cycles, rather than desolation in Winter followed by a fruitful Spring). Some have described the Mysteries as having involved the baby Dionysus, and the Eleusinian Mysteries intersected in Athenian religious life with Dionysiac and Orphic Mystery institutions as well.

This study emphasizes instead their intersection with the goddesses providing the setting of the play, the Eumenides/Furies. Oedipus dies into these goddesses, while Persephone as the Dread Goddess is invoked to guide him; he is received on the whole by the older matrilineal pantheon: The Furies’ grove and a kind of psychospiritual locus of the Eleusinian Mysteries (in real life celebrated by processions between Athens and Eleusis) join as one setting, hosting the death of the hero. In such a context, the Furies are ineffably beautiful:

Indeed, the graduated, suspense-filled series of landscape descriptions, which for all their apparent specificity rebuff completely intelligible coherence, hassled an otherwise discerning critic [Dunn, 1992] to put forward the rather flamboyant claim that: in a sense the drama is stripped down to a single aspect of stage convention: from the beginning to the end we are occupied in discovering what the scene represents. (Markantonatos, 2007, p. 77)

A short and very selected version, of what “happens” in the play is that Oedipus, old, blind from his self-punishment, and in the midst of a long beggarly exile relying on the guidance of his daughter, Antigone, discovers himself in this mysterious setting. A local citizen informs the pair that he may not stay where he stands—it endangers him and everyone; he stands in the grove of those referred to as “the Kindly Ones” (for fear,

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it may be inferred, that they should show their face as the Furies). This new name for them builds on the turnabout supposedly documented in the Aeschylean tragedy of 50 years earlier. (Aeschylus may not have been so much inventing the new name, as turning to his own uses the people’s habit of cautious euphemism). One hears in the citizen’s words the underlying terror of offending the goddesses that all still carry. Oedipus is not yet revealed to the citizen as Oedipus indeed, but one would think that he above all should be terrified to set foot in the grove, patricide that he is and, indirectly, matricide. On the contrary, Oedipus replies that, now that he knows where he is, he most certainly will remain in place. The rest he promises to explain when Theseus, the leader of Athens and its suburb, Colonus, arrives.

Oedipus himself knows that old oracles and new ones would have him die in this grove to bestow, with his bones, protective blessings on Athens, his newly adopted home. Athens would enjoy as his legacy invulnerability in war. The action develops with visits from Creon, his brother-in-law, and Polyneices, his son, who aim to induce him to return to Thebes or even, in Creon’s case, to kidnap him so as to claim this same blessing of invulnerability. These visitors, especially Creon in his violent overreaching, serve as counterfoils to the good and moderate leader, Theseus. This does not mean, however, that only Thebes, whom they represent, is the bad city. Were Athens to behave this way, and in fact she had been behaving this way, she too would be condemned to defeat at the hands of her betters; it was a common theatrical device in the tragedies to use other cities to make indirect reference to Athenian woes and misbehaviors. In any case, the outcome of the plot sees Oedipus embracing Theseus as benefactor and heir. Replacing the rejected son, Polyneices, is this equivalent of a newly adopted son. Oedipus embraces as well a new city-state—not Thebes, the scene of his attainments and subsequent ordeal, but Athens.

It is important that Oedipus also shifts, in his own perception and that of audiences old and new, the position of his daughters. It speaks to his own cosmopolitan learning, as one who has wandered Greece, and to Antigone’s excellence as a guide as well, that he says, “Like the Egyptians, I have daughters who go abroad on behalf of their father and sons who sit at home.” Yet, to reiterate, the hero’s sophisticated relativism cohabits comfortably with his own—and the playwright’s—attunement to mystery and magic.

The episodic plot culminates in the old hero’s

death by apotheosis; it is a secretive death not witnessed directly but heard tell of by way of a messenger. The secretiveness of the death ties it in with the Athenian Eleusinian institutions highlighted by Markantonatos (2007). The Demeter and Persephone of the Mysteries matter here; throughout, the Furies matter. The threads of doing and being intersect in the choral song praising the grove. The song illustrates the setting's central importance, illuminates the contention that "from beginning to end we are occupied in discovering what the scene represents" (p. 75):

In the god's untrodden vale
Where leaves and berries throng,
And wine-dark ivy climbs the bough,
The sweet, sojourning nightingale
Murmurs all day long.
No sun nor wind may enter there
Nor the winter's rain;
But ever through the shadow goes
Dionysus reveler,
Immortal maenads in his train.
Here with drops of heaven's dew
At daybreak all the year,
The clusters of narcissus bloom,
Time-hallowed garlands for the brows
Of those great ladies whom we fear.
(ll. 668-685; Greek ll. 670-684)

There is even an odd set of lines in a later scene (odd as they are translated by Fitzgerald [1954], though not by Grene [1991/1994]). The lines provide provocative psychological insight. Fitzgerald (1954), as a poet-translator, took telling liberties when he translated this set of lines; they characterize the people of Athenian Colonus, who "honor the god of the sea, who loves forever / The feminine earth that bore him long ago" (Sophocles, 441-406 BCE/1954, ll. 1070-1071; Greek ll. 1070-1073). The rhythms suggest lovemaking: Note the waves-of-the-sea rhythms, with accents on "god," "loves," and the "ev" in "forever," "earth," "long"; the wave rhythms are also the thrust rhythms of a graceful lovemaking. The poetry, then, invokes the (not infrequent) incest among the oldest gods, for whom the Mother pairing with son-consort is standard, as are incestuous versions of the Poseidon/Earth myth.¹⁵ (Sophocles used Rhea rather than Earth [Gaia] as the goddess paired with Poseidon, but Rhea and Gaia are often conflated). These lines juxtapose in a thought-provoking way with the drama at hand of purification

and rehabilitation from an unwitting incest, as if, when the action is translated to divine realms, as Oedipus is about to be translated, such a primal coupling implies no pollution (Schavrien, 1989). The sea, embracing his mother the earth (Poseidon as *gaienokhos*, Earthholder [L. Doherty, personal communication, December 19, 2010]), makes love forever to her. The Eden is one of safety and loveliness, as the citizen chorus says, and one of an unstainable innocence.

The Hero and the Multivalent Goddess

There is a Greek morality that diverges from that of contemporary Western culture. *Oedipus at Colonus* portrayed the transformation of the much-despised former king into not just a prophet but also a daemonic hero—still worshipped in 5th century Athens (Grene, 1991/1994, xxvi) though his story occurred in founding times. Many critics have attempted to explain away Oedipus' horrific temper, not so much when it triggers his downfall in middle age—he would not yet have learned his lesson—but when as an old man he is about to transfigure into a demigod. He then displays this same horrific rage toward both Creon and his own son; Oedipus sees through them at once and verbally eviscerates them, each in turn. His accuracy should be acknowledged, yet there is no explaining away the temper. Grene's (1991/1994) definition of a hero lays out, instead, a uniquely Greek gestalt of the sacred, one which accommodates such a tension:

Sophocles here draws on the complex of Greek religious notions of hero-cult ... He himself ... received such a cult after his death. "Heroes," in this technical sense, are mortal high achievers whose life-story is generally embedded in old myths or legends. Their extraordinary force and passion lead them to actions beyond the limits of normal humanity and often bring them into conflict with human and divine laws. Hence they perform great outrages as well as great benefactions. They generally come to a violent and mysterious end in which the paradoxes of transgression and greatness are enacted in a supernatural event like sudden disappearance or some other intervention by the gods. (p. xxvi)

Oedipus' life comes to a mysterious end. The drama in the grove may have threatened violent destruction for him, what with the attempts at intervention from Creon and Polyneices; but all of these are blocked by Theseus on the physical side and by Oedipus himself

psychologically. After the victorious battles, the blind old Oedipus enacts his fate by leading his party of Theseus and daughters into the grove; he is for the first time unguided and unsteadied by any arm. He then finds, through his own prophetic knowledge, the designated spot for his transformation; hears his name called out by a deity impatient of delays; disappears either into the gaped earth or else into the arms of some god; and finally, transmutes in the course of the transport into a daemonic hero.

In the play ending the Oedipal narrative, though it was the first one written, Antigone followed her father to become a heroine. What helped her qualify was the same terrible stubbornness, which nevertheless did not disqualify her from claiming hearts or having right on her side. She too aligned herself with chthonic deities when they were least in favor.

This point matters because, as the reader gains insight into the old order goddesses, and especially the Furies, she should notice, even appreciate, their multivalence. They are feminine in the round—curse, blessing, and all. To know them fully, one should know them in the context of their entire network. They are a remedy to the much diminished and disempowered goddesses of the present-day, such as Mary, sweet, forgiving, willing to intercede humbly with the greater masculine powers, asexual, and actually no goddess at all but merely human, as the Catholic Church officially maintains. In such a form, these goddesses bear the marks of a divide-and-conquer strategy, not just external but also internal: They are amputees, fragments of their former selves.¹⁶

These amputated versions of the female misrepresent figures that lived a more rounded life in their older forms (Spretnak, 1992): Hera, Athena, Artemis, and Hecate, for instance, had been chopped and diced for co-optation by the Olympian pantheon. The preceding pantheon had been presided over by a Great Mother, with Demeter perhaps most related to that figure, and a network of near-related figures such as the Minoan Lady of the Beasts (who eventually translated into either Artemis or Gaia), the Lady of the Mountains, and so forth. The frescoes and statuettes, plus correlations drawn with early Anatolian and Baltic pantheons, have provided the basis for suggestions that the Olympian goddesses found their roots in the Bronze Age culture and earlier, as did Demeter and Persephone (Stallsmith, 2008).¹⁷

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Athens, the Compassionate City of Refuge

Oedipus specifically holds Athens to its reputation as a city of refuge (Greene, 1994, ll. 271-76). When the citizens find out his actual identity, they want only to rid the place of him. He reproaches them with reneging not only on the promise they had made to host him, before they knew his name, but also on their age-old reputation for compassion to the injured stranger. Fortunately, Theseus, their leader, overrides their rejection. This is significant because perhaps a polity is essentially the promises that the folk make to each other at its founding. Perhaps the real-life evolution of Athens from welcoming democracy to bully empire was targeted by Sophocles in this call for hospitable compassion.

The Glaring Paradox of the Sophoclean Bequest

As Oedipus was leaving his bones, so Sophocles was leaving to the Athenians the bequest of this play. He left it in a time when the Athenians had overextended, having lost too large a fleet by sending out the Sicilian expedition (415 BCE). There were ups and downs to come after that, but when Sophocles was writing, the pending defeat was clear. How, then, could he write a play, set in its founding times, that marked the bestowing of a hero's grave that granted invulnerability to Athens? Was the play meant as a magical amulet, as suggested by D. Greene (personal communication, 1973)? Was it simply escapist, in the manner of the Busby Berkeley musicals on which Americans feasted during the Great Depression of the 1930s? In either case, one can comfortably argue that it gave this message to the public: If Athenians could rewind and re-do, they might have kept the brightest promises they had made to themselves as a folk, and their most grateful and pious promises to the deities. In fact the choruses portray an Athens in which there are not even competitions among the gods, as there are in myths such as the one that sets Poseidon against Athena in a competition for tutelary deity of the city. The play, as Greene (1991/1994) described, juxtaposed chthonic and Olympian religions and thereby joined areas of family and city in exploring the larger theme of the human relation with nature and the gods (pp. xviii-xix). They all had their contribution to make to the Eden which was the Athenian Colonus: Old and new, male and female, sturdy olive tree, fish aplenty, sky, sea, and earth, all dwelt in harmony and balance. This may well have been an equivalent of the Eden myth, but not as sheer fantasy; instead the Colonus myth conveyed an attitude of remembrance and attunement.¹⁸

Finally, to home in on the political dimension: Athens had certainly departed from its own charter promises of respectful governance and compassion. The extraordinary way in which the Erinyes were showcased, however, and made beautiful while retaining their potency, celebrating the fertile features of their grove and surrounding land, accomplished the following: It embedded the story in an intimacy with nature and a gratitude for the land, offering antidote to the cynical impiety and ambition of the times. There was, then, a political significance to this grateful acknowledgement of natural setting. The political seconded what was clearly a personal significance as well. The play was a lovesong, from a Sophocles facing his death, to Colonus, the land of his birth. Personal and political motives dovetailed.

Although contemporary Westerners may owe great cultural gratitude to Athenians for their questing spirit, their actualized ambitions were just one side of a double-edged sword: As the Corinthians warned their hesitant Spartan allies, Athenians had to be stopped; their ambition was unquenchable, as indicated by their incessant imperial expansions. The contrasting drift of Sophocles' last play might be expressed in the words of a Dorothy weary of Oz: There's no place like home; there's no place like home. Home was embedded in the dear land and sea that gave host to Athens.

Finding Crete in Colonus:

The Significance of the Goddesses' Lineage

For the purposes of this study, most crucial and astonishing in Sophocles' final play was the reassertion of the sacred power and importance of the Furies themselves. At the same time, there was the reactivation of their chthonic "Old Girls' Network" that included most notably Demeter and Persephone, central to the Eleusinian Mysteries and thereby to Athenian well-being. But the Mysteries had demanded utter secrecy from their many Athenian initiates; this enabled the patriarchal Olympian pantheon to remain in the limelight. The Athenian women were, in fact, conducting many festivals dedicated to maintaining fertility of land and womb throughout the seasonal phases of the year (Zweig, 1993, p. 167). Still, given the secrecy surrounding the Eleusinian Mysteries, this relative invisibility bears on the feminist search for "an accurate and usable history" (Gross, 1993, p. 19; cf. pp. 19-22). Sophocles offered some remedy by assembling a myth that linked potential Athenian healing to a foregrounding of the chthonic goddesses.

The Three S's: Secrecy, Survivals, Syncretism

To characterize historical developments stretching from Crete to Athens, one might assemble three elements and dub them the three S's: secrecy, which backgrounded Demeter and Persephone until they were, at least in terms of polis destiny, quietly foregrounded in the last Sophoclean play; survivals, which made their appearance as vestiges of the old religion in the new, such that, even if one tried to beat down the ancient goddesses, they inevitably sprang up elsewhere; and, finally, syncretism, which could be found in the respectful solution to Athenian tensions, as Sophocles harmoniously combined the chthonic with the Olympian pantheon. It is true that Aeschylus had made his own version of such an integration, but it had entailed a contemptuous subordination. Sophocles, instead, restored all due respect.

The Sophoclean Dynamic:

Restoration of the Feminine to Stabilize Athens

Since Sophocles, a comprehending witness of the Golden Age, its evolutions and devolutions, saw restoration of the feminine (in deity, energy, creature) as crucial to the stabilizing of Athens, it makes sense to follow his lead. Markantonatos (2007) went far in teasing out the threads from a dynamic skein. The present analysis adds to his a gendered perspective. He has argued that the play alluded vividly—at least for the sensibility of a 5th century Athenian who would catch the references—to the Eleusinian Mysteries; the play in some sense echoed such a rite. The play's hero, after encounter with a dark and frightening set of experiences (as some assign to the process of the Mysteries) meets then with the salvific vision: In the time between, such portents as thunder and lightning (heard by Oedipus the hero as well as by the real-life initiate) keep the initiate thoroughly awake. There may be a few witnesses, but secrecy prevails. It is understood that the vision smoothes the way to both a regenerated life and, most notably, after-life to come.

Demeter and Persephone have been alluded to in several places (e.g., Grene, 1991/1994, l. 1766, l. 1786) either by name or by an epithet both pointing to and disguising the netherworld daughter. Many other gods have appeared as well, all spread throughout the local landscape although, in this instance, all arranged in an implied relationship to the Furies, since these goddesses have been dominating the setting. In Oedipus' preparation for death in the grove, Markantonatos (2007)

has deftly identified syncretic threads of burial rites, purification rites, and sacrificial rites; they variously combined in those last moments of Oedipus' self-preparation for his transmuting death, and are extended after that by the mourning from his daughters. The entire play would have invoked a syncretic pantheon and a syncretic participation-by-proxy in its ongoing ritual: It would concoct a potent brew needed to address the terrible circumstances in which the actual polis members, the viewing audience, found themselves.

How does the analysis of Markantonatos (2007) lay out a path for redemption? The point would be, first of all, the point made in those Mysteries. An Athenian would very much need an alternative, offered by the Mysteries, to the Olympian view of death: In the Olympian underworld one has neither joy nor light nor vitality.¹⁹ As to the alternative: The Eleusinian Demeter and Persephone trace back to Minoan times in Crete (Kerenyi, 1976). Both mother and daughter are implied in the title of Demeter Thesmophoros (Stallsmith, 2008), the dual goddess; while the Erinyes most probably trace back to Minoan ancestors (the *keres*) as well. That Minoan underworld, in which the three goddesses have a stake as earth and underworld goddesses, exists in analogy to the incubation phase in the farming cycle; in such a cycle, the seed has a hopeful dormancy in the earth. This cycle, then, plays a central role in Minoan culture and religion (Gimbutas, 1999, p. 136). Along the lines of a Minoan sensibility represented by survivals—vestiges of deities and their rituals into the Golden Age—the last scene in the Mysteries themselves entails the holding up of a cut ear of corn (or a sheaf of wheat): From seeming death in the earth comes regeneration. (For resemblances between Minoan and Eleusinian rituals, cf. Gimbutas, 1999, p. 136). The mystical insight of the initiate may or may not be aided at such a moment by drug enhancements from the *kykeon* brew downed in the process; was it psychedelic? This is a facet that might also link the Mysteries with the Minoan poppy goddess (Kritikos & Papadaki, 1967). With or without the literal mystical chemistry of a potent *kykeon*, the insights would still be along these lines—regenerative—after dark encounters and death, comes the salvific vision and life. The Mysteries' earthy, renewing orientation would have been desperately needed by the down-and-out Athenians; they needed both to believe in and accomplish such a renewal for themselves and their polis.

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Most crucial are the gender modification and rebalancing required, on the secular and divine levels. Markantonatos (2007) framed matters without a gendered reference. His insights, nevertheless, harmonize well with my own view. He added that this play tutors Athenians in returning to an old view that there can and should be traits and tendencies such as moderation, decency, and keeping one's word, even and especially in political leaders. This rings a salutary change on Thucydides' (411 BCE/1951) description of virility gone wrong (cf. 3.82-3.83). Theseus served, then, as a model for the good leader. His mythical biography, interestingly enough for the argument of this study, intersected him with Minoan culture: Athenians, watching *Oedipus at Colonus*, would have had Minoan Crete at some level in their consciousness due to Theseus' having encountered Ariadne there. References then, to the various earth-network deities, the Furies, Demeter, and Persephone, would have implied if not carried explicitly the long ago and far away overtones, extending the temporal telescope by yet another segment, from contemporary Athens to its founding days, from founding days to the Minoan pre-history of its chthonic deities (cf. n. 17).

To return to Athenian politics: In fact, the democratic restoration (403 BCE), after an oligarchic interlude, showed much more restraint than had the previous administration; as if they were led by that mythical exemplar of moderation, Theseus. Athens herself managed to moderate, rebalance, and have her own kind of continuity into the 3rd century BCE and beyond. Perhaps Sophocles' message, by way of the 401 BCE staging of the play, impressed itself on the citizens? Perhaps he was simply prescient. In any case, Athens, though dying as an empire, escaped death as a city-state from fractiousness and faction.

Parallels with Contemporary Challenges: Retrieving a Home

There was a crucial female component in the syncretic pantheon of the 5th century BCE; the pantheon remained part Olympian, as imported by invaders, and part chthonic. At the same time, the earth-based and underworld figures absorbed by the Olympian pantheon were defamed, as were the Furies, or downplayed, as were Demeter and Persephone. The defamation and downplaying contributed to a faux virility which turned citizen against citizen, husband against wife, son against father. The chthonic pantheon subsumed by Olympians, then, stood to benefit Athens through being both

exhumed and foregrounded. Sophocles understood this, and the milder version of chthonic advocacy that appeared in his earlier play, *Antigone*, he threw into high relief in *Oedipus at Colonus*. His ability to root such advocacy in a psychology both deep and wide, spiritual yet also embodied, caused his sociopolitical critique to coincide with a psychospiritual and even psychoecological one. Such a foregrounding of the feminine held promise for an Athens then deep in crisis. It could come to the aid of the West today.

Politics, socioeconomics, ecology and psychospirituality are threads in a skein. Both the United States and many multinational companies share traits with Athenians. There is the questing spirit unlikely to stop unless some outside force bridles it. There is the theory undergirding what has become a rogue capitalism, a capitalism that advocates incessant expansion to new markets, questing likewise, with only the thinnest semblance of morality, for unlimited acquisition of natural resources. As the Athenians felt there was no end to their need for wheat and the fertile ground that grew it, so modern forces seek access to oil with regard for nothing but the bottom line. It is cliché to say that greed dominates the markets and, according to relatively unquestioned theory, greed makes the markets thrive: greed is good. How could such a premise provide for the upbringing of decent citizens, in the United States and abroad (L. Vacca, personal communication, April 11, 2011)?

Like the Athenians, Americans and others may find some counterbalance in the first and best promises that we, as various folk, made to ourselves at founding: For citizens of the United States, these would be the promises of those bent on hospitality, extending as well a reciprocal hospitality to the people and environment that have hosted us. Other folk might cultivate their own remembrances of their first best intentions. The caveat is that charter myths may be misused; they must be properly used, both to offer a home and to retrieve a home.

In his last play, Sophocles wrote for his chorus songs of reverence and gratitude—to both the ocean and the earth that held and sustained the culture. Likewise, this study bears witness on behalf of the oil-slicked gull of the Louisiana spill, who has served as its tutelary deity. The earth calls for both a revived gratitude and a concerted commitment to turn away from destroying and toward sustaining. Such a solution, of course, is simple but not easy.

There would be, in addition, a psychospiritual benefit to executing such good intentions: When Oedipus is finally a healer rather than a polluter, he is simultaneously healing himself. How so? The man cut off from the womb that first offered him a home, through his unwitting matricide, now finds his home in a healed city-state and in the earthy cosmos as a whole. Ancient initiates into the Mysteries, and modern-day mystics, the grounded kind, seek intimacy with the whole. Their feet walk the ground not as strangers on the earth but as those who belong. They have both retrieved and returned to a home. They have assuaged a longing to recover what might be called the primal intimacy. A mystic's belonging need not be characterized as "the opiate of the people," regression, or a lesser level of experiencing, as Marx, Freud, or Wilber (1995; addressing the indigenous brand) would have it. It may issue instead from a long and arduous healing, entailing commitment to the well-being of the whole.

May my voice join the chorus—gardener, citizen, artist, scholar, scientist, legislator—of those who promise the earth and its inhabitants both to cultivate and retrieve the sanctity of such a home. It is a cosmic home, so far and yet so near, to be discovered not only at the furthest reach of imagination, but also as the dear ground underfoot.

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Notes

1. Apollo and Athena are not so new as they would seem to be. They too have lineages that are pre-patriarchal. But, for the sake of simplicity, I take Aeschylus at his word regarding his binaries of these two as not the old gods but the new ones, coming from the he-god pantheon rather than from the she-god pantheon, as Tony Harrison's (1981) translation would have it. Aeschylus relied upon the revisionist portraits of them as Olympians, chronologically and personally young.
2. The Erinyes in this play are renamed the Eumenides. Another title used, along the lines of avoiding specificity and thereby a provocation of the deity's dark side, is the Semnae or Venerable Ones. There is some disagreement as to whether the Semnae are identical with the Eumenides/Erinyes but Harrison (1903, pp. 239-253) mostly does link them, as does Sophocles in his last play (Harrison, p. 254 as she quoted Sophocles' l. 486, her translation). Visser (1980) in her dissertation seconded the view as have others. Harrison linked the Semnae to the Erinyes and to matriarchal roots as well. At another point she linked the Erinyes to Demeter, as in the Demeter Erinys (p. 240) and she rooted Demeter in Minoan Crete (p. 564). These links support the argument that the goddesses are pre-patriarchal, with roots in both Arcadia (for Demeter) and Crete.
3. Here the Campbell parallel is inexact because partially inaccurate: The Titans were not produced parthenogenically (according to Hesiod's theogony) as Campbell is asserting; one can view them as such only by conflating them with the Gigantes (as the Greeks sometimes, in fact, did); the births of Ouranus and others, *preceding* the Titans, were parthenogenic, with Gaia only as the source.

Nevertheless, Campbell's point about defamation still carries. In the wake of defeat, the early broods of both Tiamat and Gaia suffered defamation in the tales of the conquerors.

4. Aristotle named instead for those heroes something called *hamartia*, or an error of judgment [L. Doherty, personal communication, December 17, 2011]), so it is the Thucydidean reference to *hubris* that is relevant here.
5. Despite flare-ups of strength in the wake of the Sicilian expedition, the same factioning—both intra-city and intra-psychically, paralleling inter-city battles—would make its appearance during the Sicilian expedition and the years that followed. There was, for the expedition, the confusing recall from battle of Alcibiades, its youthful inspiration and general, over his supposed mockery of the Hermes statues, protectors of new enterprise; Alcibiades purportedly perpetrated a round of phallus mutilations on these statues, distributed throughout the city, during the eve before the launching of the expedition. There were rumours too that he had been mocking even the Eleusinian Mysteries, conducting them in his home with friends, perhaps downing the kykeon. He was ordered by the populace, as the great Athenian naval expedition was nearing Sicily to do battle, to turn his ship around at once and head for Athens to stand trial. Instead he fled to Sparta, soon aiding and abetting the enemy; both the recall and subsequent betrayal debilitated the expedition to Sicily, which suffered a disastrous defeat. The recall of Alcibiades issued from a factioning one can examine with gender in mind, phallos of the Hermes statuettes and all.
6. Because I do not read the Greek itself, I compare translations and consult experts. I studied classics in translation during 5 formal years with the classicist, David Grene, and was mentored by him informally for decades. Describing Grene's expertise, the Nobel Laureate, Saul Bellow said, "He was on a first-name basis with Sophocles and Aristophanes, that was how he made you feel." My excuse for conducting a study with inevitable flaws in expertise, in this one among five fields I cover, might come from the mouth of any interdisciplinarian: "It's a dirty job but somebody's got to do it." On the other hand, I welcome constructive critique.

For *The Oresteia* I consult mainly two sets of translations, the one in 1953 and that in 1989. One

should additionally consult Peter Hall's production employing Tony Harrison's (1981) rather free stage-oriented translation to get the closest to my own interpretations of the trilogy.

7. In scholarly articles and elsewhere, one repeatedly comes upon the translation of *erinyes*, the adjectival version of the Erinyes, as "furious." Demeter Erinyes is angry or furious Demeter as well. This is probably an early Indo-European word rather than a word from the maturity of the Greek language; some consider it Arcadian. Further discussion of translations is in footnote 4, p. 251 of Johnston, 1999.
8. He had already gone through many purifications so as not to carry pollution, but the retribution—blood for blood—was still to be taken (Visser, 1980).
9. Orestes *seems* cleared in *The Eumenides* but a future play by Euripides portrayed him as nevertheless continuing to suffer pursuit by the Furies until such time as he performed yet another expiation. The end of his story, then, is not captured in one simple version.
10. Athena, it may be noted, did have a mother, Metis, but Zeus upstaged his consort by swallowing Metis and giving birth to Athena from himself. Aeschylus bypassed these complications.
11. Speaking of rational or rationalizing: This is an odd stance for Pericles to take—if indeed he did take it rather than Thucydides who puts the words in his mouth—since Pericles had a notably unconventional relationship with the well-educated courtesan (hetaera) Aspasia: She is rumored to have helped write his speeches and he, rather scandalously, having divorced to live with her, regularly included her in his symposium evenings with the best of Hellenic male artists and intellectuals.
12. It is relevant that Aeschylus and others believed in this genealogy, giving feminine divinity primacy in ownership of the Oracle; there is recent debate as to whether the truth of something such as the genealogy can be justified (cf. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood's work, 1991).
13. Ever since Schliemann dug up the walls of Troy, previously considered a fictional city, scholars have felt some justification for using Greek myths as clarifying lenses for otherwise undocumented history; such a use however, is tricky at best; it goes in and out of fashion.
14. Slater's unfortunate views—both that the mother's overweening influence on the son, and only this, issued

in an Athenian homosexuality which, in turn, was necessarily pathological—may be assigned to more than one unexamined attitude and interpretation of the 1960s. His other insights remain illuminating. Orestes was brought up in exile but most men of the Athenian Golden Age were not. So the insights still indeed bear on the paradox that women loomed on stage (and in archetype?) in an age when real women seemed, by contrast, constricted.

15. “Fitzgerald’s translations of Homer are full of metaphors he imported into the text” (L. Doherty, personal communication, December 14, 2010). Some find this passage too loose a translation in its suggestion of lovemaking between Poseidon and Rhea. Nevertheless, despite Hesiod’s clear separation of Rhea (Gaia’s daughter) from Gaia, Greek mythographers sometimes conflated them; modern researchers have cited conflation as well, such as Kerényi, or Ruck and Staples, who viewed Demeter, Persephone, and Hecate as split off from an original great goddess figure, Gaia or Rhea. Poseidon did in fact have children by Gaia; this might have been Fitzgerald’s rationale for his song to the mother-son love affair between Poseidon and the sometimes-conflated daughter of Gaia, Rhea.
16. Two additional points are relevant here: Mary, even in her diluted form, remains a light in the lives of millions. Also, in the polytheistic Olympian pantheon even the men are multiple, as if fractioned—but none are either confined to celibacy or incapable of a potent anger [L. Doherty, personal communication, December 19, 2010].
17. Gimbutas (1999), in a posthumously published work, based Anatolian inferences on Mellaart’s archeological work; see note 18 in defense of Gimbutas; see Berggren & Harrod, 1996, for rebuttals of characteristic attacks on Gimbutas.
18. A quote from Doherty (2001) communicates scholarly views of the unique Minoan society:

Gimbutas from a lifelong study of female figurines, tombs, and ‘temples’ of Neolithic cultures of the Balkan region (Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, and her native Yugoslavia), arrived at the conviction that goddess worship in these cultures was related to a higher status for women in a peaceful, egalitarian, and environmentally stable form of society. In her view, the cultures

of “Old Europe,” which flourished from roughly 7000 to 3000 BCE, were partly destroyed and partly assimilated by the Indo-European invaders, who brought with them a male-dominated pantheon of gods to match their patrilineal and hierarchical social structure. (Doherty, 2001, p. 111)

Gimbutas brings specifically Minoan freedom from invasion—due to its being an island, while invaders were horsemen—down to a date even closer to us than 3000 BCE, down to circa 1450 BCE. Doherty adds a review of recent skeptical rejections of the *pax Minoica*, the great Minoan peace, which Gimbutas and many feminist scholars maintain was prevalent for 1500 years or more, but scholarly counter-refutations include a consensus, at the archeological conference in Liège, Belgium, 1998 (Rencontre égéenne internationale *Université de Liège, 14 -17 avril 1998*), that scant evidence has been uncovered to disprove the *pax*. That there was human sacrifice has been the latest scandal about Minoan Crete, but, of the three sites that might have seen the sacrifice (nine bodies in all), only one might actually survive rebuttal (Gimbutas, 1999, p.140; “Extended definition: Minoan Civilization,” Webster’s Dictionary Online, n.d.). In any case, perfection need not be claimed for the society, just a noteworthy cultural accomplishment of Minoan balance and peace.

19. In another way, the play may be aetiological, explaining the coincidence, in actuality, of these many gods, of especially the hero Oedipus and the Eumenides—at this actual place of sanctuary in Colonus. (Greene’s [1991/1994] thinking bears on Oedipus in the Eumenides grove, and mine on the rest, Poseidon, Athena, etc.; see p. xxvi). Of the two explanations, however, Eden and aetiology, neither need exclude the other.

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