

# Greek Myths for Athenian Rituals: Religion and Politics in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Oedipus* *Coloneus*

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THE LAST FIFTEEN YEARS have seen a renewed interest in the variety of local traditions in Greek religion, and studies on the religious practices of different parts of early Greece are appearing in record numbers.<sup>1</sup> For as Walter Burkert emphasizes, "each tribe, each locality and each city has its own tenaciously-defended tradition."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, scholars have given serious attention to Panhellenism, a phenomenon that, since the eighth century B.C., had helped to obscure the variety in regional beliefs. The Greek poets, beginning with Homer and Hesiod, worked around local traditions and created

<sup>1</sup> E.g. C. Sourvinou-Inwood, "Persephone and Aphrodite at Locri: A Model for Personality Definitions in Greek Religion," in *'Reading' Greek Culture: Texts and Images, Rituals and Myths* (Oxford 1991) 147–88; A. Schachter, *Cults of Boiotia* (=BICS Suppl. 38.1–2, 4 [London 1981–86]); E. Simon, *Festivals of Attica: An Archaeological Commentary* (Madison 1983); F. Graf, *Nordionische Kulte* (Rome 1985); M. Jost, *Sanctuaires et cultes d'Arcadie* (Paris 1985); E. Kearns, *The Heroes of Attica* (=BICS Suppl. 57 [London 1989]); R. Parker, "Spartan Religion," in A. Powell, ed., *Classical Sparta: Techniques behind Her Success* (Worcester 1989) 142–72; C. Auffarth is preparing a monograph on the religion of Argos, and Robert Parker a new study of Athenian religion.

<sup>2</sup> W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, tr. J. Raffan (Cambridge [Mass.] 1985) 8. Burkert nevertheless follows the old practice of categorizing material from throughout Greece by the twelve or more different gods. This is defensible only in so far as these regional cults, despite real differences, share certain 'family resemblances' as well. On the notion of family resemblances between different human cultures, see T. C. W. Oudemans and A. P. M. H. Lardinois, *Tragic Ambiguity: Anthropology, Philosophy and Sophocles' Antigone* (Leiden 1987) 8.

a Panhellenic image of the heroes and gods to which all Greeks could relate.<sup>3</sup>

A reverse trend, in which Panhellenic figures become reattached to a local context, has been largely ignored. Such relocations are probably as old as Panhellenism itself; from earliest times Greek cities would have wanted to claim that the gods and heroes they venerated were at the same time of Panhellenic stature. This process of relocation was particularly important for the new colonies in Southern Italy and Asia Minor, which in this way could claim their own place in the mythological landscape of Greece.<sup>4</sup> But there are examples from the Greek mainland as well. In the sixth century, Sparta tried to adopt the family of the Atreidae as its own by persuading poets to locate the palace of Agamemnon not in Mycenae but in Sparta, and by ostentatiously 'bringing home' the bones of Orestes from Tegea to Sparta.<sup>5</sup> The *Naupactia*, a genealogical poem ascribed to the local poet Carcinus of Naupactus, provides another example. According to Carcinus, Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, came to Corcyra after the death of Pelias and his own son Mer-

<sup>3</sup> Here the work of Gregory Nagy deserves special mention: *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore 1979); more recently, *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (Baltimore 1990) and *Greek Mythology and Poetics* (Ithaca 1990), esp. Ch. 3. Nagy relies in part on, and refers to, studies of Anthony Snodgrass and Ian Morris.

<sup>4</sup> Some scholars have tried to connect our *Iliad* with the Troad and the family of the Aeneadae: U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die Ilias und Homer* (Berlin 1916) 83f (Bk 22 only); F. Jacoby, "Homerisches," *Hermes* 68 (1933) 1–50, esp. 37f; More recently, Nagy, *Achaeans* (*supra* n.3) 265–75; P. M. Smith, "Aeneidai as Patrons of *Iliad* XX and the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite*," *HSCP* 85 (1981) 17–85. For examples from Southern Italy, see R. R. Holloway, *Italy and the Aegean* (Louvain 1981) 97f; N. M. Horsfall, "The Aeneas Legend from Homer to Virgil," in J. N. Bremmer and N. M. Horsfall, *Roman Myth and Mythography* (=BICS Suppl. 52 [London 1987]) 12–24, esp. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Stesichorus, *PMG* 216, Hdt. 1.67f. The Spartans also claimed to possess Agamemnon's grave at Amyclae (Paus. 3.19.6, cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 11.31f). See C. M. Bowra, "Stesichorus in the Peloponnese," *CQ* 28 (1934) 115–19, and *Greek Lyric Poetry*<sup>2</sup> (Oxford 1961) 112–15; G. L. Huxley, *Early Sparta* (London 1962) 68; D. S. Rosenbloom, *The Tragedy of Power: Myth, Memory, and Hegemony in the Theater of Aeschylus* (diss. Princeton 1992) 369, with full bibliography. See also A. F. Garvie, ed., *Aeschylus' Choephoroi* (Oxford 1986) xviiiif, who is skeptical of Sparta's influence on poets such as Stesichorus.

merus was killed and, presumably, lay buried on the mainland nearby.<sup>6</sup>

Other examples can be found in fifth-century Athenian drama. The tragedians generally follow Homer and Hesiod in their Panhellenic portrayal of the gods. (An exception is the goddess Athena, who is often represented in her capacity of city-goddess of Athens.) Thus their plays could easily be performed from Macedonia to Sicily. Some plays, however, refer specifically to local Athenian cults. Euripides especially liked to conclude his plays with the *aition* of a festival or cult.<sup>7</sup> This shows us that the tragic poets did not simply pass on a Panhellenic theology, but were actively engaged with the religious views of their fellow citizens.

Two prime examples are Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus*. Scholars have generally recognized Aeschylus' and Sophocles' debt to Homer and Hesiod, as well as their reliance on local traditions in these two plays. I would like to explore these different strands of influence in terms of Panhellenism versus local cult. The result should clarify the debate on the complex political and historical background of these plays. I shall argue that in these two plays Aeschylus and Sophocles tried to strengthen certain local institutions and, at the same time, claimed for Athens the heritage of the whole of Greece.

## I. The *Eumenides*

The *Eumenides* ends with a procession that brings the Erinyes to their new home under the earth. There, in future time, "gracious and right-minded," they will watch over the land as "Semnai."<sup>8</sup> It makes little difference whether one writes the word *semnai* here with a lower-case *s* (e.g. Page) or with a

<sup>6</sup> M. L. West, *The Hesiodic Catalogue of Women* (Oxford 1985) 4f, with full references.

<sup>7</sup> R. Garland, *Introducing New Gods: The Politics of Athenian Religion* (London 1992) 156, who also provides examples. The cults to which Euripides refers are not, however, exclusively Athenian.

<sup>8</sup> *Eum.* 1040f: ἴλαοι δὲ καὶ εὐθύφρονες γῆ/ δεῦρ' ἴτε, Σεμναί. I have adopted the text of M. L. West, *Aeschyli tragoediae cum incerti poetae Prometheus* (Stuttgart 1990).

capital (e.g. West and Sommerstein).<sup>9</sup> An Athenian audience could not have missed the reference to the Semnai Theai (or “Awesome Goddesses”), who possessed a cult and a shrine on the northeast side of the Areopagus.<sup>10</sup> The identification of the Erinyes with the Semnai Theai is already anticipated in lines 108, 383, and 1006, and it is possible that after *semnai* the word *theai* was written.<sup>11</sup>

It is generally believed that Aeschylus was the first to identify these goddesses with the Erinyes who pursued Orestes.<sup>12</sup> The

<sup>9</sup> D. L. Page, ed., *Aeschyli Septem quae supersunt tragoediae* (Oxford 1972); West (*supra* n.8); A. H. SOMMERSTEIN, *Aeschylus: Eumenides* (Cambridge 1989; hereafter ‘Sommerstein’).

<sup>10</sup> Besides the end of the *Eum.*, their cult on the Areopagus occurs at Eur. *El.* 1270ff, *IT* 968f; Thuc. 1.126.11; Paus. 1.28.6; further references in A. L. Brown, “Eumenides in Greek Tragedy,” *CQ* n.s. 34 (1984; hereafter ‘Brown’) 260–81, esp. 262.

<sup>11</sup> Hartung’s supplement to line 1041, adopted among others by Sommerstein, West (*supra* n.8), and A. J. Podlecki, *Aeschylus’ Eumenides* (Warminster 1989). Sommerstein *ad* 1027 suggests that the final identification with the Semnai Theai took place in the lacuna following line 1026. Others basing themselves on the *Hypothesis* of the play (p.246 Page/341 West) and Harpocration (*s.v.* *Eumenides*, p.117 Keaney), have suggested that in this passage the Erinyes were identified as Eumenides: see Brown 267f, who disagrees. On the gradual transformation of the Erinyes into Eumenides or Semnai Theai, see A. Lebeck, *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1971) 145–49.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Sommerstein 11. On the cult of the Semnai Theai, the Erinyes, and the Eumenides, see esp. E. Rohde, *Psyche. Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*<sup>2</sup> (Freiburg i.B. 1898) esp. I 267–70 (=W. L. Hills, tr., *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks* [London 1925] 178–82), and “Paralipomena,” in *Kleine Schriften* (Tübingen 1901) 229–44; J. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge 1903) 213–56; L. Farnell, *The Cults of the Greek States* V (Oxford 1909) 437–42; L. Deubner, *Attische Feste* (Berlin 1932) 214; A. H. Krappé, “Erinus,” *RhM* 81 (1932) 305–20; F. Solmsen, *Hesiod and Aeschylus* (Ithaca 1949) 178–224; E. Wüst, “Erinys,” *RE* Suppl. 8 (1956) 82–166; C. Ramnoux, *La nuit et les enfants de la nuit de la tradition grecque* (Paris 1959) esp. 124–29; B. C. Dietrich, *Death, Fate and the Gods* (London 1967) 91–156; M. Visser, *The Erinyes* (diss. Toronto 1980); Brown (*supra* n.10); A. Henrichs, “The Eumenides and Wineless Libations in the Derveni Papyrus,” in *P. Congr.* XVII (Naples 1984) 255–68, and “Namenlosigkeit und Euphemismus: Zur Ambivalenz der chthonischen Mächte im attischen Drama,” in H. Hofmann and A. Harder, edd., *Fragmenta dramatica: Beiträge zur Interpretation der griechischen Tragikerfragmente und ihre Wirkungsgeschichte* (Göttingen 1991) 161–201; A. Heubeck, “Ἐρινύς in der archaischen Epik.” *Glotta* 64 (1986) 143–65; G. Neumann, “Wortbildung und Etymologie von *Erinus*,” *Die Sprache* 32 (1986) 42–51; H. Sarian, “Erinys,” *LIMC* 3 (1986) I 825–43, II

Semnai Theai were local goddesses who were venerated only in Attica: besides at the Areopagus, also in Phlya and in Colonus.<sup>13</sup> The Erinyes on the other hand were epic figures, without a cult either in the archaic or in the classical period. There is even the odd exception to prove the rule: Herodotus says that the Spartan family of the Aegidae, who claimed descent from the son of Oedipus, were directed by an oracle to build a shrine for “the Erinyes of Oedipus and Laius” because they were plagued by childlessness.<sup>14</sup> This act of piety was probably a direct result of the epics that named the Erinyes as the executors of the curse of the Labdacids.<sup>15</sup> The Eumenides were mostly benign goddesses who were venerated in various parts of Greece,<sup>16</sup> and it is possible that there already existed by the time of Aeschylus

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595–606; D. Sansone, “The Survival of the Bronze-Age Demon,” *ICS* 13 (1988) 1–17; Podlecki (*supra* n.11) 1–9; Sommerstein 6–12; H. Lloyd-Jones, “Erinyes, Semnai Theai, Eumenides,” in E. M. Craik, ed., *Owls to Athens: Essays in Classical Subjects Presented to Sir Kenneth Dover* (Oxford 1990) 203–11; J. D. Mikalson, *Honor Thy Gods: Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy* (Chapel Hill 1992) esp. 214–17; S. I. JOHNSTON, “Xanthus, Hera and the Erinyes (Il. 19.400–18),” *TAPA* 122 (1992) 85–98, and “Penelope and the Erinyes (*Od.* 20.61–82),” *Helios* (forthcoming, 1994: hereafter ‘Johnston, “Penelope”).

<sup>13</sup> Phlya: Paus. 1.31.4. In 1990 H. W. Catling reported the discovery of a roof tile stamped ΣΕΜΝΩΝ ΘΕΩΝ near the hill of Hippios Kolonos: *AR* 1988–89, 13 (I owe this reference to Robert Parker). This must be from the shrine Sophocles mentions in the *OC*.

<sup>14</sup> Hdt. 4.149.1f: Οιολόκου δὲ γίνεται Αἰγεύς, ἐπὶ οὗ Αἰγεῖδαι καλέονται, φυλὴ μεγάλη ἐν Σπάρτῃ. Τοῖσι δὲ ἐν τῇ φυλῇ ταύτῃ ἀνδράσι οὐ γὰρ ὑπέμειναν τὰ τέκνα, ἰδρύσαντο ἐκ θεοπροπίου Ἐρινύων τῶν Λαίου τε καὶ Οἰδιπόδεω ἱόν.

<sup>15</sup> Brown 264; Sommerstein 10. In 1979 a small altar dedicated to one of the Erinyes, Megaira, was found in Pergamum, dating from the third century A.D. (W. Radt, “Ein Altärchen aus Pergamon für die Erinyes Megaira,” in R. M. Boehmer and H. Hauptmann, edd., *Beiträge zur Altertumskunde Kleinasien. Festschrift für Kurt Bittel* [Mainz 1983] I 449–53). This altar suggests that there may have been something like the (re-)establishment of a cult for the Erinyes as divinities in later antiquity, perhaps as a result of their popularity in literature. Around the same time we find their names in magical texts, on lithica and curse tablets, and on a grave inscription (cited in Johnston, “Penelope” nn.10, 16, and 49).

<sup>16</sup> Near Sicyon, Tiryns, and Cyrene, in Cerynea in Achaea, Thespieae in Boeotia, and possibly on Chios: see Brown 260ff. On their cult in Selinus on Sicily, see most recently D. R. Jordan, “A Meilichios Stone from Selinus,” *ZPE* 86 (1991) 279–82, and M. Jameson, R. D. Kotansky, and D. R. Jordan, *A Lex Sacra from Selinus* (=GRBS Monographs 11 [Durham (N.C.) 1993]), esp. 77–81.

a Peloponnesian tradition in which the local Eumenides were considered to be none other than the Erinyes who once pursued Orestes.<sup>17</sup>

The cult of the Semnai Theai is certainly older than the *Oresteia*. Thucydides tells us that after the failure of Cylon's attempted coup in Athens (end of the seventh century), some of the insurgents tried to take refuge at the altars of the Semnai Theai on the Areopagus.<sup>18</sup> Aristophanes also mentions the sanctuary on the Areopagus as a place of refuge for people who got into trouble.<sup>19</sup> The connection between the Semnai Theai and the right of asylum is of relevance to the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus as well. Orestes presents himself as a suppliant in Athens (*Eum.* 441). He is thus pursued by creatures who, at the end of the play, will accept the rôle of goddesses who protect suppliants at their altars.

The Semnai Theai are also connected with the oath that judges, prosecutor, and defendant had to swear before the court of the Areopagus. The Attic orator Dinarchus (*Contra Dem.* 47) informs us that an oath was sworn to the Semnai Theai and several other gods, and that whoever broke his vow was "accursed" (κατάρατος). This oath was a kind of self-imprecation in case someone did not tell the truth.<sup>20</sup> Oaths and curses play an important rôle in the *Eumenides* as well. When Athena asks the Erinyes who they are, they introduce them-

<sup>17</sup> Attested for Achaean Cerynea: Paus. 7.25.7; Soph. Σ *ad OC* 42, *cf. Suda s.v.* Εὐμενίδες. The same was said about the Maniai in Arcadia: Paus. 8.34.1ff.

<sup>18</sup> Thuc. 1.126.11, *cf.* Plut. *Sol.* 12.1. A pinax found on the northeast side of the Areopagus and dating from the mid-seventh century perhaps depicts one of the goddesses: Sarian (*supra* n.12) 841=*Athena* no. 27, II.1 960 with full bibliography.

<sup>19</sup> *Eq.* 1312, *Thesm.* 224; *cf.* A. R. W. Harrison, *The Law of Athens I: The Family and Property* (Oxford 1968) 172.

<sup>20</sup> *Dem.* 23.67 records the oath: ἐν Ἀρείῳ πάγῳ, οὗ δίδωσ' ὁ νόμος καὶ κελεύει τοῦ φόνου δικάζεσθαι, πρῶτον μὲν διομεῖται κατ' ἐξωλείας αὐτοῦ καὶ γένους καὶ οἰκίας ("In the Areopagus, where the law permits and enjoins the trial of homicide, one first takes an oath by invoking destruction upon one's self, one's kindred and household"). On oaths as self-imprecating curses, see J. Plešcia, *The Oath and Perjury in Ancient Greece* (Tallahassee 1970) esp. 83, 85ff; J. D. Mikalson, *Athenian Popular Religion* (Chapel Hill 1983) 31-38; R. Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford 1983) 126, 186f; Burkert (*supra* n.2) 250-54. On the oaths sworn before the Areopagus: R. W. Wallace, *The Areopagus Council to 307 B.C.* (Baltimore 1985) 123.

selves as the Arai ("Curses") who live beneath the earth (*Eum.* 417, cf. *Cho.* 406).

The Erinyes try to make Orestes swear an oath (*Eum.* 429). This is a crucial moment in the play: if he should swear that he did not kill his mother, he would commit perjury, and the Erinyes—alias Semnai Theai—would be allowed to seize him according to the laws of the Areopagus. But Athena will not permit the swearing of an oath: "I say that oaths will not win unrighteous cases" (*Eum.* 432, ὅρκους τὰ μὴ δίκαια μὴ νικᾶν λέγω). Some commentators believe that Aeschylus is rejecting an old judicial practice by which the defendant only had to swear that he had not committed the crime in order to go free.<sup>21</sup> Such an intention on the part of the poet is of course always possible, but a judicial *aition* lies behind Athena's words as well. Orestes' case is, as Demosthenes remarks, one of *phonos dikaios* or "justified killing" (23.74; cf. *Eum.* 468, 610). Orestes never denies that he killed Clytemnestra. In such a case it was probably not necessary to swear an oath before the court.<sup>22</sup> That Athena will demand an oath of both the judges and the witnesses (*Eum.* 483, 486) shows that she is not against the oath as such.

Aeschylus could find precedents in earlier poetic traditions for a connection between the oath and the Erinyes. At *Il.* 19.258ff Agamemnon swears by Zeus, Earth, the Sun, "and the Erinyes who punish under the earth of mankind all who have sworn a false oath;"<sup>23</sup> and according to Hesiod the Erinyes assisted the goddess Eris when she gave birth to Horkos

<sup>21</sup> P. Groeneboom, *Aeschylus' Eumeniden met inleiding, critische noten en commentaar* (Groningen 1952) 158; L. Gernet, "Droit et prédroit en Grèce ancienne," in *Droit et institutions en Grèce antique* (Paris 1982) 100.

<sup>22</sup> R. J. Bonner and G. Smith, *The Administration of Justice from Homer to Aristotle* (Chicago 1930–38) II 170; cf. D. M. MacDowell, *Athenian Homicide Law* (Manchester 1963) 92, who doubts, however, the relevance of this passage in the *Eumenides* because "justified killings" were tried at the Delphinion court, not the Areopagus (93). But, as Sommerstein (17) rightly remarks: "The behaviour of Athena and the jurors at Orestes' trial provided a model, not only for the few hundred Athenians who were or might become Areopagites, but for all who would ever sit on juries." The Areopagus is presented in the *Eumenides* as still the only Athenian court. It is a model for the procedures in all criminal cases.

<sup>23</sup> ἴστω νῦν Ζεὺς πρῶτα θεῶν ὑπατος καὶ ἄριστος / Γῆ τε καὶ Ἥλιος καὶ Ἐρινύες, αἵ θ' ὑπὸ γαίαν / ἀνθρώπους τίνυνται, ὅτις κ' ἐπίορκον ὁμόσση.

(Oath), “a bitter pain for those who swear falsely.”<sup>24</sup> Compare Alcaeus fr. 129.13f (Campbell), who appears to call upon an Erinyes to punish Pittacus for breaking an oath that he had sworn: τὸν Ὑρραὸν δὲ πα[ῖδ]α πεδεληθέτω/ κήνων Ἐ[ρίν]υς ὥς ποτ’ ἀπώμνυμεν. It is not unlikely that this resemblance of functions helped Aeschylus to identify the Erinyes of the epic with the local Athenian Semnai Theai.

The origin of the Erinyes is unknown. A sacrifice to an Erinyes is mentioned on three Linear B tablets from Cnossos. We also encounter the name on *defixiones* or curse-tablets from Cyprus, and as a cult title of Demeter in Boeotia and Arcadia.<sup>25</sup> It is possible that there existed in Mycenaean times a real cult of demons who bore the name Erinyes.<sup>26</sup> After the demise of the Mycenaean world, they perhaps continued to be venerated in remote areas such as Cyprus, while on the mainland their name only survived in epic and some cult places of Demeter. Whatever the origin of the Erinyes may have been, in epic they developed into the executors of divine justice. Agamemnon mentions them in the *Iliad* together with Zeus and the Moirae (*Il.* 19.87), and Heraclitus calls them “the assistants of Justice” (Δίκης ἐπικούροι).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> *Op.* 803f, ἐν πέμπτῃ γάρ φασιν Ἐρινύας ἀμφοιπολεύειν/ Ὀρκον γεινόμενον, τὸν Ἐρις τέκε πῆμ’ ἐπιόρκους.

<sup>25</sup> On Demeter Erinyes see Wüst (*supra* n.12) 94–101; B. C. Dietrich, “Demeter, Erinyes, Artemis,” *Hermes* 90 (1962) 129–48; R. Stiglitz, *Die großen Göttinnen Arkadiens* (Vienna 1967) 110–34; W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley 1979) 125–29; Johnston, “Penelope”; Schachter (*supra* n.1) 164, who doubts the genuineness of the Boeotian cult; he is supported in this by Brown 264 n.29. The Linear B tablets (Fp 1.8, Fh 390, V 52) are cited by Heubeck (*supra* n.12) 44, and the curse-tablets from Cyprus are listed in A. Audollent, *Defixionum tabellae* (Paris 1904) 462.

<sup>26</sup> Sansone (*supra* n.12) identifies, rather speculatively, a series of representations on various Minoan and Mycenaean objects as Erinyes. Others believe that the Linear B tablets already relate to the cult of Demeter Erinyes: S. Marinatos, “Demeter Erinyes in Myceanae,” *AAA* 6 (1973) 189–92; Burkert (*supra* n.2) 44; Sommerstein 6. Johnston, “Penelope,” argues that Erinyes was originally an independent goddess who only later became associated with Demeter.

<sup>27</sup> Fr. B94 D.-K. (fr. 52 Marcovich). The Derveni Papyrus (fr. A.9f) preserves the oldest and probably most accurate quotation of this fragment: see G. M. Parassoglou and K. Tsantsanoglou, “Heraclitus in the Derveni Papyrus,” in A. Brancacci *et al.*, edd., *Aristoxenica, Menandrea fragmenta philosophica* (= *Studi e testi per il Corpus dei papiri filosofici Greci e Latini* 3 [Florence



The Erinyes play a similar rôle in the *Oresteia*. They are first mentioned when Zeus is said to have sent a "late-punishing Erinyes" (ὑστερόποινον ... Ἐρινύων) to punish the Trojans for the abduction of Helen (Ag. 58f). Together with Zeus they are held responsible for Agamemnon's murder and that of Clytemnestra.<sup>28</sup> Only in the case of Orestes does their sense of justice seem to deviate from that of Zeus and the Olympian gods, but at the end of the *Eumenides* they are again reconciled, as Semnai Theai, with Zeus and the Moirae (*Eum.* 1044ff).

By associating the local Semnai Theai with the powerful avenging spirits of the epic, Aeschylus must have bolstered their respect in the city, as well as that of the council they were believed to protect. Much has been written about the political background of the *Oresteia*.<sup>29</sup> Only a few years before the first production of the trilogy, the political power of the council of the Areopagus was reduced to that of a court of law in criminal cases and some minor religious affairs.<sup>30</sup> The *Oresteia* clearly glorifies the Areopagus, but only in its new rôle as a court of law. By associating the Areopagus through its tutelary deities with the avenging goddesses of the epic, Aeschylus stressed above all the judicial power of the council.

It is not insignificant that Aeschylus in particular chose to identify the local Semnai Theai with the Erinyes of the house of Agamemnon. Herodotus (7.159) tells us that during the Persian Wars the Spartans claimed the leadership of Greece because they were allegedly the heirs of Agamemnon, the leader of Greece in the expedition against Troy. In the course of the sixth

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1988]) 125–33; A. Lebedev, "Heraclitus in P. Derveni," *ZPE* 79 (1989) 39–47; D. Sider, "Heraclitus in the Derveni Papyrus," forthcoming.

<sup>28</sup> E.g. Ag. 462–70, 1481f, 1578–81; *Cho.* 394f; see esp. R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "Zeus and the Erinyes," in *Studies in Aeschylus* (Cambridge 1983) 154–74.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. K. J. Dover, "The Political Aspect of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*," *JHS* 77 (1957) 230–37; E. R. Dodds, "Morals and Politics in the *Oresteia*," in *The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays* (Oxford 1973) 45–63; A. J. Podlecki, *The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy* (Ann Arbor 1966) 63–100; C. W. Macleod, "Politics and the *Oresteia*," in *Collected Essays* (Oxford 1983) 20–40; Wallace (*supra* n.20) 87–93; D. J. Conacher, *Aeschylus' Oresteia: A Literary Commentary* (Toronto 1987) 195–206; Podlecki (*supra* n.11) 17–21; Sommerstein 25–31.

<sup>30</sup> Wallace (*supra* n.20) 86 and see his discussion 94–127; see also L. A. Jones, "The Role of Ephialtes in the Rise of Athenian Democracy," *CLAnt* 6 (1987) 53–76.

century, as we noted above, the Spartans had managed to adopt the family of the Atreidae by persuading poets to locate the palace of Agamemnon in Sparta and by allegedly 'bringing home' the bones of Orestes. The *Oresteia* undermines this Spartan claim. It locates the palace of Agamemnon in Argos. Orestes is said to be from Argos (*Eum.* 455, 757) where he also lies buried (*Eum.* 767). In 461/460, three years before the first performance of the play, Athens had made a treaty with Argos against Sparta. Orestes alludes three times to this treaty.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, the *Oresteia* denies any possible Peloponnesian claim to the power of the Erinyes by having them remain in Athens; tacitly, it can be argued, it makes another claim: from now on this city and its courts will be the highest authority for the Athenians and their allies (personified in Orestes)—and in the future, perhaps, for the whole of Greece.

## II. The *Oedipus Coloneus*

In *Oedipus Coloneus* another Panhellenic figure comes to Athens. As the chorus tells him: "Your name has travelled far through many lands."<sup>32</sup> But Sophocles' intentions are more

<sup>31</sup> *Eum.* 289ff, 670–74, 762f; cf. J. H. Quincy, "Orestes and the Argive Alliance," *CQ* n.s. 14 (1964) 190–206, who assumes, wrongly I believe, that Aeschylus acknowledged Sparta's possession of Orestes' grave (202). On the *Oresteia* as a response to the Spartan claim to the Atreides, see I. Hendriks, *De interpoliteeke en internationale betrekkingen van Argos in de vijfde eeuw v. Chr.* (diss.Groningen 1982) 106f; Jones (*supra* 30) 70f; Rosenbloom (*supra* n.5) 431.

<sup>32</sup> OC 305b–06a: πολὺν γὰρ, ᾧ γέρον, τὸ σὸν/ ὄνομα διήκει πάντας. I have used the new text edited by H. Lloyd-Jones and N. G. Wilson, *Sophoclis Fabulae* (Oxford 1990). Oedipus figured in various epics, especially the *Oedipodeia* and the *Thebaid*. He is mentioned at *Il.* 23.679, *Od.* 11.271f, Hes. *Op.* 161, *Cat. Fem.* fr. 192, 193.4 M.-W., and his story was apparently narrated by Nestor in the *Cypria* (Proclus p.103.22 Allen). Pindar, who also tells about his fate and that of his sons at *Ol.* 2.38f, considers his wisdom to be proverbial (*Pyth.* 4.263). On Oedipus in the epic tradition see esp. R. C. Jebb, *Sophocles, The Plays and Fragments*, I: *The Oedipus Tyrannus*<sup>2</sup> (Cambridge 1887) xii–xvii; C. Robert, *Oidipus: Geschichte eines poetischen Stoffs im griechischen Altertum* (Berlin 1915) I 149–251, II 61–93; L. W. Daly, "Oidipus," *RE* 17 (1937) 2103–17; E. L. de Kock, "The Sophoclean Oedipus and its Antecedents," *ActaCl* 4 (1961) 7–28, and 5 (1962) 15–37; J. C. Kamerbeek, *The Plays of Sophocles*, IV: *The Oedipus Tyrannus* (Leiden 1967) 1–7; W. Pötscher, "Die Oidipus-Gestalt," *Eranos* 71 (1973) 12–44; L. Edmunds, *Oedipus: The Ancient Legend and its Later Analogues* (Baltimore 1985) 6–17; J. N. Bremmer, "Oedipus and the Greek Oedipus Complex," in

modest than those of Aeschylus fifty years earlier. In 407/406, the year in which the OC was probably written, Athens was about to lose the war with Sparta over the leadership of Greece. Sophocles' hero promises to protect the Athenians after his death against the Thebans, who fought on the side of the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War.<sup>33</sup>

Oedipus, like Orestes in Tegea (Hdt. 1.66f) or Eurystheus at Eur. *Heracl.* 1026f, protects the land in which he is buried against the attacks of his former countrymen. Both texts are older than Sophocles' play, but we need not think of any direct influence, for the belief in the protective powers of a hero's grave was widespread in Greece.<sup>34</sup> There probably existed already a local Athenian tradition that placed the tomb of Oedipus at Colonus. Euripides alludes to it in a passage in the *Phoenissae*,<sup>35</sup> and it is hard to believe that Sophocles simply made it up. He did, however, literally bring it to the center of attention in the city and, furthermore, made the Athenians battle with the Thebans over the body of Oedipus.

Various interpreters have pointed out that from the beginning Oedipus behaves as the *heros* he is to become at the end of the

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*id.*, ed., *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (London 1987) 41–59; M. Davies, *The Epic Cycle* (Bristol 1989) 19–29, 42.

<sup>33</sup> OC 92f, 287f, 409ff, 457–60, 576ff, 621f, 646, 1524f, 1533f.

<sup>34</sup> A. Brelich, *Gli eroi greci* (Rome 1958) 91; Burkert (*supra* n.2) 203.

<sup>35</sup> *Phoen.* 1703–07. The authenticity of this passage has recently been defended by M. van de Valk, *Studies in Euripides' Phoenissae and Andromache* (Amsterdam 1985) 44ff, and by E. Craik, *Euripides' Phoenician Women* (Warminster 1988) 267 *ad* 1703–07. Some scholars have argued that Pind. *Pyth.* 4.263–69 already refers to the story of Oedipus at Colonus (first proposed by B. L. Gildersleeve, *Pindar: The Olympian and Pythian Odes* [New York 1890] 301f, followed by L. Edmunds, "The Cults and the Legend of Oedipus," *HSCP* 85 [1981] 221–38, 224f). Although ingenious, this is highly unlikely: *cf.* B. K. Braswell, *A Commentary on the Fourth Pythian Ode* (Berlin 1988) 362. On the cult of Oedipus at Colonus see Robert (*supra* n.32) I 14–47, II 8–16; L. R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford 1921) 332ff; L. W. Daly, "Oedipus," *RE Suppl.* 7 (1940) 785f; G. Méautis, *L'Oedipe à Colone et le culte des héros* (Neuchâtel 1940); A.-J. Festugière, "Tragédie et tombes sacrées," in *Études d'histoire et de philologie* (Paris 1975) 47–68; Edmunds (*supra*); A. Henrichs, "The 'Sobriety' of Oedipus: Sophocles OC 100 Misunderstood," *HSCP* 87 (1983) 87–100; J. Rudhardt, "Oedipus et les chevaux," *MusHelv* 40 (1983) 131–39; Bremmer (*supra* n.32) 48–52; Kearns (*supra* n.1) 50ff, 208f; L. Edmunds, *Theatrical Space and Historical Place in Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus* (forthcoming) Ch. 3.2.

play.<sup>36</sup> Prominent in the play are his curses of Thebes and Polynices on the one hand, and his blessings on Athens and Theseus on the other. They foreshadow his actions from beyond the grave, just as the battle between Thebans and Athenians that the chorus describes in the second stasimon anticipates the time “when Thebans will make a stand at this grave” (411, σοῖς ὅταν στῶσιν τάφοις).

The description of the place of the battle is quite detailed, for no obvious reason in the text. The prominent rôle of the Athenian cavalry is striking as well (1063, 1068f). Perhaps we are dealing with a description of an historical battle. Diodorus (13.72)—whose chronology is unreliable—mentions a fight between the Theban and Athenian cavalry in 408/407, and Xenophon (*Hell.* 1.1.3) records a similar battle in 410. Whether Sophocles is referring to any one of these battles in particular or they are one and the same is of little importance. The most important fact is that both authors agree that in the years immediately preceding the composition of *OC*, the Spartans, with the help of the Theban cavalry, made raids on Athens from Decelea in northern Attica. These raids must have provided the Athenian and Theban cavalry with more than one occasion to fight one other.<sup>37</sup>

I should also mention that according to a scholium to Aelius Aristides, Oedipus once appeared to the Athenians when they were fighting the Thebans and exhorted them to make a stand.<sup>38</sup> It is tempting, though highly speculative, to connect this appearance of Oedipus with the battles that were fought at the end of the fifth century, and perhaps even to see in this alleged

<sup>36</sup> Henrichs (*supra* n.35) 95, with earlier references. One may add: D. Birge, “The Grove of the Eumenides: Refuge and Hero Shrine in Oedipus at Colonus,” *CJ* 80 (1984) 11–17; M. W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (Cambridge 1989) 257f.

<sup>37</sup> Σ *ad OC* 57 preserves an oracle that warns against a Boeotian attack on Colonus (cited by Kearns [*supra* n.1] 51 n.33). While probably not authentic, it could have been created post factum. G. R. Bugh, *The Horsemen of Athens* (Princeton 1988) 84f, places the battle in the autumn of 407 and refers to a lecture by D. L. Page, who connected it with the scene in the *OC*. For a different explanation of the prominence of the Athenian cavalry in the play, see P. Siewert, “Poseidon Hippios am Kolonos und die athenischen Hippeis,” in G. W. Bowersock, W. Burkert, and M. C. J. Putnam, edd., *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies presented to B. M. W. Knox* (New York 1979) 280–89; Edmunds, *Theatrical Space* (*supra* n.35) Ch. 3.

<sup>38</sup> G. Dindorf, ed., *Aristides III* (Leipzig 1829) 560.

appearance the occasion that inspired Sophocles to write his play. Or perhaps the play prompted the belief that Oedipus supported the Athenians in its battle against the Thebans—perhaps exactly the effect Sophocles hoped it would have.

According to the epic tradition, Oedipus was buried in Thebes.<sup>39</sup> This suits its Panhellenic character, which after all excluded any preference for local cults. The city of Thebes was so closely connected with the myth of Oedipus that it could be regarded as 'neutral' in terms of cult: no one could be offended by its association with the figure of Oedipus. Notably, we do not know of any heroic cult of Oedipus in Thebes and, as we shall see, the Thebans seem to have followed a tradition that he lay buried outside the city. This does not mean that there did not exist cults of Oedipus in other towns in the archaic period. We may compare the case of the Argive heroes, who in the epic followed the son of Oedipus against Thebes. They probably already possessed a *heroön* in Eleusis at the beginning of the seventh century, but the epics never mention it.<sup>40</sup>

A scholium to the *OC* preserves a story of the Alexandrian historian Lysimachus about a grave of Oedipus at Eteonos (*FGrHist* 383 F 2). It deviates significantly from both the epic tradition and the *OC*:

When Oedipus died, his friends [or relatives] thought to bury him in Thebes. But the Thebans, holding that he was an impious person on account of the misfortunes which had befallen him in earlier times, prevented them from so doing. They carried him therefore to a certain place in Boeotia called Keos and buried him there. But the inhabitants of the village, being visited with sundry misfortunes, attributed them to the burying of Oedipus and bade his friends remove him from their land. The friends, perplexed by these occurrences, took him up and

<sup>39</sup> *Il.* 23.679–80; Hes. fr. 192 M.-W., cf. Aesch. *Sept.* 914, 1004; Soph. *Ant.* 899–902; see Pötscher (*supra* n.32) 41; Edmunds, "Cults" (*supra* n.35) 224.

<sup>40</sup> A. M. Snodgrass, *The Dark Age of Greece: An Archaeological Survey of the Eleventh to the Eighth Centuries B.C.* (Edinburgh 1971) 194; W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1992) 114. The first author actually to mention the *heroön* is Plutarch (*Thes.* 29.5). A. Pariente reports the discovery of a *heroön* for the seven Argive warriors in Argos, possibly dating from the sixth century B.C.: "Le monument argien des «sept contre Thèbes»,", in M. Piérart, ed., *Polydipsion Argos* (=BCH Suppl. 22 [Paris 1992]) 196–225.

brought him to Eteonos. Wishing to bury him secretly, they interred him by night in the sanctuary of Demeter—for they did not know the locality. When the facts transpired, the inhabitants of Eteonos asked the god [=Apollo?] what they should do. The god bade them not to move the suppliant of the goddess. So Oedipus is buried there and the sanctuary is called Oedipodeion.<sup>41</sup>

The name of the sanctuary is probably authentic and suggests an old connection between the shrine and the figure of Oedipus. It is possible that a Theban tradition lies behind the story. Lysimachus ascribes it to a certain Arizelus, which is a name other Thebans bore as well (Jacoby, *FGrHist* IIIb 112 n.35). Sophocles perhaps alludes to this tradition when he makes the Thebans declare that they do not want to bury Oedipus *in*, but only *near* Thebes.<sup>42</sup> Note that their motivation is also similar: according to the *OC* (407), Oedipus is not allowed burial in his native city because the blood of his father stains his hands.

The Eteonos version is probably older than the *OC*. Together they repudiate the epic tradition by pointing out that the Thebans would never have allowed the burial of Oedipus in Thebes. At the same time, Sophocles rejects the Eteonos account and claims the grave of Oedipus for Athens. The battle between Creon and Theseus over the body of Oedipus in the *OC* can be interpreted as a symbolic fight between Eteonos/Thebes and Colonus/Athens over which city really possesses the tomb of the hero. Possession of the tomb was crucial to Athens at this moment in time, for it alone seemed to stand between the city and its enemies.

### III. Conclusion

There are many parallels between the *Oedipus Coloneus* and Aeschylus' *Eumenides*.<sup>43</sup> It is no accident that Oedipus finds his final resting place in a shrine of the Eumenides, whom he also

<sup>41</sup> Tr. A. B. Cook, cited by Edmunds, "Cults" (*supra* n.35) 223, who also provides a Greek text. The comments in brackets are mine.

<sup>42</sup> *OC* 399, 404f, 784f, *cf.* Robert (*supra* n.32) 9.

<sup>43</sup> See esp. R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "A Religious Function of Greek Tragedy: A Study in the *Oedipus Coloneus* and the *Oresteia*," *JHS* 74 (1954) 16–24; more recently, *Sophocles. An Interpretation* (Cambridge 1980) 264–78, 324ff.

refers to as *semnai theai* (OC 89f).<sup>44</sup> The pacification of the Erinyes in the *Eumenides* may have functioned as a model for the successful incorporation of Oedipus in the city, as represented in the OC. When the Pythia of Delphi sees the Erinyes at the beginning of *Eumenides*, she cries out that they are “horrible to speak about, horrible for eyes to behold” (34, ἦ δεινὰ λέξαι, δεινὰ δ’ ὀφθαλμοῖς δρακεῖν). The reaction of the chorus in the OC is very similar. When it sees Oedipus for the first time, he is described as “horrible to see, horrible to hear” (141, δεινὸς μὲν ὄρᾶν, δεινὸς δὲ κλύειν).<sup>45</sup>

Athens is able to turn this horrible power of Oedipus and the Erinyes to its own advantage and to give it a place in its midst. The dramatic purpose of the two tragedians is nevertheless quite different. In *Eumenides* Athens adopts the vengeful spirits of the family of the mythological ruler of Greece and turns them into local guardians of justice. The emphasis in the text on the indulgence of its city goddess cannot conceal an element of imperialism behind all this: Athens presents itself as the inheritor of the power of the Erinyes and, consequently, as the moral leader of Greece. In the *Oedipus Coloneus*, on the other hand, the relocation of the Panhellenic figure of Oedipus in Athenian soil is meant to protect the city against the onslaught of its neighbor. Both plays rely, however, on the dynamic interplay between a local Athenian tradition, cults of other Greek cities, and a Panhellenic tradition.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Its existence and designation as a shrine of the Semnai Theai is demonstrated by the recent find of a roof tile stamped ΣΕΜΝΩΝ ΘΕΩΝ near the site (see *supra* n.13).

<sup>45</sup> For the range of meaning of the word *deinos*, which is difficult to translate, see B. M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley 1964) 23f, and Oudemans and Lardinois (*supra* n.2) 4, 87, 129ff.

<sup>46</sup> I would like to thank Jan Bremmer, Lowell Edmunds, Richard Martin, David Rosenbloom, Charles Segal, H. S. Versnel, and Froma Zeitlin, as well as the referee for *GRBS*, for their valuable comments at different stages of this article. An earlier version appeared in *Hermeneus* 62 (1990) 68–90 (in Dutch). I would also like to thank Lowell Edmunds for showing me a draft of his forthcoming book on the OC and Sarah Johnston for allowing me to read the manuscript of her forthcoming article on Penelope and the Erinyes.