“Reasons” as Deferral: The Dramatization of Argument in The Eumenides

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> “There is no way to refute the world of primary orality. All you can do is walk away from it.”
> Walter Ong

I. Originary Moments of Representation

Rene Girard is well aware that the history of what once might have been called Western Civilization but which is now clearly world civilization has been marked by originary moments. Within Girard’s own schema, one decisive moment is “the imposition by the group on itself of a noninstinctive restraint that defers further violence and constitutes thereby the origin of all cultural ‘deferrals’ ” (Gans,*Origin* xi). In Girard’s hypothesis, the mechanism of this deferral is the ” ‘arbitrary’ designation of an emissary victim to whom is attributed a posteriori the ‘blame’ for the original crisis” (*ibid.*) that generated the tensions that the persecution of the scapegoat is intended to remove. Girard’s accumulation of evidence from history and anthropology is a persuasive demonstration that the tracks of this process, or the process itself, are visible at many levels of cultural development, from the primitive to the modern.

The designation of the arbitrarily chosen victim to be a representation of the causes of whatever mimetic contagion happens to threaten a community *presupposes*, as Eric Gans points out, that a capacity for representation pre-exists the arbitrary choice. Hence Generative Anthropology’s fully empirical hypothesis. At its moment of origin in our prehistory — the evidence in such works as Nicholas Wade’s *Before the Dawn* offers a time frame consistent with its appearance in Africa — our primate

species developed the capacity for representation of which the Girardian designation of the scapegoat is one historically ancient and empirically recoverable manifestation (by “recoverable” I mean “subject to demonstration” using archeological or other historical evidence). The moment described by Gans as the origin of representation will eventually make historical evidence possible but necessarily occurs before such evidence exists. This does not touch the fact that humans are differentiated by their capacity for representation and that this has to have had an origin. It is a persuasive claim that the scapegoating rituals that are recoverable were preceded by an unrecoverable “abortive gesture of appropriation” that turned an ostensive gesture into a representation of an individual intention that itself was able to be understood and reciprocated by a circle of witnesses. Gans discusses how the utility of such a gesture, hence its repetition, could produce increasing “sedimentation” of meaning in the gestures and establish them as representations in the distinctly human sense (*Origin* 59-67). Such gestures could indeed reduce conflict and re-organize communities around ritual behaviors with individuals on the periphery and the significant object, whether originally food or laterly another valuable, in the center, as the sacred. The origin of the taboo, which limits violence by controlling access to the significant/sacred, follows; but the taboo requires that representation be a fully developed capacity within the species, just as does scapegoating. Because representation as a mode of deferral would have enormous evolutionary advantages, selective pressure would favor brains that could engage in it, as such pressures still do. The relatively rapid appearance of big-brained *homo sapiens* would be the paleontological signature of the utility of representation in evolutionary terms, once that capacity begins to develop in a primate species.

Gans’s efforts to hypothesize the derivation of the core linguistic categories from the evolution of the ostensive into the imperative and interrogative is unique. His insistence that the formal/syntactical/logical elements of language arise simultaneously with and are inseparable from the intentional/communal/institutional elements that propose models of the world recognizes a fact that has seemed obvious to me throughout my career, although it is as far from the main currents of linguistics as are Girard’s uses of literature from New Criticism (*Origin* 29-42). Gans has successfully hypothesized the originary event when the capacity for using language as the vehicle for representation arose in our species, a capacity Girard’s schema takes for granted. Once humans developed a wide range of noninstinctive behavioral capacities, the absence of instinctive restraints made a noninstinctive means of controlling aggression essential. The widespread appearance of scapegoating and its reifications suggests that this particular use of representation is now genetically coded, at least partially. The first sacrifice/lynching is an originary event, in a sense, but it is a use of symbolism that arises in a much later and far more elaborate social context than

the first abortive gesture of appropriation, an event that offers a new stability to a simple primate group. It is the utility of the primal event that generates the selective pressure to develop more elaborate rituals of deferral as cultures increase in the complexity that such rituals make possible.

II. Originary Insight in Literary Texts

One of the essential features of Rene Girard's work is his rejection of primitivism and cultural relativism. Without creating foolish claims that proper thinking eliminates violence, he is aware that the sorts of scapegoating that go on in a modern office are different than the actual stoning to death of cripples. The first large scale project sponsored by The Royal Society in 1660 was an investigation of witchcraft that concluded, after ten years, that there was no such thing as witchcraft. The shift from magical to physical causes as explanations has been the principle achievement of science and has lessened the violence of scapegoating in parts of modern society. After summarizing two medieval European episodes of scapegoating, Girard acknowledges the change that science has created, as well as the ways in which science separated humanity from its past.

There was a time when no one could read even the distortions of persecution found in our own history. Finally we did learn. We can put a date to this achievement. It goes back to the beginning of the modern era and seems to constitute only the first stage in a process that has never really been interrupted but has been marking time for centuries because it lacked a truly fruitful direction that would stretch back to mythology. (*Scapegoat* 38)Science is an originary phenomenon, however one chooses to date it. In this passage, Girard refers to the rise of science in the Sixteenth Century, but he is obviously aware of intellectual antecedents in other periods. His own important role, as implied in the "direction" mentioned in the last sentence of the passage, follows from his willingness to treat the texts of both early myth and literature as sources of authentically scientific information — information that is as much a resource for the project of demystification as the information provided by the physical sciences. Girard's work offers a way of seeing ourselves as part of the same struggle, the struggle to manage the rivalrous mimetic violence, that has plagued all human communities. The struggle differs now because of the scale of population increases, the integration of populations, and the amount of energy our technology makes available to us; it differs also because the accumulated insights of our civilization have deprived much of the world of the innocently ignorant unanimity that makes primitive scapegoating fully effective.

Girard makes the literature of classical Athens and the New Testament central to his discussions of the nature of myth and ritual, as well as the sacrificial violence that they sometimes describe and sometimes mask. Girard is explicit in his claim: "the

New Testament Gospels are the starting point for a new science or knowledge of humanity" (*I See Satan* xix); "The single victim mechanism only functions by means of the ignorance of those who keep it working" (*ibid*. 41). Jesus is innocent. Those united in the process of killing him are scapegoating an innocent who asks that they be forgiven because "*they do not know what they are doing*" (*Scapegoat* 111 [italics Girard's]). The force of the Gospel "lies in its dimension of revelation" (*ibid*.). The revelation is an originary moment from which humanity can not go back. Echoing Simone Weil, Girard describes the Gospels as an anthropology whose utility does not require a theology based on the magical elements of the Gospels (*Satan* 44).

Girard also emphasizes that the literature of classical Athens, especially the plays of the Dionysia, mark an originary moment in human history. This literature is central to his literary anthropology because the plays were critical of the violence in the myths which convention required playwrights to use as the sources of their plots. Attic drama provides texts which analyze myth in processes that anticipate those of the Biblical interpreters. Why this happened is a question that Girard acknowledges but does not deal with at length in *Violence and the Sacred*:

In order for men to make discoveries about their own culture, codified rituals must give way to an agile mode of thinking that uses the same mechanisms as religion with a virtuosity that religion never approached. The cultural order itself must have begun to disintegrate, and the overflow of differences must have subsided–not so much, however, as to provoke a new outbreak of violence, which would in turn generate new differences. For reasons unknown to us, primitive societies never meet these conditions. When the cycle of violence begins, it also comes to an end with such rapidity that the opportunity for making major self-discoveries hardly exists. (237)Girard has in mind here the "exceptionally far-ranging and drawn-out critical cycle" (*ibid*. 238) of modern Western society, but the habits of mind that he refers to have antecedents in Classical Athens.

The worship of Dionysis in Athens, which began as ritual dominated by song, dance, and sacrifice, developed a drama whose most important feature was the "agile mode of thinking" that is Girard's focus when he works with tragedy. The cultural organization of Archaic Greek society began to disintegrate under the force of the Athenian enlightenment. By the end of the fifth century, myth is for Euripides no longer a religious artifact; it is a literary device to be used as he wished. In *The Trojan Women*, Euripides has Hecuba say to Helen "Aphrodite is the human lust named rightly" (989-990). When the playwright describes a goddess this way, as in effect a personified hormone, he is thinking for the modern world even if most of his countrymen are not and even if it is several thousand years before his view is shared by large numbers of people. There is enormous intellectual movement in the years between Aeschylus's first surviving play (472) and Sophocles's last play (c.

406).

Girard makes the flat claim that the analytical awareness of the arbitrariness of the choice of target for the accusation leveled against the innocent as a means of restoring unanimity to community (the scapegoat mechanism) is original to the Bible: “This sleight of hand [the scapegoat mechanism] remained hidden until the Jewish and Christian revelation” (*Satan* 44). That the Gospel’s anthropological originality is the clarity with which it exposes the nature of mimetic violence and the role of the *pharmakos* seems correct, but the presence of consciously analytical discussions of this mechanism in Attic drama suggests that the Greeks were up the to same sorts of analysis in the Fifth Century in Athens.

How conscious the Attic dramatists were of the sacrificial nature of mimetic violence is something that Girard seems to have underestimated. Speaking of the performances of the Dionysia as a whole, Girard writes:

Theater performances are also rooted in collective violence and are a form of ritual, though even more cleansed of violence than animal sacrifices. They are culturally richer than animal sacrifices since they are, at least indirectly, meditations on the origins of religion and culture as a whole. As such they are potential sources of knowledge, as Sandor Goodhart shows us in his *Sacrificing Commentary*. But the goal of tragedy is the same as sacrifice. It always aims at producing among the members of the community a ritual purification, the Aristotelian *catharsis*, which is an intellectualized or “sublimated” version of the original sacrificial effect. (*Satan* 78)Girard here describes tragedy as a mode of deferral of violence. The terms “intellectualized” and “sublimated” carry a lot of weight. They point towards a major topic in the drama that is visible in the phrase from Euripides quoted above. Attic drama is an originary moment in the history of world culture precisely because of the ways in which it intellectualized the myths that were its vehicle. That the plays did this in the century before the work of Plato and Aristotle and did it in a popular civic institution in Athens gives them an importance in anthropological terms that is hard to overestimate.

Girard’s acknowledgment of Goodhart’s provocative reading of *Oedipus Rex* understates the issue. These plays are more than “potential sources of knowledge.” They are a decisive step in the movement away from mythic organizations of violence that is the feature of the modern world and there is a reason why this occurred in Greece when it did. The “agile mode of thinking” which recognizes that Aphrodite is a personification, the condition which primitive society never meets, is fully alphabetic “literacy.” Athens is apparently the first society in which a majority of the citizenry were literate, and it is the effects of literacy that open up the intellectualization that makes the plays a new means of deferral and embeds in

them elements of logic which will shortly be much more fully dramatized by Plato and then systematized in Aristotle's *Organon.* The evidence cited in the following section suggests that alphabetic literacy affects neurology and that it, like the abortive gesture of appropriation that establishes representation, is a cultural event that initiates a biological change.

III. The Originary Effects of Literacy

Eric Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963) and Walter Ong's *Orality and Literacy* (1982) are texts which make the case for the decisive nature of literacy in the terms that I have in mind. There is general agreement that the Greek inclusion of letters for vowels in the Phoenician consonantal alphabet occurred in Ionia in the early eighth century. Barry Powell even argues that it is plausible to suggest that the addition of vowels was the work of one man who wanted to record Homer's poems. Havelock is more concerned with the dates when most Athenian citizens achieved at least partial literacy in the new technology. He argues for late fifth century dates, perhaps as late as 425. Most scholars seem to argue for an earlier and more gradual development such that at least rudimentary literacy was widespread by mid-fifth century. ("Literacy here refers only to free males in Athens; literacy among women and slaves is a more uncertain issue.)

Havelock attributes the rise of analysis in classical Greece to the stability of texts which allowed individual thinkers to study them and begin to develop critical analyses of traditional social patterns. Literacy itself is the source of the crisis of differentiation that is visible in Aristophanes's *The Clouds* and in the early dialogues of Plato. Ong's study of the effects of literacy explains the origin of Athenian analysis as a neurological development triggered by a cultural development. In a section of *Orality and Literacy* titled "Words Are Not Signs," Ong takes issue with Derrida's claim that " 'there is no linguistic sign before writing' " (*Grammatology* 14 quoted by Ong 75), insisting that a spoken word is indeed a linguistic representation but adding an observation that confirms Derrida's emphasis on the written word, even when aspects of that emphasis are mistaken. Ong's major thesis is that the brain processes words written with an alphabet (at all points when I refer to writing, I will mean alphabetic literacy) differently than spoken ones and differently than pictographic scripts: "What the reader is seeing on this page [the page of Ong's text at which the reader is looking] are not real words but coded symbols whereby a properly informed human being can evoke in his or her own consciousness real words, in actual or imagined sound" (Ong 75).

Ong does not deal at length with the issues raised by Generative Anthropology with respect to the origins of spoken words, although nothing in his essay contradicts Gans's view of spoken words as modes of representation with a fundamental utility

based on their capacity to represent communal agreements to defer violence. Ong's topic is the effects of and the utility of writing down the words. Words are noises processed by the human ear and, at least pre-electricity, noises made in the presence of a real person. Coding them into marks on a surface, marks that are processed by sight and often without the accompaniment of a person, introduces an additional level of abstraction into the already abstract process of representing ideas by noises. Because of this, "writing restructures consciousness" (*ibid*. 78). The complete Greek alphabet was a point of demarcation because the full representation of words as written artifacts allowed them to be totally detached from speech. Because a text remains in the scene of representation while being detached from interaction between people, what it says can become a content that simultaneously emphasizes the institutional element of language and emphasises the accuracy with which it represents the world, while functioning as a far more formal instrument for those developing or reading that content. Readers and writers could use and know far larger numbers of words than those in the everyday world of speech, and the activity of writing removed all the situational aids of speech, such as tone and gesture. This novelty placed enormous intellectual demands on writers, forcing them to bring to consciousness a myriad of issues that may be safely left to the unconscious in everyday speech. Ong reviews the body of research associated with Parry and others on the characteristics of oral formulaic language in non-literate cultures. Because mnemonic concerns dominate linguistic productions in the rituals of these societies, they emphasize repetition and they are extremely conservative. Because the spoken word is evanescent, it does not allow extended comparisons of statements in evidentiary ways. Because the spoken word appears in encounters between people, it is always potentially agonistic.

The most important implication of the research Ong cites is that written language changes the way brains work and in doing so makes writing a new mechanism of deferral, related to but fundamentally different from speech. Working in the 1930s, the Russian researcher A. R. Luria did work published in 1976 as *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*. Luria worked with populations in Uzbekistan who had never been exposed to the alphabet. He found that they could not perform even rudimentary operations of categorical thinking or logic. Given the series hammer, saw, log, hatchet, "illiterate subjects consistently thought of the group not in categorical terms (three tools, the log not a tool) but in terms of practical situations . . ." (Ong 51 citing Luria 56). The subjects offered narratives about how the tools could be used to work with the log without ever distinguishing the category tool from the log.

A related imitation was consistent when subjects were asked to make simple inferences. Told that the bears in the Far North were white and that Novaya Zembla was in the Far North, typical subjects could not tell what color the bears in Novaya

Zembla were. The responses were again situational: ” ‘I don’t know. I’ve seen a black bear. I’ve never seen any others . . . ‘ ” (Ong 52 citing Luria 104). The illiterates, like the mythographers of Mycenaean Greece and other cultures, could tell stories and organized their consciousness in stories, but could not engage in analysis, the mentally agile thinking that is a trait of literate modernity. Additional work by Luria showed that subjects with even minimal literacy could engage in categorical thinking and make inferences in the ways that are truly described as the second nature of all who have become literate. Ong’s marshalling of evidence strikes me as an essential piece of equipment for Girardians seeking to come to terms with the fact that Athenian society was up to something new. It bears as well on the development of literacy on the other side of the Mediterranean, but the essential point is that the alphabet is a new source of deferral whose effects need to be explored in the context of Girard and Gan’s work.

I will carry the point further by reviewing Girard’s treatment of the Oedipus story and *Oedipus Rex* and then discussing Aeschylus’s *The Eumenides*, a play about which Girard says much less. In both cases I will emphasize the capacity for abstract thought at the center of each play.

IV. Originary Insight in *Oedipus Rex*

Girard’s use of the Oedipus story grounds even Freud. The family is the first location of mimesis, of the models and of the rivalries that are the focus of human experience. Hence the incest taboos whose universality drives from the necessity of limiting violent conflict within families based on sexual competition. Hence Aristotle’s advice that the most powerful tragedies involve relations within families. Hence the archetypal power of a story in which a man kills his father and marries his mother. (I gloss it not as a mapping of infant sexuality but as a representation of the worst thing a man can do.) That Oedipus’s actions are unintentional (he did not know what he was doing when he committed parricide and incest) parallels, although Girard does not note this, Jesus’s comment that his murderers did not know what they were doing. The Oedipus story is worth all of the attention it has received.

Girard begins his discussions of *Oedipus Rex* in *Violence and the Sacred* by associating tragedy with the irrationality of myth:

Men always find it distasteful to admit that the “reasons” on both sides of a dispute are equally valid–which is to say that *violence operates without reason*. Tragedy begins at that point where the illusion of impartiality, as well as the illusions of the adversaries collapses. For example, in *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresias are each in turn drawn into a conflict that each had thought to resolve in

the role of impartial mediator. (46) [Girard's emphasis]This opens Girard's focus on the arguments in the play between Oedipus, Tiresias, and Creon and the very original suggestion by Girard that Tiresias's announcement that Oedipus is the murderer is not a truth but a mimetic falsehood offered to Oedipus (and Thebes) in retaliation for Oedipus's own threats against the prophet. There is a plague in Thebes, a contagion that has created a crisis; Oedipus is no more guilty than anyone else. He is a party to an argument generated by the crisis, and the accusation against him is a mimetic artifact arising from the contagious panic of the moment, an atavistic designation of him as the arbitrarily chosen scapegoat. Oedipus is a paradigm of the process of designation because he is a cripple and a foreigner, a man marked by difference, and because he himself comes to believe the charge against him on the basis of mistaken uses of evidence.

Sandor Goodhart's extensive discussion of this issue is based on the ambiguous use of singular and plural references to the robber(s) who killed Laius. Creon (at Sophocles 107) and the servant who is the sole survivor of the attack on Laius (at 122 and 716) report that Laius was killed by robbers. The Chorus reports an "old faint story" about robbers (292). Oedipus, once he fears that he is indeed the killer of Laius, sends for the servant to have him report on how many murderers there were. He is sure that a report of many murderers will acquit him, since when he killed a man at a place where three roads meet, he was alone. The servant who is the witness to the death of Laius never gives his report. By the end of the play, events have distracted Oedipus from his concern with the number of robbers, the evidence that would decide the question of parricide. Now, Oedipus is concerned instead with the question of who his father was. Goodhart argues that this means that Oedipus's situation remains unclear. The crucial evidence that would convict him of parricide does not appear in the play. Hence his acceptance of his guilt at the end is not justified. Oedipus might indeed be an innocent scapegoat, and the topic of the play is not his heroic insistence on knowing the truth but a pre-modern representation of a postmodern error: the false belief that we know things we really do not know.

Girard and Goodhart, by suggesting that Oedipus is falsely accused, offer a reading that overturns many centuries of interpretation of the play. After citing Goodhart's interpretation in *The Scapegoat*, Girard comments on Sophocles's development of the myth of Oedipus: "Certainly, Sophocles suspects something, but he never goes as far in revealing the structural principle of the scapegoat as the Gospels or even the prophets. Greek culture forbids it. The myth does not burst in his hands and show its inner workings" (122). The myth of Oedipus is a persecution text; Sophocles intuits that it is, and he seems to resist the myth by offering a version of it with an innocent Oedipus. But Sophocles, according to Girard, is not clear about "the real problem, the representation of the myth as a whole and the system of

persecution which has been shaken by the tragedy but not really subverted or made to appear false as in the Gospels" (*ibid*.).

I am not persuaded that Sophocles intended his audience to believe that Oedipus was innocent, or was placed in an ambiguous situation, for reasons ranging from foreshadowing that makes no sense if Oedipus is innocent to the comments about his parricide and incest in *Oedipus at Colonus* in which he says he did what the traditional story said he did. I will use another detail of *Oedipus Rex* as a route to a Girardian interpretation of the play that suggests three things: [1] Sophocles had more than a suspicion about the mechanism of mimetic persecution; [2] Sophocles does indeed expose it as false, although not in the same terms as the Gospel; [3] the precise mechanism of his exposure, the mechanism of deferral of persecution in the play, is reason.

My point of entry into this reading is Tiresias. He is a prophet. In an ancient literary convention, visible at many places in Homer and the drama, what a prophet says is true. Within the universe of the play, when Tiresias says Oedipus is the killer of Laius, that is the truth. In literary terms, Tiresias is a formal device. The audience knows the story and expects, once they hear about the plague and its cause, that Oedipus will learn the things he learns. Tiresias's reluctant revelation is the first step in that process and one that Oedipus does not find persuasive. He accuses the prophet of being a quack in the employ of a conspirator and prepares to punish Creon. Girard's description of Oedipus and Tirisias as doubles is a mis-reading. If the play were a myth they would be doubles, like the enemy brothers. But this is a piece of literature making uses of elements of myth to develop a theme. Tiresias is a prophet not a king, a formal device not a brother, a character in a story who is, by convention, the source of the truth. There is indeed an analysis of scapegoating in the play, but it does not involve Tiresias's exposure of Oedipus's history.

Oedipus's first response to the news of his own situation, and to the crisis for him that it represents, is to blame someone else. The arbitrarily chosen and innocent focus of Oedipus's accusation is Creon, who would become king if Oedipus were deposed. Oedipus accuses Creon of conspiring with a false prophet to attack him and sentences Creon to death. What is remarkable about the play is its portrayal of the process by which Oedipus moves beyond his first response, a paradigm of accusation that is the primitive response to the sacrificial crisis, to a modern and competent concern. After agreeing to ameliorate his sentence of death and merely send Creon into exile, Oedipus hears in Jocaste's effort to reassure him (707-725) the first indication that he himself might indeed be the murderer. The rest of the play dramatizes his response to a fact. Laius was killed "at a place where three roads meet" (716) and Oedipus knows he has killed a man at such a place. Oedipus's response to this fact is to acknowledge that it means *he* might be guilty.

The subsequent action is a model of investigation and of the rational use of evidence to determine who is actually guilty. This turn to investigation and the presentation of evidence is an historic moment. It does not yet have the clarity of the Gospel's focus on the innocent victim, but the play is an analysis of displacement, the mechanism by which individuals project their own guilt on to others, and it does offer a model of how such displacements can be overcome. In the terms of this essay, the play is a portrayal of a means of deferral of sacrificial violence. The means here is the rational analysis of evidence.

Goodhart and Girard are correct in attaching importance to the number of robbers. A fact, the fact that Oedipus killed a man at a place where three roads meet, brings his own behavior to consciousness. The question of guilt or innocence does depend on the number. A thing cannot both be and not be. The fundamental notion of contradiction which Aristotle will later systematize is here the issue that causes Oedipus to send for the servant and initiates the sequence of events later to persuade him of what his actual situation is. The servant appears; he gives evidence that convicts Oedipus; evidence is the issue even though, at the play's frightening climax, it is not evidence about the number of robbers. That situation is a terrible one, in truth, and to the extent that Oedipus is Everyperson, the play enlarges that theme to the claim that none of us can escape the mistakes (Oedipus's situation is a paradigm of a terrible mistake) that our human condition condemns us to. This is the theme of a great work of literature written by a highly literate man. Sophocles intentionally explodes the claim offered by myth that the source of the sacrificial crisis is the evil of the accused rival. The ultimate historical effect of this insight, like the effect of the Gospel, will be to defer some acts of violence. The mechanism by which the insight is confirmed is reason.

V. "Reasons" as Deferral in *The Eumenides*

The story of the Royal House of Argos was so riddled with violence that Aeschylus made it the basis of his great trilogy *The Oresteia.* That this is the only surviving intact trilogy may be blind luck. It may also reflect the efforts of copyists who agreed with later generations about its importance. The first two plays, *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*, follow closely the bloody episodes of the family history that were used to various effects by all three of the tragedians whose work survives. The third play guarantees that Aeschylus is an intellectual with a theme rather than a mythographer peering suspiciously into the past. *The Eumenides* creates an original ending to the history of Orestes that belongs in any discussion of violence.

The topic of the trilogy is the deferral of violence. The mechanism that Aeschylus is interested in is the legal system of Athens, most especially the Court of the Areopagos, the oldest court in Athens which, in 461, in a contested action, had been

stripped of some of its jurisdictions by democrats who suspected the courts of having an oligarchic bias. The *Oresteia* is Aeschylus's last work, staged in 458, two years before his death in 456. In the first two plays, the topic is killing and why people kill. The third play offers a resolution to the violence by portraying a fictional moment in Athenian history, the moment when Athene founds the Court of the Areopagos to adjudicate the guilt of Orestes, who has fled to Athens seeking help after the murder of his mother Clytemnestra. The plays are, on good evidence, a political editorial reminding Athens of the importance of its legal system at a time when that system had been under some attack. They are also, like *Oedipus Rex*, deeply moving meditations on human life. Cassandra's speeches in the *Agamemnon* in the moments before she goes in to be murdered along with the King are matched by Shakespeare but by few others. Even so, a development that occurs in the third play is the most important feature of the trilogy: *Aeschylus portrays logical argument as a means of deferring violence.*

In the background of the plays is the ancient code, a triad that happens to be explicitly summarized in its entirety only in one place, Aeschylus's *The Suppliant Maidens*. Beseeching the citizens of Argos, the maidens ask:

> To strangers without grief
> May they grant justice.–
> May the gods who possess the city
> Be honored by citizens well
> With sacrificial laurel, ancestral.
> For respect of one's parents
> Is third among laws
> Written by Justice (792-70)

The obligation to honor strangers, the gods, and parents is a traditional code typical of tribal social organization in all non-literate societies. It serves (this can be over-emphasized) to limit conflict, protecting travelers, for example, and at least tending to limit conflict within families in situations where clans were the principal social unit. Such codes are conservative and typically inflexible. The mechanism of enforcement is revenge and this points to the mimetic component in them that makes for violent disaster when mimesis produces vendetta.

Here is Girard on the mechanism that is the topic of the plays in the *Oresteia*:

If one individual imitates another when the latter appropriates some object, the result cannot fail to be rivalry or conflict. . . . In human beings, the process rapidly tends toward interminable revenge, which should be defined in mimetic or imitative

terms. (*Double Business* vii)The *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*, in ways that are far more certain than anything that can be said about *Oedipus Rex's* relation to an ancient myth of Oedipus, follow very closely the myth of the House of Atreus. Atreus and Thyestes are doubled brothers whose rivalry includes both the kingship of Argos and Atreus's wife. Thyestes denies Atreus his share of power and seduces Atreus's wife. Atreus's revenge on his brother, tricking him into eating the flesh of his own children, is horrible, but mimetic. You harm me so I harm you. Thyestes curses Atreus but the effect of the curse skips a generation. Aegisthus, surviving son of Thyestes, cohabits with Clytemnestra while Agamemnon, son of Atreus, is at Troy. On Agamemnon's return, Aegisthus helps Clytemnestra kill Agamemnon. He intends his revenge as appropriate compensation for the serving up of "that ghostly food" (1598), the flesh of his murdered siblings fed to Thyestes. Clytemnestra's revenge is intended to pay for the violence done to her daughter Iphigenia, sacrificed by Agamemnon before he went to Troy. Cassandra, Agamemnon's slave/concubine from Troy dies in the contagion in the household.

The Libation Bearers continues the paradigmatically mimetic killing. Aegisthus has revenged his father, honored him as the code requires, but the first play ends with the chorus asking "Oh, can Orestes live be somewhere in sunlight still?" (1646). *The Libation Bearers* opens with Orestes arriving at the tomb of his father. He lives. He too must kill, honoring his father by killing both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. In the course of the play he does so. But the issue that Aeschylus has in mind is clearer in the second play. Agamemnon had been trapped in a way, by the curse on his father and by the need to lead the Greeks to Troy at the cost of his daughter's life. Orestes is even more clearly trapped. To honor his father, he must kill his mother. Apollo has ordered him to do so and he himself will die if he does not commit matricide (269-305). The myth puts him in this dilemma. Aeschylus emphasizes it. The dilemma is a logical category, contradiction. To honor his father he must dishonor his mother. Contradiction prevents him from fulfilling the law that is the basis of deferral in Archaic culture.

These plays are not pacific. Killing is assumed to be appropriate in some situations (in the case of Aegistheus's adultery and bloody acts, for example). The problem is the cycle of vendetta that traps individuals in cycles of killing that have no clear end. At the end of *The Libation Bearers*, Orestes, who thinks he is guiltless because he followed Apollo's orders in killing his mother, looks up on the roof of the palace and sees the Furies, the ancient chthonic goddesses of vengeance. They have smelled the blood and come for him. He flees in terror. The play ends with a question from the chorus: "Where / is the end? Where shall the fury of fate / be stilled to sleep, be done with?" (1075-1076). Those questions reverberate through traditional culture.

Revenge, the threat of being killed by the relatives of the killer's victim, is a mechanism of deferral, the mimetic nature of which is the source of its primitive utility and its limit. Mimetic violence, as Girard observed above, quickly engulfs people in situations where justice is no longer an issue, only blood. The representation of that loss in *The Libation Bearers* is the impossibility of Orestes resolving the dilemma posed for him by the Archaic code. *The Eumenides*, the completion of the trilogy, is Aeschylus's decisive representation of Athens' greatest gift to human civilization: the substitution of argument in public assemblies for actual combat and the substitution of victory in an election for the killing of an enemy. He is not equating tragedy with sacrifice. He is offering sacrifice as a tragedy and political analysis as a means of recovering from sacrificial violence.

The opening scene of *The Eumenides* is set at the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi. Orestes has fled there seeking help from the god whose order made him a matricide. The Furies have followed him there, seeking his blood. They are asleep when Apollo appears and instructs Orestes to travel to Athens. (I will only note in passing the social and dramaturgical skill of this move, which places the scene of the rest of the play above and behind the audience sitting in the theatre on the south slope of the Acropolis.) There in "Pallas' citadel" he will "find those who will judge this case and words to say that will have magic in their figures" (79;81-82). Orestes takes this advice. The Furies, awakened by Clytemnestra's ghost, are enraged that Apollo has helped Orestes escape but the god is unafraid and unimpressed. He knows what they represent; he tells them to leave; they belong where "heads are lopped and eyes gouged out, throats cut, and by the spoil of sex [castration] the glory of young boys is defeated, where mutilation lives, and stoning, and the long moan of tortured men spiked underneath the spine and stuck on pales" (186-190). This is precisely Girardian language; the Furies are ancient personifications of the cruelty of persecution, but the language comes from a Fifth Century Athenian. "Magic words" will be the antidote to the ritual implacability of their vengeance. The first of these follows immediately, when Apollo asks the Furies why, if they pursue matricides, they do not also pursue women who murder their husbands. The Furies have an answer: husband and wife are not blood relatives. But Apollo is not comforted. Married love is "guarded by right of nature" (217-218). This claim that they contradict themselves when they claim to serve justice is the first argument in the play.

The next scene is the temple of Athene on the Acropolis. The Furies have caught up with Orestes there and hear him petition the Goddess of Wisdom who is the Patron Goddess of Athens. He asks her to come and "without work of her spear" (289) to rescue him. The mechanism of the rescue will be non-violent because it will involve argument. The Furies, enraged, sing a magical binding song and recite their prerogatives: "we have authority; we hold / memory of evil; we are stern / nor can

men’s pleadings bend us” (382-384). They are, they insist, beyond any form of argument. Only the fact of a deed matters. Blood for blood in mimetic symmetry. But this insistence will be challenged in the course of the play.

In what must have been an impressive moment, Athene enters. She orders all to be respectful and queries the Furies. Was the man under duress? Was the homicide, in effect, justifiable? The Furies only care that Orestes will not swear he did not kill. Athene insists this is “only half the argument” (428). This insistence marks the second analytical moment in the play. The Furies tell her to decide whether Orestes should be punished, but Athene will not do it alone. “This matter is too big for any mortal man who thinks he can judge it. Even I have not the right to analyze cases of murder where wrath’s edge is sharp. . .” (470-473). She announces that she will create a jury to do so, founding the court of the Areopagos “into all time to come” (484). Aeschylus has a remarkably clear anthropology here. Any single judge condemning a murderer risks triggering another episode of retaliation. To break the cycle, decisions must be by a group. But this is still not a guarantee that the group will not just stone an arbitrarily chosen victim or a mimetic double. The new mode of deferral will propose such a safeguard.

Convening the trial, Athene calls for all the populace to be assembled. One of the sources of justice is transparency in the process. The trial will be public and the jurors have sworn to be just. The *polis* will watch. The first arguments are between the Furies and Orestes. Then Apollo assumes the defense. The scene is relatively short. Some of the topics are troublesome to modern audiences. Apollo’s argument that matricide does not create blood guilt because “the parent is he who mounts” (660) and because mothers are just containers of the father’s seed is standard Athenian sexual physiology; it is accounted for by the fact that Athenians could see semen but had no microscopes available to discover the female contribution to procreation. Nevertheless, it is so perversely wrong as to be hard to stomach, even though it is in the same league as the Furies’s comment about wives who murder husbands.

However unsatisfactory the details of the arguments in the trial are, the fact that they are there makes this text an originary moment in our civilization. Athens’s democracy had been in place since 510. The Council of 500 was a representative body. The Assembly was a pure democracy. The court system was extensive, familiar, and by modern standards rough. There was no central public mechanism for prosecution or defense. Prosecution and defense, especially early in the century, were individual matters. The procedures were subject to abuse and were abused. Athenian civic ethics expected that citizens would do what they could to harm enemies, so many cases were personal punitive efforts. Plaintiffs were themselves subject to punishment if they could not win a minimum number of votes in a case.

This enforced minimum was a limit on frivolous or patently dishonest cases, but even so, justice was not always the issue in trials.

What was at issue, and what is portrayed in *The Eumenides*, extremely carefully, and by explicit contrast with the violence in the first two plays of the trilogy, is that the trials were substitutes for, and hence deferrals of, violence. Some decades later, the academic discipline of rhetoric will develop to train people to speak effectively in political contexts. The evaluation of reasonable arguments will become an academic skill, modeled first by the Socrates of Plato and then systematized by Aristotle. *The Eumenides* emerges at an early stage in these processes. Some Athenians citizens are literate in 458. The abstract analytical resources that literacy makes available have appeared in the city to a degree that is hard to estimate but which, on the evidence of the play, will be recognizable to the audience of the Dionysia.

Approximately 80 years later, Plato did not respect the logical capabilities of Athenian juries. However rough their thought processes were c. 399, they must have been rougher in the first half of the Fifth Century. The rudimentary dramatic representation of analysis in the trial scenes of *The Eumenides* can be accounted for in those terms, or, more simply, in the playwright's disinclination to bother much with verisimilitude when he had ideas he wanted to present. What is important about it is its representation of the use of proto-logic as a means of deferral. The reciprocal revenges of primitive cycles of violence make no allowance for circumstance: "men's pleadings do not bend us." Literacy, Wisdom, Athene, Athens–all change that. Pleadings bend a literate mind and a group of literate men, a jury, listening together to reasons, have the capacity, however imperfect, to use logic, modeled in the play by claims of contradiction, to evaluate the justice of the Furies's questionable claims that violence is necessary. The Furies call their arguments their "arrows" (676). The adversaries in a trial are enemies, but the weapons are words. Death may result, but logic at this point enters our literature as a means of deferral of violent death. Juries will still convict and kill people in most cultures lucky enough to have juries, but Girard acknowledges that actually guilty people, at least in Greek culture, are not scapegoats.

The analysis of evidence and the reasoning modeled by *Oedipus Rex* and the *Eumenides* are processes that non-literate societies are not capable of. They are processes the emergence of which marks a threshold that, once crossed, opens a new possibility for civilization. It is not the possibility envisioned in the Gospel, but it is close to the one created by our own adversarial legal system, which defers violence/punishment or acquittal until after a process of deferral based on reasons. We have walked away from the Furies.

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