THEATRICALITY AND VOTING IN EUMENIDES: “ΨΗΦΟΝ Δ' ΟΡΕΣΤΗ ΤΗΝ Δ' ΕΓΩ ΠΡΟΣΘΗΣΟΜΑΙ”

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Capital court cases make for compelling drama. This was as true in ancient Greece as it remains today, and the voting scene in Aeschylus’ Eumenides (lines 711–753) ranks as one of the most theatrical moments in the entire Oresteia. Athena has just finished instructing the court trying Orestes for matricide, saying that it is now time for them to stand, raise their ballots, and do justice (ὀρθοθείαν δὲ χρῆναι καὶ ψήφον αἴρειν καὶ διαγνώσαι δίκην, 708–709). With Apollo and the Erinyes trading angry reproaches, the jurors proceed to an altar or table, where each deposits his voting token in one of two urns. The goddess then speaks again, claiming it as her task to render a final verdict (λοισθάναι δίκην, 734). She declares her intention to vote for the defendant, explains her reasoning, and states that a tie will result in acquittal. The suspense is palpable as she herself approaches the urns and deposits her token. The spectators undoubtedly sympathized with Orestes’ anguished

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1 I thank Toph Marshall, Jennifer Wise, Vayos Liapis, and the members of the Humanities Research Group at Creighton University for their extremely helpful comments on earlier versions of this piece.

2 Suspense likewise attends the mock voting scene in Aristophanes Wasps, with Philocleon’s question at line 993 (πῶς ἡγωνισμένοι; “What is the outcome?”) recalling that of Orestes at Eumenides 744. The dramatic possibilities of such trials were not lost on prose authors. In Book III, Thucydides juxtaposes quasi-judicial capital cases against the cities of Mytilene and Plataea. And Plato stands the trope on its head in his contrarian Apology, which concludes not with the imposition of the death penalty on Socrates, but with an ironic question about its significance (42a).

The preserved text of Eumenides’ trial contains significant difficulties. Taplin (1989) 398 notes inter alia three important elements that are absent from the scene yet mentioned or hinted at elsewhere in the play: the summoning of witnesses; the swearing of an oath by the jurors; and a founding speech by Athena. He further argues, on largely formal grounds (400), “that Aeschylus’ text of the trial in Eumenides has been considerably disrupted and cut, and is corrupt on a scale which has not been seriously entertained since the heady days of Kirchhoff and Wecklein. While 566–571, 575–677, and 711–777 are substantially as Aeschylus left them, lines 678–710 have been displaced and altered, and lines 572–574 are the corrupted edges of a large lacuna.” Fortunately for us, the lines analyzed here belong to one of the sounder portions of the scene. Unless otherwise noted, the Aeschylean texts presented are those of West (1990); all translations are my own.
cry: "How will the contest turn out?" (πώς ἄγων κριθήσεται;, 744). The very next line emphasizes the visual dimension of the proceedings, as the Erinys ask their mother Night whether she is watching: ἄρ' ὅρας τάδε; (745). Mutatis mutandis, Samuel Johnson was right: nothing concentrates the mind quite like the prospect of a hanging—especially someone else's.

To date, scholars studying this passage have focused on a number of important issues, including the number and stage movements of the jurors; the related question of whether Athena's ballot is a tying or a casting vote; the rationale behind her decision; and the implications of the verdict. Yet an important theatrical element of the voting scene has been comparatively neglected to date. At line 735, the goddess vows her support for the defendant: ψήφον δ' ὀρέστη τήνδ' ἐγὼ προσθήσομαι (“I will cast this vote for Orestes”). The best reading of the line is that a voting token is actually present, and that at some point thereafter Athena places it in the urn for acquittal. The main

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3 How much the audience knew or suspected about the trial’s outcome is unclear. While Jacoby (1954) FGH IIIB Suppl. p. 24 claims “that Aischylus was the first to bring Orestes before the Areopagus,” Sommerstein (1989) 5 argues more tentatively that prior versions of the tale existed. Even if the latter is correct, many of the spectators might have been unfamiliar with such pre-Aeschylean works. At Poetics 1453a20, Aristotle lists Orestes among the heroes often treated by tragedians. Yet elsewhere (1451b25–26) he states that such standard stories, although delightful, were familiar to only a few (καὶ τά γνώριμα ὁλίγοις γνώριμά ἐστιν, ἀλλ’ ἤμως εὐφραίνει πάντας). Nor would the existence of the proagón necessarily change matters. If the practice dates back as early as 458, we still do not know how much poets actually revealed about their upcoming productions. (On evidence for the proagón, see Pickard-Cambridge (1968) 67–68; Csapo and Slater (1995) 109–110, nos. 4–8.) Finally, even an audience expecting Orestes to be acquitted might not know how this would transpire.

4 Hill and Powell (1934) iii.167.

5 Many scholars hold that ten jurors cast their ballots seriatim during the ten couplets comprising lines 711–730. For a judicious review of the scholarship surrounding these lines and the controversial triplet at 731–733, see Sommerstein (1989) 222–225.


9 Pace Goldhill (1984) 258, whose emphasis on ambiguity in the language of the Oresteia leads him to stress “the difficulty of reading a dramatic text as specifying its performance.” His specific objection that the tense of προσθήσομαι is future is not however compelling. Gagarin (1975) 124 n. 13 plausibly suggests that the verb implies that Athena deposits her tying vote sometime before line 742. Or the future tense could also be ‘performative’, announcing an act that is already under way; the promise held in such futures is often fulfilled by its mere enunciation. On the use of the future tense to emphasize present intention see Goodwin (1890) 20 para. 72.