

Introduction

Afterlives in the *Oresteia*

Similarly, David said to the Holy One, blessed be He, “make me to know my end,” that is, he wished to know to which end he was allotted, and his mind was not at rest ’til the good tidings reached him, “Sit at my right hand” (Ps. 110:1).

(*Zohar Bereshith* 1.63a)¹

Dear to the dear ones who nobly died over there,
 being prominent
 as an august lord under the earth
 and an attendant of the greatest
 chthonic rulers there.
 For when you lived you were king
 of those wielding in their hands destined fate
 and the mortal-persuading scepter.

(*Choephoroi* 354–62)

Preoccupation with one’s lot after death has been suggested as the starting point of all philosophical thinking and is one of the central concerns of world religions. It is evident in the quotation above from the *Zohar*, as it is in innumerable other religious texts.² In Ancient Greece, mystery cults promised a better afterlife – but antiquity’s profound silence has segregated them from the mainstream of Greek religion. Unlike the scriptures and commentaries of numerous other religions, the only openly circulating Ancient Greek texts outspoken about the afterlife are philosophical and literary. Among them, the one with perhaps the greatest disparity between its overt concern with what lies beyond death and the lack of scholarly attention to the theme is Aeschylus’

¹ Quoted in Segal (2004), 630.

² For recent overviews of afterlife conceptions in ancient and world religions see Obayashi (1992); Coward (1997); Bremmer (2002); Segal (2004); and Smith (2009).

Oresteia.³ In scene after scene, and in the work as a whole, afterlife conceptions transform both individual values and the structures within which humanity operates. I am not claiming that focusing on the afterlife radically transforms our understanding of the *Oresteia*. In analyzing this understudied theme, I merely attempt to estrange and thus reevaluate some of the trilogy's most often discussed ethical and political dilemmas.⁴

Plurality and ambiguity enrich the *Oresteia*'s representations of human afterlives. Foremost, these techniques demonstrate a literary field of meaning, in interaction with, but not bound by, religious ideas. One can unpack crucial differences between religious and literary treatments by contrasting the two quotations above. Each passage depicts the figure who personifies the highest kingship in its culture facing an uncertain afterlife. The first exemplifies how definitive religious answers can be. The *Zohar* fills in a gap from the absence of a positive individual afterlife in the Hebrew Bible. It presents David's anxiety about his "end" after a tumultuous earthly reign, yet it mollifies him with assurance from the highest authority, directly quoting the divine through a passage from the Psalms.

By contrast, the *Choephoroi* passage is sung by the Chorus of Slave Women, who have no stated connection to the divine. Moreover, its content is highly incongruous with its setting: Agamemnon's wife has slaughtered him, dismembered him, and interred him without proper funeral rites. Agamemnon's disgraced end is not alleviated by this serene picture of the powerful ruler beloved in the afterlife by "the dear ones who nobly died over there," that is, his friends who died gloriously in combat at Troy. Without a definitive promise, this choral song only increases the tension between Agamemnon's manner of death and his imagined afterlife.

In the *Oresteia*, epistemic uncertainty complicates nearly every mention of the afterlife. The translation of the first sentence of the *Choephoroi* passage above lacks a main verb, reflecting its absence in the Greek. Are the Chorus

³ There has been little scholarship on the afterlife in tragedy in general and in the *Oresteia* more specifically until recently. North (1992) briefly demonstrates just how freely tragic authors treat traditional understandings of the afterlife. Schlatter (2018), in a lightly revised doctoral dissertation in German, provides a running commentary on chthonic forces in key tragedies, with comparanda and bibliography. Martin (2020) surveys the types of interactions between the dead and living in all of tragedy, emphasizing the harm they may do to each other.

⁴ This is in line with other readings of the *Oresteia* and tragedy more generally that have shifted our understanding by shedding light on specific themes. The works of Vernant, Zeitlin, Lebeck, Goldhill, and the collection of essays edited by Silk (1996) are the most relevant for my approaches to the genre of tragedy, its poetics and themes.

singing of a factual situation in which Agamemnon is honored in the afterlife (“you *are* dear”) despite his ignominious death and dishonored funeral? Or are they *wishing* for the honor that is currently lacking (“you *would be* dear”) and thus declaring it may still occur? Such ambiguity is partially a product of the *Oresteia*’s multivalent web of themes and terms couched in dense poetry, whose permutations have been analyzed on a variety of fronts. This study uncovers a further, little-examined set of linguistic, thematic, and philosophical issues that arise specifically from potential afterlives. The trilogy’s use of this imagined plurality is part of its poetics of the beyond.

Taking the epistemic uncertainty so prevalent in the *Oresteia* one step further, most of the characters who depict the beyond make no religious or prophetic claim to knowledge. Their descriptions are regularly marked as their own projection onto the unknown. The views of human characters are ambiguous when taken alone, contradictory compared with their previous statements, at odds with those of others, or belied entirely by the manifestation of an underworld figure. For instance, several characters at the start of the trilogy express views of death as oblivion, an absolute end to consciousness. In contrast to this are, at first, the hints of continuity in ambiguous statements by these same characters. As the trilogy progresses, numerous scenes feature afterlife continuity prominently. These include a vision of the self in the underworld, a staged attempt at raising from the dead, ghostly returns from the underworld, the transformation of staged characters into afterlife beings, and even references to judgment by Hades. Sometimes an assortment of these possibilities is expressed by or about the same character. In the *Choephoroi* scene of mourning, the Chorus describe several other ways of thinking about Agamemnon, including as an agitated, undead avenger. The afterlife, moreover, is not only left to human surmise. In the *Eumenides*, the Ghost of Clytemnestra speaks of her existence in the underworld and the chthonic Erinyes reveal the ethical punishment of the dead.

Understanding how possible afterlives transmute both individual arcs and political structures in the *Oresteia* leads to new perspectives on key points and affects the reading of the whole. Characters draw radically disparate conclusions from their contemplation of the beyond; affirmation or denial of the afterlife affects how they face the possibility of death, a theme that the Herald, Cassandra, and the *Agamemnon*’s Chorus all address. Other characters ground vengeance, and even political coups, on one or several versions of existence after death. These appeals are conspicuous in the mourning for Agamemnon, in the claims of Clytemnestra’s Ghost, and in Orestes’ transformation into an undead hero. Many see the finale of the *Oresteia* as akin to religious revelation, promising to resolve all the problems of humanity. Yet,

this book will argue, the counterrevelation of ethical punishment in the underworld presents a wide-ranging contrast to the vision of justice and the state at the end of the trilogy.

Several introductory sections follow, as a guide to the book and its key terms. The first provides necessary background on Ancient Greek religious and literary ideas about the afterlife. The second section offers some common methods for analyzing ethics in literature that several of the chapters will challenge. This section also gives a working definition of tragic poetics for contextualizing ethical analysis in a genre of stylized characters and extreme situations. The third section surveys the relevant political background for the structures and themes in the *Oresteia*. The last section introduces the main concerns of each chapter to preview the arc of the whole book.

Material Background and Literary Precedent

The concept of an “afterlife” is a flexible one in the Greek tradition.⁵ Generally, it refers to the continuity of a human being after biological death, with the retention of some group of recognizable features. Yet the mechanisms, forms, and meanings of such a continuity are multifarious. Western religions inherited from the Greco-Roman tradition a specific subset of ideas concerning an ethically determined afterlife, with the promise of reward as well as punishment.⁶ These have led to a tendency in earlier scholarship to condemn or disregard the far more prevalent Greek views that had little or nothing to do with the judgment of ethical actions. On the other hand, the vast array of Eastern ideas about the afterlife, many of which bear similarities to Greek ones, were not widely discussed by the Greeks themselves, nor is direct influence from the East easily found.⁷ Between these two factors, studies of Greek religion have sometimes had trouble dealing with its flexibility and diversity on its own terms.⁸ Within the *Oresteia*, many of the culturally available notions concerning life after

⁵ Major studies and overviews concerning the Greek afterlife include Rohde (1925); Vermeule (1979); Burkert (1985), 190–215, 276–304; Vernant (1989), (1991), and (2001); Sourvinou-Inwood (1995); Johnston (1999); Bremmer (1983) and (2002); Garland (1985); Jouanna (2015); and Larson (2016), 251–309.

⁶ On the wide range of sources, both Greco-Roman and Near Eastern, for the various modern notions of life after death, see Bremmer (2002), 41–102; Segal (2004), 399–732; and Casey (2009).

⁷ Bremmer (2002), 24–6.

⁸ Attempts to fit Greek afterlife ideas into a narrative that progresses more or less toward the views in later religions occur both in classic and modern studies, such as Rohde (1925), Burkert (1985), and Bremmer (2002). On the opposite extreme, Parker (2011), xii, claims that the Ancient Greeks were relatively indifferent to the afterlife, which is therefore not a part of his study of major issues in Greek religion.

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death make consequential appearances. Moreover, there are several ideas hardly found in previous Greek texts or mainstream religious practices. What was culturally standard in 458 BCE and what might have stood out? A necessarily oversimplified, brief discussion of contemporary Archaic and Classical Greek cultural and literary treatments of afterlives follows, to help contextualize the occurrences of these ideas in the *Oresteia*. Each chapter will return to and expand on relevant ideas in this overview.

From the earliest times, Ancient Greek care for the dead focused on honorable memorialization and rites with social importance. Rituals could be sophisticated affairs in which lament channeled grief and brought groups together, burial goods symbolized honor, and markers at the grave focused memory.⁹ There was clearly political tension in democratic Athens surrounding the lavishness of aristocratic funerals, since they were repeatedly legislated against.¹⁰ Further emphasis on the state's role in burial seems to be influenced by Cleisthenes' democratic reforms. Starting in the early part of the fifth century, the Athenian war dead were buried in the *dēmosion sēma* ("public tomb") outside the city walls of Athens, breaking with general Greek practice of burial on the battle site.¹¹ The new location – away from previous aristocratic tombs – the broad architecture, and the associations with symbolically significant tombs all signaled the difference of democratic values.¹² The funeral was at state expense, first with a chance for individual offerings and then with processions of caskets by tribe, with one casket for those whose bones were not recovered. Funeral speeches were given to the citizen body. The most famous one, Pericles' funeral oration, as reported in Thucydides, does not focus on the afterlife at all, but on the perspectives of the living citizens on Athens, how their ancestors increased its power, and how the fallen have preserved it (2.35–46).¹³ This is a speech in part about subsuming familial memories of the dead to social memory. It emphatically

⁹ On grave rituals and their surrounding mourning, see Garland (1985), 21–37; Alexiou (2002), esp. 4–7; Oakley (2004); and Mirto (2012), 62–167.

¹⁰ See Shapiro (1991), 629, 643–47; Morris (1992), 129–34, 138–45; Meyer (1993), 106, on Cicero *de Leg.* ii 59–66; and Mirto (2012), 148–51.

¹¹ Thuc. 2.34. On the *dēmosion sēma*, its excavations and imagery, see Clairmont (1983); Stuppenrich (1994); and Arrington (2010). On the meaning of the split from Greek practice of battlefield burial for the ideology of Athens, focusing on the equality of all Athenians, see Loraux (1986), esp. 18–56. Contrary to Thucydides' claims, we have evidence of burial at battle sites both before and after the Persian Wars, on which see Toher (1999).

¹² Arrington (2010), 525, 532–3.

¹³ On the whole genre of Athenian funeral orations and their emphasis on building an imaginary idea of Athenian democracy, see Loraux (1986). On the funeral oration as a specifically Periclean political statement in the context of the first year of the war, see Sicking (1995). For an example of the long debate over the particular relationship of his speech to democracy and its institutions, see Harris (1992).

states that the act of facing death bravely and the consummation of dying for the *polis* erases any harms these individuals did in their private lives (2.42).

We also have evidence from Thucydides of cult for the dead of Plataea (3.58.4) and late evidence for a cult for the dead of Marathon, as protectors of Athens.¹⁴ Although they did not end tyranny in Athens, Harmodius and Aristogeiton, the aristocrats who attacked the tyrannical family, were referred to as the Tyrannicides; uniquely, they were awarded statues in the Agora and received democratically tinged cultic worship.¹⁵ These are some of the ways the material and ritual commemoration of the Athenian dead reinforced political ideas about the democracy at the time of the *Oresteia*.

The following chapters address analogous aspects of the trilogy, as death and burial rites are loci of discord throughout. I argue that close attention to all aspects of speech regarding the dead, burial, and afterlife return shows that they diverge substantially from internal expectations, which are conditioned by civic and individual practices as well as by literary precedent. The return from the Trojan War involves public discourse over its casualties (Chapters 1 and 2). This includes civic disaffection at their loss and halting, restrictive discourse about their afterlife and share of glory. The *Oresteia*'s corrupted burial rituals and emphasis on the mourning of Agamemnon (the *kommos*) are familiar ground.¹⁶ The contest over the burial of Agamemnon is intertwined with the rivalry for control over the royal house and the attempt to restore rites proper to a father and king (Chapter 4). The question remains open of whether it is not vengeance rather than ritual that restores honor, an issue in the afterlife of Clytemnestra as well (Chapter 6). On the political front, both Agamemnon's and Orestes' afterlives include continuing civic protection (Chapter 5). I will argue that death in war and rhetoric over burial from the start of the trilogy provide a framework for a meaningful rereading of the picture of Athens at its end (Chapter 7).

As is well known, Archaic and Classical Greek culture often distinguished between body and soul: the former decayed, and the latter

¹⁴ On the heroic aspect of these burials, see Kearns (1989), 55; and Currie (2005), 89–119, who adds evidence concerning the dead of Thermopylae, Salamis, and the Megarian dead of the Persian Wars, as well as from other *poleis*.

¹⁵ Hdt. 5.55–6, 6.123; Thuc. 1.20.2, 6.53–9; *Ath. Pol.* 18.2–6. Shear (2012) identifies the rituals as occurring during the Panathenaia and thus posits a mutual reinforcement between the democratic aspects of the festival and the actions of the Tyrannicides. Cf. Kearns (1989), 55, 150; and Azoulay (2017), 15–23.

¹⁶ For the corrupted rituals in the *Oresteia* and their poetic function, see the classic articles of Zeitlin (1965) and (1966). On the poetics of ritual in tragedy, focusing on Sophocles, see Brook (2018), 3–19.

would go elsewhere.¹⁷ Literature and artistic representations depict some portion of the person continuing after death in the grave, in the realm of Hades, or in both. One of the most influential texts, *Odyssey* 11, contains a different set of elements in tension. The notion that a partly physical body could continue in Hades alternates with something close to an immaterial soul existing there.¹⁸ Although this study will use the term “ghost” in English for consistency, a wide range of terms, each with its own undertones, refers to the soul after death. The most flexible and wide ranging is *psukhē*, from the word for breath. Others, such as *eidōlon* (“image”), *skia* (“shade”), *opsis* (“vision”), and *onar* (“dream”), all refer to the vestige of the person as visual, without their former substance.¹⁹ Archaic literature tends to depict the dead soul less as a full subject than as the remainder of a person, lamenting its lost life, aroused only by contact with the living. Such is the main tendency of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, with references to death and the realm of Hades as dark, gloomy, shadowy, and invisible.²⁰ The presumed etymology of Hades (Ἅιδης) in many Greek texts is from ἀ-ιδεῖν, *a-idein*, “not to see.”²¹ This notion of life as light and death as darkness is structurally embedded in Greek culture and recurs with variations throughout the *Oresteia*, as do many of the Archaic afterlife terms and ideas.

Even in the Homeric shadow realm, however, the theme of continuation beyond death invites poetic transformations of value. Instead of souls unable to interact with each other or with the living, both Homeric epics return dead souls into the narrative to reverse some of the positions they held in life. Thus, when comparing antecedents in literature, this study refers to the scenes of Patroclus’ return as a ghost (*Il.* 23.62–107), Odysseus’ stories of visiting the realm of Hades (*Od.* 11), and the (likely written somewhat later) scene of souls interacting with each other in the afterlife (*Od.* 24.1–204). Aeschylus’ Ghost of Darius from the *Persians* and the

¹⁷ Rohde (1925); Vermeule (1979); Mirto (2012), 10–28; and Jouanna (2015), 55–62.

¹⁸ Tsagarakis (2000), 105–23; and Sourvinou-Inwood (1995), 10–107.

¹⁹ Vernant (1991), 186–8, defines three kinds of supernatural apparition denoted in Homer by the term εἰδῶλον, all of which are actual doubles of a human being, rather than products of the imagination: the phantom, *phasma*, created by a god in the semblance of a living person; the dream, *oneiros*, considered to be a sleep apparition sent by the gods as an image of a real being; and the souls of the dead, *eidōla kamontōn*, phantoms or images of the dead, which exist in the afterlife and are also called *psukhai*. Cf. Rohde (1925), 3–26, 156–235; Vermeule (1979), 8; and Burkert (1985), 190–8.

²⁰ Gazis (2018), 36–40; and Vermeule (1979), 23–34, with comparanda from other cultures.

²¹ On the disputed etymology of Hades, see Chantraine, s.v., who is unwilling to commit; and Beekes (1998), s.v. For further notes on etymology and alternate names, see Burkert (1985), 195–6; Albinus (2000), 32; and Gazis (2018), 36. Cf. Homer’s puns in *Il.* 5.844–5 and 6.284–5; and Aeschylus *Sept.* 856–60.

numerous references to Hades in his *Suppliants* provide the other major comparanda.²²

Absent any scene in tragedy that takes place in the underworld, scholars routinely understand phrases that refer to acting in Hades as simply metaphors for being dead.²³ Yet meaningful actions and interactions in the realm of the dead are mentioned by several characters in the *Oresteia*, from allusions by Cassandra (Chapter 3) and the Slave Women (Chapter 4) to the risen Ghost of Clytemnestra's claim that those she killed are shaming her (Chapter 6). Even the shorter references and allusions, the following chapters will show, are deeply imbricated with the trilogy's themes and should be interpreted both literally and metaphorically. Each underworld reference echoes some aspects of the Homeric underworld but often differs in pivotal details.

When the dead were thought to be agitated by a lack of care, such as remaining unburied, they were said to reappear, demanding in a dream or through an intermediary some ritual or action to return them to rest.²⁴ In Athens, for which we have the best evidence in the Classical era, several annual civic festivals were concerned with honoring the dead, explicitly as prophylaxis against the anger of spirits who could affect life.²⁵ In Homer, too, there are numerous threats from the dead and dying. Not one of the Homeric undead, however, actually manifests any power over the living.²⁶

In tragedy generally, and Aeschylus more particularly, undead figures can be pivotal to the dramatic action.²⁷ Aeschylus himself may have been

²² Other types of afterlife are beyond the scope of the argument but are still fruitful areas for research. These include the Hesiodic spirits of the gold race and his "Watchers"; and Herodotus' story of Melissa at the Oracle of the Dead (5.92). Plays with central undead figures in extant tragedies after the *Oresteia* include Polydorus' Ghost in Euripides' *Hecuba*, Achilles' Ghost mentioned within his speech, and the revenant title figure in *Alceste*.

²³ Short references to acting in Hades without follow-up are plentiful in Sophocles and Euripides, e.g.: Soph. *Aj.* 865; Eur. *El.* 1144–5; *Ion* 953; and *Tro.* 445. The *Antigone* as a whole, however, presents a counterexample to such a dismissive attitude. Antigone's speeches conjoin references to Hades that can be taken as merely synonymous with death with appeals to the "laws of Hades" (519, cf. 451–2) as a religious matter and repeated references to being there with her family as motivation for her act (72–6, 542, cf. 912). Cf. Rehm (1994), 59–71; and Foley (1996). On the *Alceste*, a play deeply concerned with the afterlife, see Dova (2012), 170–87; and Schlatter (2018), 191–235.

²⁴ Johnston (1999), 9–10, 38–81; and Jouanna (2015), 62–3.

²⁵ See Johnston (1999) on the fear of ghosts rising, 22, 29; on the needs of the dead, 27–8; on funerary law, 40–1; on the Genesis as a civic "festival of the dead" for one's "begetters," 43–5; on the Nemesis as a "festival of the dead" to avoid Nemesis, "wrath," even from dead parents, 46; and on the Anthesteria, which was partly comprised of sacrifices to Hermes Chthonios for leading the dead back to the underworld after three days above, and included roles for Dionysus, Orestes, and the Erinyes, 55, 63–6. Cf. Burkert (1985), 190–203.

²⁶ Hence the ubiquitous dishonoring of enemy corpses and seeming unconcern for the cremation of common soldiers, on which see Garland (1984).

²⁷ Johnston (1999), 7–32, lays out the evidence for the increasing influence of the dead in literature from Homer's relatively weak souls to the active undead in tragedy.

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the first to bring spirits on stage.²⁸ Certainly the summoning and appearance of the Ghost of Darius is the central dramatic action of the *Persians*. Although our evidence is limited, the extant sources are most likely not the only literary undead to which Athenian audiences had ever been exposed by 458 BCE.²⁹ For example, Aeschylus' fragmentary *Psychagogoi* ("Ghost-Raisers"), of uncertain date, is connected with Odysseus' journey to the underworld.³⁰ In the *Oresteia*, the unsettled spirits of the dead play a number of roles: the Herald denies the desire of the Trojan War casualties to rise (Chapter 1), Cassandra sees the ghostly forms of the Children of Thyestes (Chapter 3), the mourners of Agamemnon call on him to rise bodily (Chapter 4), and Clytemnestra's Ghost actually arrives on stage and activates destructive forces in the world (Chapter 6).

In Greek religion, attributions of divine power to the dead sometimes blurred the line between humans and gods. Heroes were conceived of as the powerful spirits of dead individuals. They were local semidivinities with shrines where they received ritual cult, unlike the gods, who were worshipped at multiple sites all over the Greek world.³¹ Historically, both Agamemnon and Orestes received cult as heroes. In the *Choephoroi*, the mourners of Agamemnon attempt to harness his supernatural power for vengeance (Chapter 4), and in the *Eumenides*, Orestes speaks of his own powers after death in the manner of a hero (Chapter 5). However, I will argue that the afterlife of each bears a counterintuitive relation to their living characters and their cultic worship in Greece.

The Ghost of Clytemnestra, for her part, neither haunts Orestes directly nor gains heroic powers but mobilizes the Erinyes on her behalf. These chthonic deities, known from Mycenaean times, had only a minor cultic presence in Greek religion.³² The Erinyes are widespread, however, in the visual arts and Archaic literature. In the former, they are depicted as snakes, symbolizing divine vengeance.³³ In the latter, the Erinyes have their own

²⁸ As Bardel (2005), 92, argues, from later evidence.

²⁹ There were clearly tragedies with scenes set in Hades, which Aristotle, in *Poetics* 1456a3, specifically mentions under the category of "spectacle." Yet none survive. Aristophanes' *Frogs*, set mostly in the underworld, was staged over fifty years after the *Oresteia*. The Basel Krater (Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig BS 415), dated to 480 BCE, gives a visual representation of a possible tragic raising of the dead preceding the *Oresteia*. See Wellenbach (2015).

³⁰ Henrichs (1991), 187–92; Moreno (2004), 7–29; Cousin (2005), 137–52; Bardel (2005), 85–92; Sommerstein (2008b), 269–73; and (2010a), 249–50; and Martin (2020), 76–80. Other Aeschylean dramas with potential underworld or soul motifs exist only in tiny fragments: *Sisyphus the Stone-Roller*, which might have been a satyr play, and *The Weighing of Souls*, in which the characters are still living.

³¹ Rohde (1925), 115–38; Burkert (1985), 203–8; Kearns (1989); Antonaccio (1994) and (1998); Currie (2005); Bremmer (2006), 15–20; and Parker (2011), 103–23.

³² Burkert (1985), 44; and Sewell-Rutter (2007), 81–2. ³³ LIMC, s.v. "Erinyes."

genealogy and functions: myths before Aeschylus present them as older than the Olympians, the daughters of Gaia.³⁴ This locates them in a wide constellation of dark, chthonic, bloody, and deadly forces.³⁵

There is always an undertone of terror to the Erinyes, yet previous references to their functions fall into two connected categories – balancing the universe and carrying out curses among humans – the first of which is seemingly benign. In Heraclitus, they prevent occurrences contrary to nature, keeping the very sun in its course, as ministers of Justice.³⁶ This also covers one of their most prevalent duties in Homer, namely to guard against actions and events contrary to the universal order, even when divinities themselves would transgress it.³⁷ This is the only function of the Erinyes within the *Prometheus Bound* (whether or not it was written by Aeschylus). Along with the *Moirai* (Fates), they are explicitly the pilots of divine necessity, whom not even Zeus can contravene (*Prom.* 515–18). In curbing the excesses of the gods, the Erinyes function as noncontingent enforcers of the current structure of the universe.

For mortals, however, the balancing power of the Erinyes is far more sinister. Their most neutral function is as the guarantors of oaths, in which, however, self-cursing is also involved.³⁸ More destructively, they are the divine forces of vengeance, deeply identified with family curses.³⁹ In many of these examples, they come from under the earth.⁴⁰ Both literary and material

³⁴ On the genealogy of the Erinyes in Homer and Hesiod, their functions before Aeschylus, and their distinction from the spirits of death, the *Kēres*, see Sommerstein (1989), 6–9; and Sewell-Rutter (2007), 78–91, who also distinguishes them from the Fates, the *Moirai*, 143–4.

³⁵ On the meaning of “chthonic,” a poetic term for supernatural forces connected to the earth and underworld, see e.g. Scullion (1994); Burkert (1985), 190–215; and Henrichs (1991), who emphasizes its dual aspect as both fertile and deadly.

³⁶ Fr. 94 DK. Sewell-Rutter (2007), 79, collects instances of the Erinyes’ corrective nature from Homer, citing the scholia on *Il.* 19.417 that “they are the overseers (ἐπίσκοποι) of things contrary to nature.” Cf. Sommerstein (1989), 6–12.

³⁷ In the *Iliad*, Poseidon is admonished by the threat of the Erinyes, who support the claims of the elder, in this case Zeus (15.204). Hera uses them to silence a horse endowed with speech (19.400–18). Cf. Johnston (1992); and Sewell-Rutter (2007), 88 n. 40.

³⁸ See Burkert (1985), 197–8, 200, 252–3. Oath formulas in the *Iliad* invoke the Erinyes (19.259–60, cf. 21.412). In *WD* 803, the Erinyes assemble at the birth of Oath, son of Strife (Ἐπίς). On oaths in ancient Greece, see Sommerstein and Torrance (2014).

³⁹ For example, Phoenix’s father curses him with the Erinyes (*Il.* 9.454–6) and Meleager’s mother curses him similarly (*Il.* 9.566–72). Athena tells Ares that the Erinyes of his mother are taking vengeance on him for abandoning the Achaeans (*Il.* 21.412–14). In the *Odyssey*, it is the mother’s Erinyes that afflict Oedipus (*Od.* 11.280). This literary identification with curses has a material corollary, for in curse tablets from even before the *Oresteia*, they are part of a constellation of threatening, chthonic (and often female) deities: Hecate, Hermes of the underworld, and Persephone; see Johnston (1999), 71–9, 91–4.

⁴⁰ As in Agamemnon’s speech in *Il.* 19.259–60: “the Erinyes, who beneath the earth punish dead men, whoever has sworn a false oath.” Cf. *Il.* 3.276–9; and see Schlatter (2018), 125 n. 4, for further citations of their connection with the underworld.