

The Stars' Earthly Mirror: Heavenly Inversions in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus

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Abstract

Plato's *Republic* provides a distinctive representation of Ancient Greek astronomy in the image of the cosmic Spindle of Necessity. In this mythical astral space the goddess Necessity (*Ananke*) and her daughters oversee the destinies of mortal creatures. The stars and the planets turn on this spindle with irresistible inevitability. For Homer and Hesiod, the celestial bodies seem closer to the *earth*, yet still abstractly aloof: washed by day as they dip into the ocean, and dictating the passage of the seasons. Thus the full extent of the divine significance of the stars seems very understated in Greek mythology. I argue that the divine power of the stars is brought vividly into focus by the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. Here, the stars are symbolically mirrored on earth by the signal flares which announce the Argive victory at Troy. The flares form a relay between the cities of Troy and Argos, crossing air and water, much like the invisible lines which create the constellations across the vacuum of space. This image commences a trilogy replete with the nocturnal imagery of sleeplessness, disturbed dreams and light in the dark. I show that this motif of light in darkness gains its power in Aeschylus' trilogy by metonymically bringing the stars to earth. The fires of this earthly mirror are fuelled by indifferent necessity and polluted divinity. The light rushes home, preceding the doomed king Agamemnon, whose death demands the eventual reconciliation under the joyful processional torches of the trilogy's conclusion.

I. Homer and Hesiod

The stars are distant objects to many in the twenty-first century: not only in the vast objective physical distances which separate us from the heavenly bodies, but also in our relationships with them. It is no surprise to find that stars had a central role in many aspects of pre-industrial life. This paper examines one aspect of starlight in Classical Greek tragedy. I argue that the stars have a quality which is inherently divine to the Ancient Greek mind: they are portents of good and ill – like the gods. The physical distance of the astral bodies was, of course, an insurmountable obstacle for the Greek stage. The main force, then, of my argument concerns the way in which Aeschylus, in his trilogy the *Oresteia*, is able to harness the symbolism of the stars by inverting the source of nocturnal light. First, I shall very briefly survey the status of the stars in Greek mythology, before examining Aeschylus' inversion. We begin in the forge of Hephaestus.

In book eighteen of Homer's *Iliad*, Thetis, the mother of Achilles, comes to Hephaestus to ask for a new shield and armour for her son. Hephaestus, the god of the forge, crafts an astonishing shield, exhibiting intricate detail. The shield portrays a geocentric universe within which, being a god, Hephaestus is able to include an incredible amount of life and activity. The shield depicts a wedding, a siege, a ploughland scene, a king's estate at harvest, a vineyard, a herd of cattle attacked by lions, a sheep meadow, and a dancing circle. But along with these microcosmic details, we also have a grand, macrocosmic view of the entire universe, with the earth, the sky, and the sea. Included in this panorama are the sun, the moon, and the constellations of the Pleiades, the Hyades, Orion the Hunter and the Great Bear. This last constellation Homer also calls by another name: the Wagon, since it 'wheels on her axis always fixed, watching the Hunter, / and she alone is denied a plunge in the

Ocean's baths.¹ The Great Bear is the only constellation that the Greeks recognised which remains visible throughout the celestial year. All the others are washed 'in the Ocean's baths' as they sink beneath the horizon. Homer's stars, then, fall within the limits of the ocean; indeed, at the conclusion of his description of the shield, Homer tells us that Hephaestus 'forged the Ocean River's mighty power girdling / round the outmost rim of the welded indestructible shield.'² The Shield of Achilles thus provides a visualisation of the Homeric universe, with the earth – with all its activity – at the centre, the sun, moon, and stars around it, and encircling this whole universe is the ocean which lies beyond even the stars. The Shield of Achilles shows us that the heavens are within the realm of human cognisance: when we see the sun and stars rise and set, we see them emerge from our own world.

That other Greek epic poet, Hesiod, also gives an account of the stars. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, the stars are born of the goddess Dawn, so they are very much a part of the same numinous structure that orders the human world.³ For mortals, the stars also have another, very specific, role which Hesiod tells us about in his *Works and Days*. There, Hesiod tells us of the Pleiades, which rise in May to bring the harvest, of Sirius, the Dog-Star, associated with high summer and the dog days of summer, of the rising of Arcturus in late winter as a herald to spring, and June, 'when Orion's strength first shows itself', which is the time to be winnowing the grain.⁴ For Hesiod, the stars are a way of dictating how to work the land; they are herald to the seasons, and the good and bad days that each season brings; and they are intimately connected to the earth and the fruits that come from the soil. Taken together, Hesiod's two extant epics – the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* – demonstrate his portrayal of the mythological and the scientific with equal seriousness. As in the former poem, which describes the unruly god of the heavens, Ouranos, impregnating (some say with the rains) the goddess Gaia, whom some still know as Mother Earth, in the latter, Hesiod still sees the heavens as having a bearing on everyday life. To many watch-wearers, diary-owners, and smart-phone handlers of today, who may struggle to identify more than one or two constellations, the stars are simply mysterious points of light, many light-years away; but Hesiod could read them like a calendar and a plan of the day's work on the land.

II. The *Oresteia*

In book eight of the *Iliad*, Homer describes the amassed Trojan army, fifty-thousand-strong, camped outside their city walls at night, surrounding their blazing watch fires. In an epic simile, the poet likens this scene to the constellations around the moon.⁵ The fires dotted around the night landscape form an effective analogue to the points of light in the night sky. Aeschylus adopts this image, but carries it further, imbuing it with terrible divine import.

The *Oresteia* of Aeschylus comprises three plays: *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, and *Eumenides*; it is the only extant trilogy of Greek tragedy. It begins at the end of the Trojan war: the war which ended in the destruction of the city of Troy. In his opening scene, Aeschylus brings Homer's starry simile rushing home to the Greek city of Argos. The first scene is a monologue delivered by the Watchman who has spent the past year on the roof of

¹ Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), XVIII.570-71 (Greek ll. 488-89).

² Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Fagles, XVIII.708-9 (Greek ll. 607-8).

³ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 381-82, in Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, trans. Glenn W. Most (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, 2010).

⁴ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 383-600, in Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, trans. Glenn W. Most (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006, 2010).

⁵ Homer, *Iliad*, VIII.553-65.

Agamemnon's palace; he is crouched like a dog. With this simple opening image we have both inversion and metamorphosis: earth-born man resides on the roof – outside the palace home – and he also loses a measure of humanity in his canine posture.⁶ Inversion and metamorphosis are well-established as among the dominant themes of the trilogy: we see it in Queen Clytemnestra's mastery over her husband Agamemnon, and over her lover Aegisthus, and in the abundance of animal imagery.⁷

The Watchman then tells us how thoroughly he knows 'the throng of stars of the night, and also those bright potentates, conspicuous in the sky, which bring winter and summer to mortals'.⁸ From Hesiod, we well recognise his allusion to the stars and constellations which mark the seasons. This year-outside, roof-dwelling, dog-man is intimate with the heavenly bodies – or at least with their earthly significance: their heralding of the seasons. But this astral message is one-way traffic, the stars he has lived under for a year are less messengers than the message itself: they are mute, unresponsive; they remain aloof, distant, untouchable. The Watchman does not feel blessed in his vocation, but begs the gods to release him from his misery. Aeschylus enforces the Watchman's loneliness and this distance before presenting the great inversion that is the substance of this paper: bringing the terrible majesty of the heavenly bodies to the earth. The Watchman announces the way this is to be done. His look-out is for a beacon: the man-made light which bears its own message; not of the irresistible passing of time and seasons that the stars presage, but news of a momentous human event. And, twenty lines into the play, the light arrives, bright as day.

The message is of victory at Troy – more than two-hundred miles away – and the victory was won the same night that we hear the news in Argos. The play's Chorus of Argive citizens sensibly asks, 'what messenger could come here with such speed?'⁹ Clytemnestra – ruling in Agamemnon's absence – gives the reply. She tells us of a relay of beacon fires sent from Mount Ida near Troy, visible at the next watch-post, where a second fire is lit to be seen at the next, and so on, establishing a sequence of fires, lit as soon as the previous one was seen, lighting up a ring around the Aegean Sea, hurrying the message to Argos.

Clytemnestra accounts for the stages with telling symbolism of their divine import.¹⁰ She invokes Hephaestus when she speaks of the first fire at Mount Ida, and Hephaestus is appropriate, not just because he is the god of the forge and the fire, but he is the one who made the shield of Achilles which encompasses the earth and heavens. Hephaestus is cartographer of the land and stars, emphasising the connectedness of the earthly and celestial realms. The next stage is Hermes' Crag on Lemnos, and Hermes is apt, messenger god that he is. The third, Mount Athos, is described as 'the steep height of Zeus'.¹¹ The light then shines to Mount Macistus, producing a fire 'like another sun', Clytemnestra says.¹² Those at Macistus ward off sleep, lighting a blazing fire that is seen at Mount Messapium; but from

⁶ A simile which also foreshadows numerous other canine references, including one to Sirius, the dog-star, *Agamemnon* 967.

⁷ For discussion of both these themes, see, for example, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, 'Hunting and Sacrifice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*', in Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990), pp. 141-59.

⁸ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 4-6, in *Oresteia*, trans. Alan H. Sommerstein (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

⁹ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Sommerstein, 280.

¹⁰ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 281-310.

¹¹ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Sommerstein, 285. Here the text is corrupt; Sommerstein endorses M. L. West's proposal that Peparethos was the next stage (p. 35 n. 62).

¹² Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 288.

Messapium the light is no longer like the sun, but is now ‘like the shining moon’.¹³ And so at this stage – at the half-way mark of the signals (though not half-way in terms of distance) – Clytemnestra’s imagery begins to take a different hue. The switch from likening the beacons to the sun to likening them to the moon is more than just a search for a new simile: it heralds the turn in imagery from day to night, and from benign to sinister. This is appropriate enough, since the beacons were lit at night and send the message of a city’s destruction. But by turning to the night, Clytemnestra subtly evokes the later dominance of the trilogy’s action by the Furies – older, pre-Olympian goddesses of vengeance, those self-described daughters of Mother Night who will threaten Athens with ruin.¹⁴ This turn to the night also happens to come along the stretch between Mounts Messapium and Cithaeron, that is, over Aulis. Aulis was the scene of the sacrifice the goddess Artemis commanded Agamemnon to perform before sailing to war at Troy: a bitter location for Agamemnon and Clytemnestra because the required victim was their daughter, Iphigenia. This act of sacrifice constitutes Clytemnestra’s primary motive for her murder of Agamemnon upon his return.¹⁵ Furthermore, from this stage, Clytemnestra no longer mentions the positive, or neutral symbolism of the Olympian gods – the likes of Hephaestus, Hermes, and Zeus. The turn to night and fury which occurs at the site of Agamemnon’s crime is maintained. The next place the light passes over, from Mount Cithaeron, is Gorgopis bay. Reminiscent of the Gorgons, the word *gorgōpis* literally is *fierce-eyed* which recalls the eyes of Iphigenia which stared accusingly at her killers once she had been gagged at the sacrificial altar.¹⁶ The next stage is Mount Aegiplanctus: the mountain of goats. This continues the sacrificial theme, for, only seventy lines earlier, the Chorus had compared Iphigenia at the altar to a young she-goat. And on to Arachnaeum, whose name – *the spider’s crag* – conjures the net in which Clytemnestra will enmesh her husband before delivering her fatal blows.¹⁷ Finally, from here, the light is seen by the Watchman on the palace roof in Argos, his gaze drawn from the heavenly host to their imitation on Earth.

Through these stages Aeschylus gives us a mirror of the stars: crossing air and water, much like the invisible lines which create the constellations cross the vacuum of space. They are new lights in the sky bringing not the message of the seasons, but a message of victory, and with victory, the return of the longed-for Greek army, and with that, the return of King Agamemnon, the one who killed the happy daughter of the house. As the stars for Hesiod were a prompt for action, so the beacons are to Clytemnestra, and after a decade of waiting, while the army fought at Troy, Clytemnestra can enact her revenge. It is a terrible message that these lights bring, yet the initial response is one of joy – though soon mixed with disquiet. This mixed portion of great joy and tragedy is in the very nature of divinity and fate that the heavens represent.

The ambivalence of the Greek gods is well established. Homer gives us the controlling, capricious Olympians, Hesiod gives us both the stars, bound up with daily and yearly rituals of humans, and Ouranos, who must be suppressed. Hesiod tells us in his *Theogony* that Ouranos, the ‘starry sky’, is born of Gaia, the earth.¹⁸ Ouranos repeatedly impregnates Gaia, producing offspring which eventually sire the Olympian pantheon. But generally, Ouranos is troublesome. The solution to his superabundance of enthusiasm is found when his son,

¹³ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 297-98.

¹⁴ Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 321-22, 417, 745 (Mother Night); 780-87 (Athens’ ruin).

¹⁵ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1521-29.

¹⁶ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 239-42. This may also project forward to the appearance, later in the trilogy, of the goddess Athena, often called grey-eyed or flashing-eyed, ‘fierce-eyed’ is another of her epithets in the *Ajax* of Sophocles, 450. As for the Gorgons, they had their own place in the Ptolemaic constellations.

¹⁷ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1382-83.

¹⁸ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 126-27.

Kronos, castrates him.¹⁹ This subsequently keeps the sky at a distance from Gaia. It seems that such heavenly divinity must be *managed*, it must not be allowed to mingle too intimately with earthly matters. The inverted image of the stars produced by the signal fires in the *Oresteia* symbolically extends the reach of this divinity. The tragic fate rushes home to Argos through these earthly conduits of the divine light. The symbolism of the artificial, earth-bound constellation announces the arrival of divine pollution and murderous revenge, but, unlike the castration of over-active Ouranos, Aeschylus finds a civilised way to contain the trouble.

In the conclusion of the trilogy we witness a court scene in which the gods Apollo and Athena are present and take an active part. Apollo is on the side of Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, who, in retaliation against his mother's murder of his father, in turn has killed Clytemnestra herself. Against him stand the Furies, old, chthonic divinities who take the side of the murdered mother. Athena, acting as judge with a democratic jury of Athenian citizens, acquits Orestes, sending him home to Argos.²⁰ The Furies, insulted by this judgement, threaten to use their formidable powers to make Athens a barren city. Athena is eventually able to mollify them, offering them a new home as exalted goddesses by the Acropolis. While in the first part of the trilogy the inversion of light of the stars brings divinity to earth in all its uncontainable *miasma*, here, such divine power is harnessed.

With the acquittal of Orestes, his advocate, Apollo, leaves the stage. But who is Apollo? He is Phoebus Apollo – *bright* Apollo: one who shines with the light of the sun. So, leaving, he takes with him the symbolism of natural, divine sunlight. Remaining are Athena and the Furies: the latter emphatically stand for darkness, while the former bears the attributes of *mētis* and *peithō*, wisdom and persuasion – a metaphorical light, perhaps. Her role here is to use these attributes to civilise the Furies and take them into the city, and into culture. And this she does, with one final display of light, to balance the troublesome display at the trilogy's start. They are escorted to their new shrine under the earth by a torch-bearing procession.²¹ Thus the daughters of night are illuminated by torches: symbolic starlight finally shines on their midnight blackness, and we are returned to the image we started with: the vision of the constellations inverted on the earth's surface. Yet there is a further inversion: we move from the open places we saw at the start of the trilogy – the Watchman on the palace roof, the starry sky, and the signal fires illuminating the Aegean sea – into the enclosed spaces of the court (albeit an open-air one), the *polis*, and the hillside under which the Furies are housed. The conclusion of the *Oresteia* is explicitly wall-building: endorsing democracy and the rule of law, and housing the formerly free-roaming Furies. The Furies maintain their fearsome powers, but the powers are tempered by the blessings that the goddesses bestow on the city. By housing the Furies and their procession of lights under the Acropolis, Aeschylus completes the move begun in the observation of the stars, and their mirror on the Aegean which brought them to earth. Finally the divine light is ushered *into*, or *under* the earth: it takes the symbolism of starlight as a representation of divinity, bringing the heavenly – in its terrible ambivalence – to our world, harnessing the numinous as the foundation of civilisation.

¹⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 132-82.

²⁰ Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 763-66.

²¹ Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 1003-5.

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