

The Furious Nobility: Aeschylus, Solon, and the Athenian Aristocracy

Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, and more particularly his *Eumenides*, is often observed to be the extant tragic work that addresses contemporary political concerns and institutions most straightforwardly. Considerable scholarly attention has, therefore, been expended in order to map the plot and characters of the plays onto contemporary figures and events and thereby to reconstruct and refine the poet's political and social attitudes (e.g., Griffith 1995, Samons 1999). Though continuing in this vein, this paper departs from previous scholarship by focusing on the intertextual relationship Aeschylus establishes between his trilogy and the poetry of Solon. The dramatist uses this connection to analogize contemporary political concerns to those of the previous age, configure the elite members of Athenian society within the parallel he implies, and reassure them that their political influence will not diminish by guaranteeing them *sebas* if they capitulate.

The Ephialtic reforms of 462/1 BCE signified a major shift in Athenian politics away from the extensive executive control and considerable influence of the aristocracy and toward the fuller expression of *demokratia* characteristic of the later fifth century. These reforms were accompanied by a shift away from Spartan cooperation and toward rapprochement with the Argives. The resultant atmosphere engendered resentment among Athenian *eupatrids*, apprehensive about the diminution of their power inherent in further enfranchisement of the *demos*. This apprehension finds an analog in the resentment of the sixth-century Athenian *eupatrids* expressed in Solon's poetry in the course of his own program of legal reform partially enfranchising the *demos*. This paper argues that Aeschylus perceives this similarity and appeals to the poetry of Solon as a model for his appeal to the discontented fifth-century opponents of the Ephialtic reforms.

The tragic poet adapts for the chorus of *Erinues* in the *Eumenides* (526-537) a passage of Solon (8G-P²=6W²) in which he reassures his upper-class critics against the extremity of his measures (Nouissa-Fantuzzi 2010) and appealing to a “genealogy of vices” which deviates from the Hesiodic model (Helm 2004). Aeschylus adapts the Solonic genealogy, whereby *hubris* follows on satiety (*koros*) as a result of wealth (*olbos*) in the hands of those whose mind is “not the best” (*mē...aristos*), and focuses instead on *dyssebeia* as the parent of *hubris*. Loss of reverence for the furies diminishes their influence over humans and endangers society. The *Erinues* of Aeschylus’ play, therefore, take on the character of Solon’s disgruntled aristocrats, but are more concerned with the loss of their esteem (*sebas*), and as a result their control of human society, than in preserving their material advantages. This reflects the preoccupation of the fifth-century aristocracy with their control of the body politic.

Sebas, the paper demonstrates, goes on to serve as a crucial feature in Athena’s design for the Areopagus council (681ff) and an essential element of the world the *Erinues* will inhabit if they choose to capitulate and cooperate with the newly-founded system of justice. Aeschylus takes every pain to show the furies that they will maintain the importance to which they are accustomed as older deities if they desist from menacing the city in their anger over their defeat in court. The poet thus undertakes a consolation of the contemporary *eupatrids* who recognize the furies’ concern for *sebas* as a reflection of their concern for political importance. The glorious reception of the *Semnai Theai* in Athens at the end of the play, therefore, guarantees the *eupatrids* of Athens, in the case of their cooperation, the influence to which they are accustomed by depicting the *Erinues* as *synonymous* with the *sebas* they feared to lose.

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