

The Daughters of Metis

Patriarchal Dominion and the Politics of the Between

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Praise neither the life of anarchy, nor that of despotic rule, god has given power in all things to the in-between, though he governs at one time one way at another, another.

—Aeschylus¹

From its very beginnings, patriarchal dominion has always established its authority and won legitimacy by a subversion of the feminine that arises out of an implicit recognition of feminine power. Swallowing Metis, Zeus secures the stable order of his divine rule; sacrificing Iphigenia, Agamemnon asserts his authority as sovereign; denying the Erinyes their vengeance, Athena founds the human community that bears her name. Each of these stories articulates a dimension of the tragic dialectic of patriarchal dominion: a feminine power is subverted in a foundational act of decision designed to establish and consolidate patriarchal authority; this act of subversion then wins legitimacy by repression as it is designated inevitable and identified with the natural order of things.

Yet, the structure of this dialectic is tragic, animated by the attempt to control the very excess that conditions its own possibility. The original act of subversion and its subsequent repression is accomplished by a transformative political intelligence known as *μητις*, which carries the sense of cunning, deception and craftiness as much as that of wise counsel and political acumen. The patriarchy itself depends upon the habit of thinking it most needs to control. But Metis does not submit quietly to the appropriations of the patriarch; she remains operative and effective, underlying and undermining the structure and stability of the patriarchy itself. She lives in the figure of her daughter, Athena, born from the very head of her father as the intractable upsurge of power that emerges from that original act of consumption by which

Zeus seeks to consolidate his authority. What the story of Athena's birth inaugurates, the story of her actions transforms; for in her ultimate attempt to establish a place of justice for humans, she turns decisively against the masculine logic of force to a logic of persuasion and respect, a logic, indeed, of a certain transformative habit of thinking, itself a μῆτις directed toward justice and designed to open a space for the possibility of genuine human flourishing.

Turning again to these ancient stories, to the *very language* in which patriarchal authority first comes to expression and by which it seeks its first legitimation, will uncover the mythic origins of patriarchal dominion and the tragic dialectic according to which it operates. Yet to discern the transformative effects of μῆτις and the possibilities it holds for a different politics, it will be necessary to undertake a phenomenology of the things said, a 'legomenology' that allows the things said to speak for themselves and in so speaking to articulate not only the tragic dialectic of patriarchal dominion, but also the voice of another possibility for politics, one rooted in the transformative capacity of words. What we make of these words must be informed by what they have already made of us.

Listen then, again, first to the story of Zeus and Metis.

1. Zeus and Metis: Intimations of Another Politics

The dialectic of patriarchal dominion begins always with a certain recognition. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, Metis is introduced as "she who knows most [πλείστα . . . εἰδυῖαν] of all the gods and humans."²⁸ Yet, it is not her superlative knowledge, but her potential offspring that Zeus seems initially to recognize as a threat to his newly established rule:

For it had been arranged that from her, children surpassing in wisdom would be born, first the grey-eyed girl, Tritogeneia [Athena], and she is equal to her father in strength and sage counsel; but then indeed [ἀτὰρ ἔπειτ' ἄρα] a son to be king of gods and humans was to be born, and his would be a heart of overwhelming might [ὑπέρβιον]. (*Theog.* 894-8)

Metis is a threat to Zeus not in her own right but because of her reproductive power. Indeed, the text is yet more specific, for her ability to generate a daughter equal in both strength and wisdom to Zeus seems not to imperil the stability of the regime. Rather, the order falters only in the face of the possible birth of a son. The text sets this possibility off from the discussion of Athena and gives it special emphasis with the words, ἀτὰρ ἔπειτ' ἄρα—"but then indeed" . . . a son. It is as if only here, where the strength of Zeus combines with the knowledge of Metis in the figure of the son, that the regime begins to tremble. For while

the strength of Athena is equal to that of her father, it is not said to surpass his; but the son is to have a “heart of overwhelming might [ὑπέρβιον].” Zeus pre-empts this threat of force with force of his own. Facing the prospect that Metis would give birth to such a son, he acts to secure his sovereignty by putting Metis “down into his belly [ἐκκάτθετο νηδύν]” (*Theog.* 899).

The masculine logic of force that is the paternal legacy of Zeus culminates in this act of subversion by absorption. In swallowing Metis, Zeus accomplishes what his father and grandfather could not: He takes full possession of the feminine dimension of the generative process, and in so doing secures his own ultimate autonomy. This act of consumption is at once Zeus’ ultimate act of political assumption and the culminating action of *Theogony*. The narrative structure of *Theogony* itself is driven in large part, but not exclusively, by the logic of force in which each new generation seeks to secure its own hegemony by suppressing the generation to come. By closing this pattern of generational suppression in on itself, Zeus takes full control of the generative process so that no other should “hold kingly honor over Zeus” (*Theog.* 892).³ This act of assumption marks the final transition in *Theogony* from its radically unstable, ambiguous, and open inception in Chaos, who bore dark Erebus and black Night (*Theog.* 123), to the stable order of the regime instituted by Zeus. What begins in darkness and with a surplus of feminine fecundity, with Gaia generating from herself Ouranos, the sky, grandfather of Zeus, “her equal in every dimension” (*Theog.* 126-7), ends in a surplus of masculine fecundity, with Zeus generating from his head Athena, virgin goddess of war and justice, “equal to her father in strength and sage counsel” (*Theog.* 896).⁴

Yet there is more to this myth than the deployment of force against force. To read it as simply one more story of the father’s attempt to secure his kingship against the claims of the son is to reinforce the masculine narrative the story of Metis renders so powerfully ambiguous. Metis is indeed the very condition for the possibility of Zeus, not only of his authority as king, but of his very appearance on the scene of divine politics. Faced with a husband who consumed each of his children as it “came from the womb [νηδύος] of its mother to her knees” (*Theog.* 460), Rheia asked her parents, Gaia and Ouranos, “to think of a μῆτις,” some plan by which she could give birth to a son (*Theog.* 471). Zeus was born, quite literally, by μῆτις. Here, μῆτις takes on the sense of δόλος, trickery or deception, which it often has within the economy of patriarchal domination. This is the sense it has for Prometheus who is said to be ἀγκολυμήτις (crooked-counseling), when in full awareness he perpetrates his δολίης τέχνης (artful deception) by presenting Zeus with the white bones of an ox, saving the meat and fat for humans

(*Theog.* 445-6). The conflict between Zeus and Prometheus is in fact marked by a duality of μῆτις: it sets the royal μῆτις of Zeus intent on maintaining firm control of the ruled against the technical μῆτις of Prometheus designed to win for the ruled a degree of self-sufficiency.⁵

Here μῆτις is bound up with the capacity to undermine the authority of the patriarch and to act on behalf of the oppressed. From the perspective of the patriarch, this sort of μῆτις is dangerous trickery that cannot go unpunished. The punishment chosen by Zeus is ironic indeed; for he has Athena introduce into human-being the “beautiful evil,” the καλὸν κακόν that is woman (*Theog.* 585). He has the daughter of Metis give humans the gift of μῆτις; for throughout Greek literature, women are depicted as creatures of μῆτις who, deprived of a voice in politics, resort again and again to trickery and deception in the face of the forces of the patriarchy.

So μῆτις is duplicity, crafty threat to kings, and hope to the oppressed; yet it is also the vehicle by which patriarchal sovereignty is won and the power by which it is sustained. Zeus himself consolidates his authority by swallowing Metis, but he accomplishes this only through a certain μῆτις: “deceiving her perception by trickery [δόλῳ] and slippery words, he put her down into his belly [ἔσκατθετο νηδύν]” (*Theog.* 889-90). Even before consuming her, Zeus seems to possess a powerful capacity for μῆτις capable of deceiving Metis herself. Indeed, the *Theogony* expresses the ambiguity of μῆτις in its relation to Zeus in a provocative way. Not only does Zeus deploy μῆτις to consume Metis and bring her ultimately under his authority, but his very ability to establish his rule in the first place is predicated on a cunning political acumen that is closely associated with the feminine power of μῆτις.

In order to defeat the Titans, Zeus heeds the advice of his grandmother, Gaia, who not only helps devise the μῆτις for Rhea that conditions the very birth of Zeus, but who also sets the succession of patriarchal authority into motion in the first place by means of the “evil, treacherous plan” that allows Kronos to castrate his father as he came to her desiring love (*Theog.* 160f.). Acting now on behalf of her grandson, Gaia impresses upon Zeus the need to persuade the hundred-arm giants to fight with him against Kronos (*Theog.* 628). To do this, Zeus turns to the powers of two of the sisters of Metis, the Oceanids Peitho, persuasion, and Styx, the oath of the immortals, and so, the one who ensures promises are kept and honors respected.⁶ First, in accord with Styx, Zeus makes a promise to any Titan willing to fight on his side that he will respect and maintain the honor (τιμὴ) of each and that any god who was dishonored by Kronos would, under him, be raised to a position of honor as it is just (ἔμεις) (*Theog.* 388-96). The

oath of Styx is part of an overall strategy for political victory that moves the regime of Zeus decisively beyond the economy of force that animated the actions of his father and grandfather. No longer will authority be maintained by force, now it will be won, legitimized and sustained by a set of promises made with an eye to justice (ἄμις).⁷ Zeus wins the loyalty of the hundred-arm giants and thus, ultimately, victory over the Titans because of this promise articulated with Peitho, sustained by Styx and enacted by a capacity for μῆτις Zeus inherits from Gaia, his grandmother, through Rheia, his mother. The ultimate stability and legitimacy of his regime depends, then, on a set of powers associated with feminine deities that move divine politics beyond the masculine logic of force.

In the end—indeed, from its inception—patriarchal dominion is unsustainable; for power cannot be maintained by force. Hannah Arendt has articulated the meaning of power for which force is no substitute:

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.⁸

Patriarchal dominion destroys the possibility of genuine political *power*, for its deeds are brutal, its intentions veiled. Power, if it is to be political, is an ability to hold oneself open to the legitimate claims of others and to respond with an imaginative creativity that is capable of weaving difference into community with an eye toward justice.

From this perspective, we might hear the story of Zeus' consumption of Metis and his assumption of power not simply as one more in a long line of stories in which the masculine subverts the feminine in order to maintain and legitimize patriarchal authority,⁹ but as the birth of a new possibility for politics that manifests itself in the figure of Athena.

She is the daughter of Metis, but she inherits a certain μῆτις too from her paternal grandmother and great-grandmother. Athena embodies that habit of thinking bound to the complex ambiguities of political community, attuned to deception, but guided always by a sense of justice. In what we have inherited as the story of the marriage of Zeus and Metis in *Theogony*, Zeus puts Metis “down into his belly [ἐσκάτθετο νηδύν], so that this goddess should think with him [συμφράσσαιτο] good and evil” (*Theog.* 900).¹⁰ The text is rife with nuance: Zeus “puts her down [ἐσκάτθετο] into his belly” in the middle voice, and one begins to wonder how unwilling Metis herself was to go down into

the very body of the sovereign. Perhaps she colludes in her own descent. After all, Zeus is able to deceive her by slippery words, a μῆτις that Metis herself may have discerned. The middle voice hints at the possibility, even as it also emphasizes the extent to which Zeus consumes Metis for his own benefit—for such is the reflexive power of the middle voice which turns its object back in upon the subject. And then there is this word συμφράσσαιτο, which means to take counsel with, to debate, consider, or contrive together with someone and so suggests a kind of communal habit of thinking enacted between Zeus and Metis.¹¹

Would it then be so strange to consider that it was together with Metis that Zeus decided to turn his attentions next to Themis as a second wife, so closely tied as she is to the powers associated with his first? And then there is Athena, born from the head of Zeus himself, who enacts the good and evil thought together by her parents. It is she who with her half-sister, Dike, born of Themis and Zeus, opens the possibility for human flourishing in a city founded not upon violence, but upon the powers associated with the sisters of her mother, Peitho and Styx, the powers of persuasion and respect for honor. To discern the full complexity of Athena's attempt to found a city capable of cultivating genuine human flourishing, it will be necessary to attend to another story, that told in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* about the breakdown of the politics of force and the birth of another politics.

Listen, then, again to the story of another father and his daughter caught up in the politics of force at the root of patriarchal authority, and to what becomes of a king whose sovereignty ultimately succumbs to the violence born of its own violent inception.

2. Agamemnon and Iphigenia: The Monstrous Inception of Patriarchy

When Artemis ordered the winds to hold the ships at Aulis back from Troy, Calchis, the seer, gave voice to “another, heavier remedy” and the sons of Atreus threw down their staves, unable to hold back their tears.¹² The patriarchy itself was felt to buckle under the weight of this “heavier remedy,” for it placed the king, Agamemnon, in an intractable double bind—and he knew it:

Heavy is my fate if I do not obey, but heavy too, if I slaughter [δαίξω] my daughter, delight of my house, by maiden sacrifice, staining these father's hands with rivers of blood beside the altar. What of these things is without evils? How shall I become a deserter [λιπόνους] and fail my allies? For if this sacrifice, this virgin blood, stops the winds, it is right [θέμις] for them to desire it with fervor, most fervently [ὀργᾶ περιоргῶ σ<φ> ἐπιθυμῆιν]. May all be well. (*Agam.* 206-17)

What begins in tears, ends in hope as Agamemnon the king sacrifices himself as father in the name of Themis and the violent anger of his allies. The recognition of the ineluctable double bind that presses down upon him and his regime at the start of this passage shifts, like the winds themselves, in the moment of decision. The passage describes two mutually exclusive possibilities, its vocabulary is severe: either there will be a *slaughter* and bloodstained hands, or desertion and failure. Yet, Agamemnon hardly considers the latter before embracing the sacrifice as something *right to desire*. That which will secure and legitimize his sovereignty has already been posited as “right,” ἔμμις.

Although, it has often been insisted that the king has no real choice in the matter, that he is caught up in a logic of divine retribution that sets the command of Zeus against that of Artemis;¹³ that the winds of Aulis were already wasting away the flower of the Argives, and without the sacrifice all would die (*Agam.* 185-98);¹⁴ that, indeed, the yoke of necessity forced his hand against his daughter; yet none of this captures what is most poignant about the passage: how quickly he comes to collude in the decision. The chorus anticipates the manner of Agamemnon’s collaborative response to the “heavy remedy” when they describe how he held himself in relation to Chalcis and the calamity that was facing the ships at Aulis: there he stood “not blaming any prophet, blowing along with [συμπνέων] the sudden events that struck him” (*Agam.* 186-7).¹⁵ Although these words appear before Agamemnon has heard the whole of what will befall him (for Chalcis has not yet spoken of the sacrifice), already he is not inclined to rage against his fate, but rather, to blow along with it. *This* is not a matter of divine coercion, but of his own “character,” his ἔθος — and as such, it carries blame.

The same metaphor of blowing/breathing (πνεῖν) is used to describe the change of mind Agamemnon undergoes in the moment of decision:

When he put on the strap of the yoke of necessity, breathing the changing-wind of his heart [φρενός . . . τροπιάαν], sacrilegious [δυσσεβῆ], impure [ἄναγνον], impious [ἀνίερον], at that moment, he decided to think the most audacious thing. (*Agam.* 218-21)¹⁶

The decision is necessary, but nevertheless impious — and the chorus underscores the latter, surrounding the “most audacious thing” with three words signifying that which is unholy. What from the divine perspective must be, is, from the human, monstrous. Yet, it is Agamemnon who acts: *he* puts on the strap of the yoke of necessity; *he* breathes into his heart the very changing wind that holds them back from Troy. He takes it into himself and makes it his own by deciding to think this most audacious thing. The decision, however, is said already to carry the imprimatur of ἔμμις. It is justified even as it is being made. Neither

Agamemnon nor his regime could abide the searing tension of the tragic situation into which they are thrust: almost immediately, Agamemnon turns his desire to the single law that will secure his authority, eclipsing completely the legitimacy of that other law, the law that presses in upon him as father. What Reiner Schürmann calls Agamemnon's "tragic denial"¹⁷—the decisive turning away from the law of the family to the divine law *as the only legitimate law*—is the founding moment of his patriarchal sovereignty.

The patriarchy is founded upon the sacrifice of a singular female, the daughter of the king who must now be named: Iphigenia. Schürmann puts it this way:

In the name of the city, which he elevates to the rank of sovereign meaning, he obliterates "there, that singular." He consolidates the union between commander and his troops. The law, uniformly obligatory, emerges in the sacrificial rapture. Tragic denial is necessary for the univocal law to be born.¹⁸

Upon what delusion is this denial possible? Upon what habit of thinking? The chorus is not silent on this either:

For shameless contrivance [αἰσχρόμητις] emboldens mortals, suffering, deranged first cruelty, and thus, he took it upon himself to become the sacrificer [θυτήρ] of his daughter, leading a woman-avenging war, a wedding-sacrifice [προτέλεια] for the fleet. (*Agam.* 221-7)¹⁹

The chorus speaks of a shameful μῆτις that allows the πατήρ to become θυτήρ, the father to be made sacrificer. Here μῆτις still names a decisively transformative habit of thinking; it too continues to carry the sense of cunning and trickery, but it now also takes on the dimension of delusion and deranged madness. The patriarchy is born of this delusion and sustained by it.

But the chorus does not permit us to fall victim to the delusions of the patriarch; they insist upon the details: ignoring her pleading cries of "father," he prayed, then ordered his men to lift her, prone, as if a she-goat (χμιαίρος); she fell at his feet, pleading with all her heart; he ordered them to hold back her voice with a guard (*Agam.* 227-37). The institution of the patriarchy is predicated on this silence and the substitution that makes it possible; no other law now can be heard and the daughter becomes a beast.

Then: "with force of bit, in silence secured by strength, pouring her saffron veil to the ground, she struck her sacrificers each in turn with her eyes' arrows of pity; as if a figure in paintings, she was striving to address them [προσενέπειν]" (*Agam.* 238-42).²⁰ And although the chorus turns away—"the next things I saw not nor speak it"—we are left

with a powerful rejoinder to the shameful μήτις by which Agamemnon took it upon himself to sacrifice his daughter to secure his own sovereignty. For Agamemnon's μήτις is met by another μήτις: it is the cunning and craft of Iphigenia, who seems somehow to be able to pour her saffron veil upon the ground so as to speak with her eyes, entreating each of her sacrificers to consider the cost of war and the patriarchal dominion that makes it possible. The gesture is eloquent: the veil that signifies modesty and submission, is removed, just as a bride removes her veil to look directly at her new husband and his guests.²¹ She sheds her sense of shame and pierces each man in turn with her "eyes' arrows of pity" that cleave the moment of decision on which the patriarchy rests. With her eyes, Iphigenia articulates the tragic fissure at the very foundation of all patriarchal authority, a fissure in the face of which Agamemnon sheds tears, only then, quickly, to repress as anathema to the univocal law that at once institutes and legitimizes his regime.

Agamemnon embodies this patriarchal law, literally, breathes it into himself. Roberto Calasso puts it this way:

Agamemnon, ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν, king of men, is kingship itself. As such, he must preside over relations with heaven and earth. It is on him that all exchanges converge. . . . The person who controls the mechanism of exchange, the king, is that unique person who must sacrifice the uniqueness of every other, including his daughter. But this one master of exchanges, prince of substitutions, may in turn be attacked by uniqueness.²²

Iphigenia will not be substituted; she is no goat and her silence no silence. She too is a daughter of Metis insofar as both her parents are said to operate with a certain μήτις. If Agamemnon acts with a "shameful μήτις" that allows him to sacrifice his daughter, Clytemnestra, the chorus reports, acts with a μεγαλόμητις—a great, mighty or even violent cunning—when she plans and enacts the sacrificial murder of her husband in retribution for the camouflaged murder of Iphigenia. In these two cases, μήτις remains deceptive, duplicitous, and violent, marking either the deranged delusion that enables the foundational act of patriarchal authority or the cold calculation of the act that signals its ultimate demise.²³ In both cases, however, the power of μήτις transforms human politics, illustrating the deficiencies of one politics and opening up the possibilities of another.

The μήτις of Clytemnestra is as caught up in the logic of violence as that of Agamemnon. Strikingly, however, both appeal to a certain justice to legitimate the actions they perform under the influence of μήτις. For Agamemnon, the appeal is to a divine ἔμμις, an immortal order of justice beyond the domain of mortals.²⁴ As sovereign, Agamemnon controls

the economy of exchange between the divine order and its manifestation in the human community. By managing this exchange, the patriarch brings the human order under his control. Thus, it is decisive for the efficacy of the patriarchy to locate its ultimate source of authority in the natural order of things—in an origin beyond the power of human politics. Yet Clytemnestra too appeals to a certain $\epsilon\mu\iota\varsigma$, albeit one more intimately bound up with $\delta\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta$, and so with the actions of mortals in the world of human community.²⁵ Clytemnestra exhorts the elders of Argos thus: “Now hear you this, the justness [$\epsilon\mu\iota\nu$] of my solemn oaths: by the accomplished Justice of my child [$\tau\eta\nu\ \tau\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\iota\omicron\nu\ \tau\eta\varsigma\ \epsilon\mu\eta\varsigma\ \pi\alpha\iota\delta\omicron\varsigma\ \Delta\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta\nu$], by Ruin [Ἄτην] and Fury [Ἐρινύς], for whom I sacrificed [$\epsilon\sigma\phi\alpha\epsilon\lambda\iota$] this man” (*Agam.* 1431-3). Clytemnestra’s oaths, like Agamemnon’s most fervent desire, appeal to the same ultimate authority: $\epsilon\mu\iota\varsigma$. In so doing, she calls the very principle of the patriarchy into question. She sets $\epsilon\mu\iota\varsigma$ against $\epsilon\mu\iota\varsigma$ in order to uncover another dimension of justice: “the accomplished $\delta\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta$ of my child.” The transition from $\epsilon\mu\iota\varsigma$ to $\delta\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta$ shifts the locus of authority from the divine to the human, from the general to the singular, from the father to the daughter.

If this transition is anticipated by Iphigenia’s insistent resistance, it is initiated by her mother’s sacrifice of the sovereign. Yet, the initiation enacted by Clytemnestra fails ultimately to transform patriarchal politics because it is predicated on the very violence to which it is opposed. The end of *Agamemnon* announces not a new politics, but the assumption of a female patriarch. Where Agamemnon stood, having mobilized divine $\epsilon\mu\iota\varsigma$ to legitimize his sacrifice of the singular for the sake of the whole, now stands Clytemnestra, having appealed to the $\delta\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta$ of the singular to justify her violence and accomplish her own sovereignty.²⁶ In blurring the strict boundaries between the feminine and the masculine, the appearance of the female patriarch anticipates the possibility of another politics, though it does not accomplish it. For this, a return to the daughter of Metis is required, for only Athena is able to rise above the politics of violence and chart a path between the anarchic $\delta\acute{\iota}\kappa\eta$ of the singular and the despotic $\epsilon\mu\iota\varsigma$ mobilized on behalf of the patriarch.

Listen, then, again to a final story about the inception of a political order that at once repeats certain dimensions of the dialectic of patriarchal dominion even as it opens the possibility of another politics.

3. Athena and the Erinyes: Metis and the Politics of the Between

At a crucial moment in *Eumenides*, Apollo—that god of light and reason—articulates the founding myth of patriarchal sovereignty. Arguing that the Erinyes have no justifiable claim on the life of Orestes for

killing his mother, Clytemnestra, Apollo says: “The one called mother is no parent [τοκεύς] of her child, but only nurturer of the newly sown embryo. He who mounts [θρῶισκων] begets [τίκτει], whereas a stranger she preserves a stranger’s seed” (*Eum.* 659-61).²⁷ In consolidating the meaning of parent (τοκεύς) by identifying it exclusively with the father, Apollo enacts a fourfold subversion of the feminine.²⁸

First, he silences the immediate claims of the Erinyes, those goddesses of old, who are in Aeschylus daughters of the Night (*Eum.* 416), but who in Hesiod are born as the irrepressible excess of that original act of castration by which Kronos, for the first time, establishes patriarchal dominion (*Theog.* 185).²⁹ In the *Eumenides*, the Erinyes defend the rights of the mother against the transgression of the son. So, in silencing them, Apollo also subverts the legitimacy of Clytemnestra’s assertion that killing Agamemnon was done with justice. To silence the mother, however, is to silence again the voice of the daughter; for in rejecting the law that underwrites Clytemnestra’s act of retribution, Apollo implicitly reinforces the legitimacy of that original act of violence by which Agamemnon trades his daughter for a kingdom.

And there is a fourth subversion of the feminine at work here as well, for to strengthen the authority of his words, Apollo appeals to Athena as a sure sign (τεκμήριον) that a father can generate without a mother: “Here she stands as witness, the daughter of Olympian Zeus, who was not even nurtured in the darkness of a womb [νήδους], for in no way could a goddess bring such a child to birth” (*Eum.* 663-6). With these words, Apollo seeks to set Athena apart from the Erinyes: if they are ancient goddesses of an ancient goddess, daughters of Night who occupy a place underground, indeed, a “sunless darkness” (δυσήλιον κέφας) (*Eum.* 395), Athena is no child of the dark, has no mother and belongs to a new generation of Olympian gods. And yet, the word νηδύς (“womb” but also “stomach”) betrays Apollo; for it gestures to that other story of Athena’s birth, to the νηδύς of Zeus, and to the mother Apollo so eagerly seeks to elide. Metis operates at gut level, in the very belly of the patriarch—the site of darkness and gestation and hunger.³⁰ She, like Iphigenia, sets to work the moment the patriarchy feels itself sated, its hunger for mastery legitimized and its authority set upon a stable law.

At first Athena seems to betray her mother, colluding in the masculine logic of patriarchal dominion and the subversion of the feminine on which it is based. She acquits Orestes with the words: “There is no mother who gave birth to me, and except for marriage, I always approve the male, for I am with all my heart very much on the side of my father” (*Eum.* 736-8).³¹ Athena’s virginity symbolizes this ultimate loyalty to her father; yet her description of her own birth is at once lit-

erally true—no mother gave birth to her—and suggestively misleading. On the surface, it seems to resonate with Apollo’s contention that no goddess nurtured her; yet, Athena’s own words here simply describe her paternal birth. Her actions, however, bespeak a loyalty also to her mother. Zeus and Metis think together (συμπράσσωσθαι) in their daughter, informing her actions throughout *Eumenides* as she seeks to establish a court on the Areopagus rooted in the human capacity for δίκη and capable of cultivating genuine human flourishing.³²

This requires, as Athena seems to recognize from the start, a habit of political thinking fundamentally different from both the cold calculation of Clytemnestra and the deranged delusion of Agamemnon. Where they turn to violence in an attempt to legislate their own legitimacy, Athena turns to honor, respect, and persuasion. Where theirs is a logic of hubris, blindness, and subversion incapable of tolerating the ambiguities endemic to politics, hers is a logic of humility, imagination, and respect capable of weaving justice into the fabric of human community.

Athena does not seize power, she is offered it, having gained the confidence of those over whom she will rule. She begins in the openness of wonder and with a question: “[W]ho are you? I speak to you all alike, both you, the stranger kneeling at my image here, and you, who are like nothing ever generated from seeds” (*Eum.* 407-10). This openness draws first the confidence of the Erinyes. When Athena explicitly asks them to turn authority in the case over to her, they readily agree; for the request itself carries with it a respect for the authority the Erinyes originally claim for themselves (*Eum.* 434-5).³³ Orestes, for his part, stakes his claim upon Apollo and yet he too is willing to accept the authority of Athena’s decision (*Eum.* 465-9).

Having come to power by respect, Athena reigns with humility. “The matter is too big for any mortal who thinks he can judge. Nor is it right [ἄμικς] for me to determine cases of murder where wrath is swift” (*Eum.* 470-2). Unlike Agamemnon who immediately mobilizes ἄμικς on his own behalf in an attempt to render the equivocal law univocal, Athena affirms the ambiguity of ἄμικς itself: Orestes is blameless, but the Erinyes “have their allotted function too” (*Eum.* 476).³⁴ She allows the two sides to press in upon her: “Both together—[for the Erinyes] to stay or [for me] to send them away—are difficult without my incurring wrath” (*Eum.* 481-2).³⁵ If Orestes is acquitted and the Erinyes sent away, Athena will see her land sickened to death, the soil infected—indeed, the Erinyes themselves promise anarchy: “I will unleash all manner of death” (*Eum.* 478-9, 502). If, on the other hand, her suppliant Orestes is denied help, Apollo has promised the fearsome wrath of the gods (*Eum.* 233-4). Yet this divine wrath is perhaps not as compelling for her as is the recognition that the cycle of retributive violence upon

which the patriarchy rests destroys the possibility of human flourishing. She cannot but incur wrath, but perhaps she can transform force into power.

Although the words by which she acquits Orestes seem to reinforce the logic of patriarchal dominion right down to its attempt to arrogate for the male the generative process itself, the words by which Athena charges the jury resonate with the concerns the Erinyes themselves voice. The Erinyes had warned of the dangers that arise when all fear of reprisal disappears: it is the life of anarchy. Yet, they advise too against the life of despotism, insisting that “the in-between has the power.” “Hubris,” they say, speaking a “measured word,” “is the very child of impiety [δυσσεβίας], but beloved and desired prosperity is born of a healthy heart [φρενῶν]” (*Eum.* 517-37). The words call to mind Agamemnon’s moment of decision when he “breathed the changing-wind of his heart [φρενός], sacrilegious [δυσσεβῆ],” and dared to think the most audacious thought that enabled him to found his regime upon the cut throat of his daughter (*Agam.* 218-21).³⁶ Prosperity, say the Erinyes, is born not of that deranged impiety, but of the healthy heart that animates the power of the between. It is strange perhaps to hear such measured words of health and prosperity from deities that are explicitly thematized as vile and monstrous.³⁷ Yet Athena echoes precisely these sentiments in charging the jurors of the Areopagus: “I counsel my citizens to maintain and practice reverently neither anarchy nor despotic rule, and not to cast the fearsome [τὸ δεινόν] entirely from the city” (*Eum.* 696-8). The term—τὸ δεινόν (the fearsome)—should be taken to refer both to the fear that stems the tide of anarchy and to the Erinyes themselves—the fearsome embodiment of retribution. Athena then, can be heard here to endorse both the Erinyes and their politics of the between.

Contrary to what the words of her actual judgment in the case seem to suggest, in the end, Athena enacts this politics of the between. Immediately upon hearing Athena’s verdict, Orestes and Apollo depart and the actual founding of the city is left to the women. Athena feels the full force of the Erinyes’ wrath: they will contaminate the soil rendering both the land and its people barren (*Eum.* 778f.). Although she does not fail to remind the Erinyes of her access to her father’s thunderbolt, Athena responds not with force, but with persuasion, respect, and honor. She begins directly, in the second person singular, with an imperative, but in the middle voice: “Let yourself be persuaded by me . . . you have not been beaten. This came truly from a just and equal ballot. There is no dishonor for you” (*Eum.* 794-6). She continues, respectfully, but with confidence: “I will bear your angers; for you are older and in this you are wiser [σοφώτερα], and yet, Zeus gave me

intelligence [φρονεῖν] too, not to be spoiled” (*Eum.* 848-50). If the Erinyes excel in wisdom, Athena has inherited a certain political intelligence—a φρόνησις—that is capable of responding to the contingencies and ambiguities endemic to life in the polis. Her response to the Erinyes illustrates the power of this political intelligence that retains its fundamental relation to that more original habit of thinking associated with her mother and grandmothers: μήτις.

Athena’s words do not part company with her deeds; they are informed by actions that establish rather than violate relations: she grants the Erinyes honor by expanding the scope of their authority and the degree to which they will be praised.³⁸ She offers them a privileged status in the city: no longer will their authority be limited to pursuing and punishing those guilty of murdering their own blood relatives (*Eum.* 264-75, 334-40), but now “no household will prosper” without their will (*Eum.* 895); they will manage the entirety of human affairs (*Eum.* 930-1); indeed, the scope of their authority will extend to the immortal gods and the gods underground (*Eum.* 950-5). And the Erinyes allow themselves to be persuaded, for ultimately, they too recognize that the law of violence cannot cultivate their “beloved and desired prosperity” (*Eum.* 536-7). Thus, they redirect their wrath (μεθίσταμαι κότου) (*Eum.* 900),³⁹ placing it on the side of the city, and settle into their new home beside Athena (*Eum.* 916), at the very root of human community.

The manner in which Athena weaves the Erinyes into the life of the polis echoes the way Zeus incorporates the Titans into his divine regime in the *Theogony*. Where he turns to Styx and Peitho, the sisters of Metis, to grant honor to the elder Titans and to persuade them to put their strength in the service of ἄμις, she turns to Zeus and Peitho to grant honor to the elder Erinyes and to persuade them to serve a city directed toward δίκη. And yet, at this late date, we have barely learned to practice that habit of political thinking that makes this weaving possible. However, this habit of thinking is already discernible in the very texts that articulate the dialectic of patriarchal dominion and the logic of force that continue to dominate human politics with ever more destructive consequences. These stories, however tragic, prefigure the lived tragedies enacted by those who, like Agamemnon, respond to the complex ambiguities of human political life in blindness and with arrogance, positing a rigid conception of retributive justice as the univocal law of political authority. Yet by attending to the manner in which Zeus and Athena respond to the inherently unstable economy of retribution in the stories we have inherited, another possibility for politics emerges.

If patriarchal dominion operates according to the masculine economy of violence, this other politics would need to articulate an androgynous economy of power in the Arendtian sense. It would require the cultivation of that transformative habit of political thinking we have traced through the shifting terrain that is μήτις. Such a transformative habit of thinking involves a constellation of capacities that are difficult to sustain in the face of the disconcerting contingencies endemic to human political life. A condition for its possibility is ethical imagination, an ability to imagine one's way into the position of the other so as to discern the most effective ways to address the legitimate concerns voiced there. Its locus is the precarious space between competing claims for justice, the site upon which such claims converge. Its practice requires confidence in the face of irreconcilable differences and the courage to allow the voices of difference to be heard in all asperity. This political habit of thinking requires, too, an ability to turn the pressure of such differences toward a common concern for justice animated by a recognition that human flourishing cannot be sustained by force. It entails the capacity to weave such differences together into the fabric of a community strong enough to bear the weight of difference and flexible enough to respond with openness and creativity to the tensions endemic to the play of difference. To allow such a transformative habit of thinking to inform the action of politics is difficult indeed, though the stories we have inherited suggest that it is not impossible if only we are willing to listen.

NOTES

1. Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, ed. Alan H. Sommerstein, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ll. 525-9; henceforth *Eum.*, followed by line number.
2. Hesiod, *Theogonia*, in *Theogonia, Opera et Dies, Scutum*, ed. Friedrich Solmsen, Reinhold Merkelbach, and Martin L. West, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), l. 886; henceforth *Theog.*, followed by line number. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
3. Marylin Arthur beautifully articulates the manner in which Zeus' actions close the pattern established in *Theogony*: "Zeus' swallowing of Metis is not so much a 'next step' in the succession-struggle, which completes the pattern at its logical extreme, as it is an act of synthesis which by including strategies of the earlier two stages and collapsing them into one, closes the pattern in upon itself. For, like Ouranos, Zeus suppresses the child in the mother's womb; and, like Kronos, he swallows the child itself, by consuming Metis when she is pregnant with Athena and about to give birth"

- (“Cultural Strategies in Hesiod’s *Theogony*: Law, Family, Society,” *Arethusa* 15:1-2 [1982], p. 77).
4. Arthur seems to overstate her case slightly when she says, “[t]he first birth of the poem is an act of simple re-production: Gaia produces Ouranos to be ‘equal’ to herself.” Actually, the first birth seems to be that of Erebus, the dark, from Chaos (*Theog.* 123). However, she is certainly correct to draw the striking parallel between the original birth of Ouranos from Gaia as her equal with the birth of Athena as equal to her father. And further, she is correct to see in this birth a token of the legitimacy of Zeus’ patriarchal authority, although this too is problematized by the role Metis plays in the birth of Athena. Arthur puts it this way: “the last major birth, that of Athena, produces a child whose resemblance to her father betokens legitimacy and hence the primacy of patriarchy” (“Cultural Strategies in Hesiod’s *Theogony*,” p. 63).
 5. See Norman O. Brown, “The Birth of Athena,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 83 (1952), p. 132.
 6. Zeus appoints Styx to be the oath of the immortals and promises her and her daughters a respected position in his regime (see *Theog.* 397-403).
 7. It is no accident that immediately before the articulation of this agreement, *Theogony* tells of the births of Rivalry, Victory, Power, and Force as the children of Styx and Pallas. To set these children apart and yet to relate them to one another as siblings is to recognize the extent to which they belong together. To make them children of Styx, however, and to place them under the control of Zeus is to recognize they cannot be given free reign to destabilize the order of justice.
 8. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 200.
 9. Ann Bergren seems to read the story as one more story of the hegemonic functioning of patriarchal authority, all of which are essentially the same. “What varies,” she says, “is the degree to which he [the Greek male] attempts to demote, divide, or expel the ‘female’ at the same time as he takes on her powers, and then to proceed as if they had always been his own” (“Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought,” *Arethusa* 16:1-2 [1983], p. 71).
 10. By emphasizing the status of *Theogony* as an inherited text, I mean to gesture toward the controversial status of the entire text that tells the story of the marriage of Metis and Zeus. Friedrich Solmsen agrees with a long tradition of scholars, including Wilamowitz, who take lines 886-900 of *Theogony* as interpolation, effectively suppressing the appearance of Metis and leaving as genuine only the notion that Athena was produced autonomously out of the head of Zeus (see his *Hesiod and Aeschylus* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995], pp. 67-8). Here he rehearses the reasons for taking the passage as inauthentic—it is, for example, inconsistent with what we read in Pindar and with lines 924f. of *Theogony* itself, where Zeus is said to produce Athena himself (αὐτός). None of these reasons are compelling, however, to Norman Brown, who insists that “the arguments for excluding these lines are based on the application of inap-

appropriate standards of consistency both to the text of Hesiod and to the body of Greek mythology” (“The Birth of Athena,” p. 131). Although Brown’s position is convincing because it is based not on an outdated obsession with consistency, but rather on a holistic reading of the overarching structure of *Theogony*, it is advisable to leave it to the philologists to debate the authenticity of the passage. At present it is enough to emphasize two points. First, philological interpretation is not itself immune from the long legacy of patriarchal domination that seeks to control the power of Metis. And second, the passage in which Metis appears, even if “inauthentic,” incisively articulates the manner in which patriarchal dominion itself is bound up with and depends upon this feminine power of thought.

11. See George Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), s.v. συμφορά. Significantly, this term appears at *Theog.* 471, where Rheia asks Gaia and Ouranos μήτιν συμφοράσασθαι (“to contrive together a plan”) by which Zeus can be born. The birth of Zeus thus mimics the birth of his regime insofar as both are made possible by a communal habit of thinking that involves μήτις.
12. Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, ed. John D. Denniston and Denys L. Page, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), ll. 199-200; henceforth *Agam.*, followed by line number.
13. In their introduction and throughout their commentary, Denniston and Page insist that Agamemnon cannot be held responsible for his actions (see esp. introduction to *Agamemnon*, pp. xxiii-xxix). It is true that Zeus Xenios forces the sons of Atreus against Troy for Alexander’s violation of guest-friendship (*Agam.* 61-2) and that Artemis demands the sacrifice of Iphigenia as retribution for the murder of a hare and her unborn young perpetrated, not by Agamemnon, but by the very eagles sent by Zeus himself as an encouraging portent (*Agam.* 107-20). Nevertheless, given the manner in which the Greeks understood human-being as embedded in a complex constellation of forces, both divine and human, and that they had no modern conception of the freedom of the will, it was possible for them *both* to see Agamemnon as forced by necessity and yet also responsible insofar as his own desire is in line with his actions, that is, insofar as he acts according to his own volition (ἐκῶν, to use the Aristotelian vocabulary). For an excellent articulation of how tragic decision is caught up both in the character of the individual and in the power of divine necessity, see Jean Pierre Vernant, “Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy,” in *Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1981), pp. 28-62.
14. Martha Nussbaum puts it this way: “If Agamemnon does not fulfill Artemis’s condition, everyone, including Iphigeneia, will die” (*The Fragility of Goodness* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], p. 340).
15. This passage is highlighted by Vernant to emphasize the extent to which the ultimate sacrifice of his daughter is consistent with his own character and desire: “By submitting to the thing, without in any way questioning (πέγειν, to blame) the monstrosity of it, the king shows that the life and love of his daughter cease to count for him the moment they become an

- obstacle to the warlike expedition of which he has assumed command” (“Intimations of the Will,” p. 49).
16. Note that τροπαία means “a returning wind, alternating wind: one which blows back from the sea to land” (Liddell and Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, s.v. τροπαία).
 17. Reiner Schürmann, *Broken Hegemonies*, trans. Reginald Lilly, ed. John Sallis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 27.
 18. Ibid.
 19. For justification of προτέλεια as a kind of wedding sacrifice, albeit here a corrupt one in which the bride herself is the victim, see David Armstrong and Elizabeth A. Ratchford, “Iphigenia’s Veil: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 228-48,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London* 32 (1985), p. 7.
 20. For justification of the translation of κρόκου βαφάς (“saffron dyes”) as “saffron veil,” see *ibid.*
 21. *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
 22. Roberto Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Vintage International, 1994), p. 115.
 23. Both actions are explicitly called “treacherous” or δόλιος. The chorus insists that Clytemnestra’s act was done with a hand of treachery (*Agam.* 1495, 1519), while Clytemnestra claims that Agamemnon too acted with treachery (1523).
 24. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant emphasize the meaning of Themis in *Theogony*: “The omniscience of Themis relates to an order conceived as already inaugurated and henceforth definitively fixed and stable” (*Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd [Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1978], p. 107).
 25. In *Theogony*, the first children of Themis and Zeus are the Seasons (Ὠρας), Lawfulness (Εὐνομίην), Justice (Δίκην), and Peace (Εἰρήνην), all of whom “attend to the actions of mortal people” (*Theog.* 903). If Θέμις points to an established order that is stable and fixed, her daughter, Δίκη, is situated squarely in the transitive world of human action and politics.
 26. *Agamemnon* concludes with Clytemnestra fully in charge, subduing the “vain barking of dogs” that is the argument between Aegisthus and the chorus of elders by asserting her authority. To Aegisthus, she says, “you and I rule, we will set this house in good order” (*Agam.* 1672-3).
 27. Note that the verb θρώσκω means “to leap” or “to spring” and carries the notion of an attack or assault.
 28. As Sommerstein suggests, this consolidation of the meaning of τοκεύς does violence to both the everyday usage of the term and its use elsewhere in *Oresteia* (see commentary to *Eumenides*, pp. 207-8). Apollo’s words reflect neither Aeschylus’ position nor even that of Greek culture in gen-

- eral, but, put forth in defense of Orestes, they articulate the underlying logic of domination endemic to the structure of patriarchal authority.
29. Detienne and Vernant argue that Kronos rather than Ouranos is the first genuine sovereign in *Theogony*. They claim that Ouranos was driven by sexual, not political, desire and that until Ouranos is separated from Gaia by means of Kronos' sickle, the universe had not yet come into existence as the organized cosmos that is the site for the political struggles of the gods over sovereignty (see *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, pp. 62ff.).
 30. Referring to the term γαστήρ in the prooemium of *Theogony* (26), which, like νηδύς, means both "belly" and "womb," Marilyn Arthur writes that it "is the floating signifier for every kind of ambiguity which characterizes the human condition" ("The Dream of a World without Women: Poetics and the Circles of Order in the *Theogony* Prooemium," *Arethusa* 16:1-2 [1983], p. 104). Metis is at home in the belly where ambiguity reigns. Recall, too, that the μῆτις Gaia and Ouranos think together for Rhea involves substituting a stone for a child and tricking Kronos to "put it down into his belly" (ἔσκάτθετο νηδύν) (*Theog.* 487) just as Metis was put down into the belly of Zeus. In both cases, the patriarchy was transformed by the consumption.
 31. Note that the description Athena gives here is similar to that given at *Theog.* 925. It is possible to hold together the two stories of the birth of Athena in *Theogony*. She was indeed born from the head of Zeus alone—let us even give the weight to αὐτός at *Theog.* 925 that Solmsen gives it when he says that, although it need not carry this weight, it "means almost the same as 'alone'" (see Solmsen, *Hesiod and Aeschylus*, p. 68). Even so, Athena would have herself been introduced into the very body of Zeus as he consumed Metis while she was "about to bring forth the goddess, grey-eyed Athena" (*Theog.* 888-9). No mother gave her birth does not necessarily mean that she had no mother, nor indeed, as Apollo says, that no goddess nurtured her in the darkness of a womb.
 32. That δίκη is at issue between Orestes and the Erinyes is clear from *Eum.* 433 when the Erinyes enjoin Athena to "judge straight and just [δίκην]." That the justice must be fundamentally a human rather than a divine capacity is clear from Athena's charge to the citizens who will serve on the jury not to violate their oath with an unjust mind (*Eum.* 490). Although the initial act of judgment that decides the case and establishes the Areopagus is ultimately given to Athena, she does not cast her ballot until the human ballots return tied, nor does her divine vote seem to weigh more than any single human vote. Athena does suggest that the matter is too big for a mortal to judge, but also that she does not have the ἔμυς to decide (*Eum.* 470-2).
 33. For the Erinyes' claims of authority in cases such as that of Orestes, see *Eum.* 311-20 and 381-96.
 34. "Allotted function" translates the Greek μοῖραν which points to an old order of divinity that assigns this function and these rights to the Erinyes.

35. This is a difficult passage due to some corruption in the text. My rendering follows the logic of Sommerstein in *Aeschylus: Eumenides*, p. 168.
36. See also *Agam.* 750-82, where similar language appears.
37. They are initially described as “black and utterly disgusting,” their breath unapproachable with ooze dripping from their eyes, fit neither for divine nor human community (*Eum.* 52-6). Athena herself, although not terrorized by them, distances them from both gods and mortals (*Eum.* 410-3).
38. Rose Cherubin has insightfully emphasized the importance of the expanded role of the Erinyes as a condition for the possibility of the flourishing of the city (“The Metaphysics of Justice in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*” [Ancient Philosophy Society, Boston, 12 April 2007]).
39. The verb μεθίστημι is significant here: the wrath of the Erinyes is not dissolved, but turned, placed in another way. Now, it serves the polis, not the pain of the injured individual.