

The purpose of this paper is to put a spotlight on the development of the curse-theme in the *Oresteia*, mainly contesting the assumption that cursing, represented and largely employed by the female, is suppressed at the end of the trilogy by a male civic form of justice.

Cursing in the *Oresteia* has received some attention in discussions about the evolving concept of justice. References to curses tend to be deployed to explain and justify the retaliatory familial violence supported by the gods but expressed by human agents through homicide. Critics connect the curse, the embodiment of which is the Erinyes, to an archaic form of justice through retribution. Based on this connection, it is argued more specifically that ‘vendetta’ justice gives way to a male civic form of justice, represented by the establishment of the Areopagos, a development which necessitates the suppression of the power of the female Erinyes-curses.

Focussing on the last scenes of the *Eumenides* this paper aims to make two points. First, it shows that the curse retains its force in the legal constitution established in Athens, where a new form of cursing prevails – the oath, which by definition is a conditional self-curse. The curses-Erinyes, though transformed into Semnai Theai and presented as giving blessings to the Athenians (916-1020), preserve an ‘archaic’ feature, which, apart from everything else, defines the oath as a conditional self-curse: Athena’s warnings of punishment against Athenian citizens if they do not behave properly (932-936, 948-955), reveal that the curses-Erinyes remain in Athenian civic life and function as threats; they will prevent possible transgressions by maintaining the citizens’ fear of divine punishment. Second, where scholars see the end of the *Oresteia* as evidence of the suppression of the female and the establishment of male civic power corresponding to the model of the fifth-century Athenian polis, I argue that the representation of the Erinyes-curses at the closing of the trilogy keeps into focus the significance of the female. In the Athenian polis, the curse, expressed through the female Erinyes, will continue to be applied by the female divine powers when the male power in the Areopagos proves inadequate to the task of providing justice.

This paper aims to shed light on the evolution of the curse-theme in the *Oresteia*. It indicates continuity in the idea of the curse over the course of the drama and as witnessed in the last scene of the trilogy, in which the curse retains its power as a threat against the Athenian citizens in the new institution of the polis. At the same time, it does more justice to the prominence of female deities in the closing scene of the *Eumenides*, and counters the usual scholarly emphasis on female suppression.