

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF MATRICIDE

Revenge and metabolism imagery in Aeschylus'
*Oresteia**

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'[T]hose aspects of our animal humanness that get excluded from or bottled up in other genres' are common subjects in ancient satire and Aristophanic comedy. So argues Daniel Hooley, drawing a distinction between 'indecent' and 'decent' literature (the latter represented by 'epic') on an intuitive classification of bodily fluids and emissions. While listing '[s]hit, vomit, pus, gas, semen' to exemplify the domain of comedy and satire, he adds parenthetically that there is 'not much blood, an epic fluid', and that '*nobody pisses in epic*' (Hooley 2007: 8, emphasis mine). Indeed, scatology is the endemically comic grammar: 'Farting and excreting . . . are an important component of the comic hero's "arsenal" of self-expression'; the few extended scenes of defecation in Aristophanes are 'invariably for thematic purposes . . . which transcend the merely farcical' (Henderson 1991: 54, 397). For example, it is thematically justified that Aristophanes' protagonist defecates on an arms-dealer corselet and calls personified War the 'lord of shitting down your legs' in the *Peace* (1226–37; ὁ κατὰ τοῖν σκελοῖν, 241; trans. Silk 2002: 154; see Edwards 1991).

A fortiori, explicit references to bodily discharge—other than 'blood, sweat, and tears'—call for special alertness when they occur in 'decent', high-register literature. A scene where someone *does* piss—not in 'epic' but, equally inappropriately by Hooley's standards, in Classical Athenian tragedy—occurs at the critical moment in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* (*Choephoroe*), the central play of his *Oresteia* trilogy. Orestes and Pylades, disguised as foreigners, bringing news of Orestes' alleged death, return to avenge the death of Agamemnon. After an unsuspecting Clytemnestra welcomes them and they go into the house, Orestes' childhood nurse Cilissa comes out to lament his reported death, recalling how she took care of him in infancy. Her speech will be analysed in detail (*Libation Bearers* 743–63):

ὦ τάλαιν' ἐγώ, (743)

ὥς μοι τὰ μὲν παλαιὰ συγκεκραμένα
ἄλλη δύσοιστα τοῖσδ' ἐν Ἀτρέως δόμοις (745)

τυχόντ' ἐμὴν ἤλγυνεν ἐν στέρνοις φρένα,
ἀλλ' οὐ τί πω τοιόνδε πῆμ' ἀνεσχόμην.
τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλα τλημόνως ἦντλον κακά·
φίλον δ' Ὀρέστην, τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς τριβήν,
ὄν ἐξέθρεψα μητρόθεν δεδεγμένη (750)

καὶ νυκτιπλάγκτων ὀρθίων κελευμάτων
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καὶ πολλὰ καὶ μοχθήρ' ἀνοφέλητ' ἔμοι
 τλάσῃ· τὸ μὴ φρονοῦν γὰρ ὡσπερεὶ βοτὸν
 τρέφειν ἀνάγκη—πῶς γὰρ οὔ;—τροφοῦ φρενί·
 οὐ γάρ τι φωνεῖ παῖς ἔτ' ὢν ἐν σπαργάνοις (755)
 εἰ λιμὸς ἢ δίψη τις ἢ λιψουρία
 ἔχει· νέα δὲ νηδὺς αὐτάρχης τέκνων. [MSS. αὐτάρχης]
 τούτων πρόμαντις οὔσα, πολλὰ δ' οἴομαι
 ψευσθεῖσα, παιδὸς σπαργάνων φαιδρύντρια,
 κναφεὺς τροφεὺς τε ταῦτ' εἰχέτην τέλος. (760)
 ἐγὼ διπλᾶς δὲ τάσδε χειρωναξίας
 ἔχουσ' Ὀρέστην ἐξεθρεψάμην πατρί·
 τεθνηκότος δὲ νῦν τάλαινα πεύθομαι. (763)

O wretched me!

For I found the old griefs that have happened in this
 house of Atreus hard enough to bear, all mixed together as they
 were, and they pained my heart within my breast;
 but I have never yet had to endure a sorrow like this.
 The other troubles I patiently put up with.
 But dear Orestes, who wore away my life with toil,
 whom I reared after taking him straight out of his mother!
 <Over and over again I heard> his shrill, imperative cries, which forced
 me to wander around at night <and perform> many disagreeable tasks
 which I had to endure and which did me no good.
 A child without intelligence must be reared
 like an animal—how else?—by the intelligence of his nurse [?];
 when he's still an infant in swaddling clothes he can't speak at all
 if he's in the grip of hunger or thirst, say, or of an urge to make water—
 and the immature bowel of small children self-governing. [MSS.: self-sufficient]
 I had to divine these things in advance,—and often, I think, I
 was mistaken, and as cleaner of the baby's wrappings—
 well, a launderer and a caterer were holding the same post.
 Practicing both these two crafts,
 I reared up Orestes for his father;
 and now, to my misery, I learn that he is dead!¹
 Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers* 743–63

What to make of these 'ordinary things that nowhere else find a place in extant Greek tragedy' (Garvie 1986: 243–4), which 'take domestic detail further than any other scene in Greek tragedy' (Gregory 2009: xxiii)? Why are we hearing about infant Orestes' urge to urinate, soiling diapers, and incontinent bowels at all—let alone at such a climactic moment, right before he murders his mother?

One earlier commentator describes this monologue as the 'pithy illiterate babble of the old woman', essentially dismissing the Nurse's perceived disruption of the tragic register as a timely 'comic relief'.² Alan Sommerstein reminds us that this murky label, originally invented to account for scenes in Shakespeare 'that offended against what were thought to be fundamental aesthetic canons', has been occasionally applied to

the lowborn characters of *Oresteia* (Sommerstein 2002: 152). But his survey of comic language in the trilogy shows that only less than 10 percent of it is assigned to low-status characters, demonstrating instead that linguistic breach of aesthetic decorum coincides with the outburst of violence in the *Oresteia*. From the lexical distribution he persuasively concludes that ‘far from being light relief of any sort, comic language is used in the *Oresteia* to heighten the blackness and bleakness of the vicious cycle of retaliatory violence, and disappears at the point where that cycle is broken’; simply put, ‘ugly deeds that can only be described in an ugly way’ (Sommerstein 2002: 163–4; cf. Seidensticker 1982: 65).

With different methodology but along similar lines, A. F. Garvie observes that the Nurse’s speech is more than a sideshow: she provides a rare display of genuine affection in the trilogy, standing out as the mother-figure of Orestes as a foil to Clytemnestra, while the helpless baby creates a ‘grim contrast’ with the grown murderer (Garvie 1986: 243–4 on *Libation Bearers* 730–82). Specific correspondences are conspicuous: baby Orestes mirrors the newborn snake in Clytemnestra’s dream (*Libation Bearers* 523–53; cf. Rousseau 1963; Catenaccio 2011 on dreams in the *Oresteia*); Cilissa describes the baby’s cries keeping her ‘wandering in the night’ (νοκτιπλάγκτων, 751) with an Aeschylean coinage used only in the *Oresteia*, which Garvie sees as a ‘deliberate echo’ of Clytemnestra haunted by the nightmare (νοκτιπλάγκτων δειμάτων πεπαλμένη, 524; Garvie 1986: 248, on *Libation Bearers* 751–3).³ Infant Orestes cannot speak and is reared like an animal (*Libation Bearers* 753–5), which Garvie connects with the prominent animal imagery in the trilogy (for which see e.g. Knox 1952; Heath 1999; Saayman 1993). In the *Libation Bearers*, he is ‘in swaddling-clothes’ (ἐν σπαργάνοις, 755), like the snake (ἐν σπαργάνοισι, 529; cf. perhaps οὔφιν ἑπάσσα σπαργανηλείξετο† 544). Moreover, ‘Orestes’ situation in a sense parallels that of Aegisthus, who was driven into exile while still ἐν σπαργάνοις (*Agamemnon* 1606), only to return later (1607) as the avenger’ (Garvie 1986: 188, on *Libation Bearers* 529; more on these passages later).

Cilissa thus addresses in one way or another some major themes of the trilogy, such as parenthood and speech,⁴ and Orestes’ infancy becomes a miniature figurative re-enactment of the Orestes myth at large. Even the most graphic of the details, the washing of Orestes’ diapers (σπαργάνων φαιδρύντρια, *Libation Bearers* 759), transcends the mundane ‘pithy illiterate babble’ if nothing else by alluding lexically to the bath of Agamemnon (λουτροῖσι φαιδρύνουσα, *Agamemnon* 1109);⁵ the bathtub allusion is activated by a brutally ironic move in the immediately preceding scene where unsuspecting Clytemnestra welcomes Orestes, offering a warm bath (θερμὰ λουτρὰ, *Libation Bearers* 670).

The question now concerns the thematic valence of Orestes’ soiling the diapers in the first place and his incontinence, which makes the whole cycle uncontrollable and frustrating for the Nurse. Such a specific and inappropriate image calls for attention if only because ‘[t]he single most compelling feature of the artistry of the *Oresteia* is its elaborate network of image and metaphor’ (Zeitlin 1965: 463), and every image is ‘part of a larger whole: a system of kindred imagery’ (Lebeck 1971: 1).⁶ Especially developed among these networks of metaphor is the imagery of liquids; blood, for example, is likened to sacrificial wine (Zeitlin 1965) or textile dye (and more: Lebeck 1971: 80–91). Nor are the associations limited to ‘epic’ fluids: the ‘quasi-erotic’ overtones of the pleasure Clytemnestra felt on being sprinkled by Agamemnon’s blood

(*Agamemnon* 1389–92) had been arguably noticed already by Sophocles (*Antigone* 1238–9; Sommerstein 2002: 154). If, then, Sommerstein is right, that the horrors of the *Oresteia* are intensified by the ugliness and inappropriateness of comic register—and comedy, for its own part, enjoys ‘dramatizing [a character’s] dependence upon, and frequently his lack of control over, his bodily needs’ (Henderson 1991: 54)—then there is something thematically significant about Orestes’ metabolism.

In particular, I interpret the image of the physiological cycle of intake and discharge of bodily fluids as a symbolic expression of another kind of cycle, indeed the fundamental one for the trilogy: of crime and retribution. The infant Orestes’ incontinence in disposing bodily waste allegorically captures the essence of the vicious cycle of revenge in the Atreid myth: while the drive is instinctive, understandable, and sometimes felt as necessary, it should not be left to go on unrestrained. As a background for the detailed analysis of the symbolic function of the imagery of Orestes’ metabolism, I first discuss select references to the quantity and circulation of fluids, both inside and outside the body.

Aeschylus persistently exploits the dichotomy of wetness and dryness, especially when playing with the ambiguity regarding which one is more desirable. The messenger speech in the *Agamemnon*, for example, presumes two contrasting ancient commonplaces: that water is a vital fluid and dangerous as a means of traffic.⁷ Agamemnon’s messenger reports that after the tumultuous sailing of the Greek fleet, dry land at Troy was even *worse*—but only because the soil was wet and it was constantly raining, whereby their clothes got infested with vermin (*Agamemnon* 558–62). That is, water is both the sailor’s nightmare and the source of life after all, only not of the sort of living creatures that the Greek warriors would want. That Agamemnon escaped the ‘sea Hades’ (Ἄϊδην πόντιον, *Agamemnon* 665) pointedly foreshadows his humiliating death in the tub: the domestic, downscaled sea (parallels for this type of murder collected by Bremmer 1986).

Frequently, wetness and dryness logically stand for vitality and perishing, respectively. The leaves of the bone-marrow (μυελὸς) of an old man are already ‘withering’ (τό θ’ ὑπεργήρων φυλλάδος ἤδη | κατακαρφομένης, *Agamemnon* 74–80; on the bone-marrow as the ‘vital fluid that is the stuff of life’, see Sommerstein 2008: 11, ad loc.). Clytemnestra poses as a withering wife who cried herself dry: ‘In my eyes the gushing fountains of tears have dried up, there’s not a drop left’ (ἔμοιγε μὲν δὴ κλαυμάτων ἐπίσσυτοι | πηγὰι κατεσβήκασιν, οὐδ’ ἔνι σταγῶν, *Agamemnon* 887).⁸ These physiological processes of the human body are imaged as a natural phenomenon participating in the ecosystem, much like when the internal organs ‘whirl in eddies’ (σπλάγγνα δ’ οὔτοι ματᾶ- | ζει πρὸς ἐνδίκους φρεσὶν | τελεσφόροις δίναις κυκλούμενον κέαρ, *Agamemnon* 995–7; cf. Euripides *Suppliants* 203–7).⁹

Aeschylus is particularly fond of images of dehydration and absorption. The war god Ares is famously portrayed as a short-changing banker who dries out the living, sending the ashes back to be soaked in tears of their beloved (*Agamemnon* 438–44):

ὁ χρυσαμοιβὸς δ’ Ἄρης σωμάτων
καὶ ταλαντοῦχος ἐν μάχα δορὸς
πυρωθὲν ἐξ Ἰλίου
φίλοισι πέμπει βαρὺ

ψῆγμα δυσδάκρυτον ἀν-
τήνορος σποδοῦ χεμί-
ζων λέβητας εὐθέτους.

Ares, the moneychanger of bodies,
holding his scales in the battle of spears,
sends back from Ilium to their dear ones
heavy dust that has been through the fire,
to be sadly wept over,
filling easily-stowed urns
with ash given in exchange for men.
Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 438–44

Ares' funerary receptacles are curious, since *lebēs* (λέβης) is normally a container for liquids. By repurposing the word, Aeschylus has Ares practically drain the life fluid and return what is left in the same 'package'. A *lebēs* is allowed to contain dried remains because in the *Oresteia*'s network of imagery it will be treacherously lethal even when it contains fluid; the most ominous occurrence of *lebēs* containing liquid is in reference to Agamemnon's fatal bathtub (*Agamemnon* 1129; see Fraenkel 1950: 515–16, ad loc.). This specific semantic restriction of the term to denote lethal fluidity (and, as a consequence, dryness) seems like an ad hoc Aeschylean innovation which was not lost on Sophocles. Namely, the only other two instances where *lebēs* denotes a cinerary urn is for the vessel with Orestes' alleged ashes in both the *Libation Bearers* (686; Garvie 1986: 232, ad loc.) and Sophocles' *Electra* (1401). Here the traces of semantic intervention are still visible—the vessel *does not really* contain Orestes' ashes—but thus making it in a way all the more effective: while the *lebēs* does not materialise the death of Orestes, it announces his return alive, which spells doom for Clytemnestra and Aegisthus; as Patrick Finglass comments on the Sophoclean instance: 'To [Electra] he brings new life, to [Clytemnestra] death' (Finglass 2007: 513).¹⁰ Sophocles continues the sinister symbolism of *lebēs* as he uses it for the container in which Deianeira received the poisonous blood of the centaur Nessus presented as love-potion (*Trachinian Women* 556; numerous parallels between this play and the *Oresteia* have long been on the record: see e.g. Garner 1990: 100ff.)

Shortly after the Ares passage, the dust cloud raised by the messenger's arrival is called 'thirsty dust, the sister and neighbor of mud' (κάσις ἢ πληοῦ ζῦνουρος διψία κόνις, *Agamemnon*, 494–5).¹¹ This same dust in the *Eumenides* absorbs human blood irreversibly (ἀνδρὸς δ' ἐπειδὴν αἵμ' ἀνασπάση κόνις ἢ παζ θανόντος, οὔτις ἔστ' ἀνάστασις, *Eumenides* 646–7); once the Erinyes are appeased, they pray that 'the dust not drink up the dark blood of citizens' (μηδὲ πιούσα κόνις μέλαν αἷμα πολιτῶν, *Eumenides* 980; see also Lebeck 1971: 86–8). The image of dry dust absorbing life turns out to be a very Aeschylean one, and once again it impressed Sophocles (see Cairns 2014 on *Seven against Thebes* 734–7 and *Antigone* 599–603).

The corresponding image in the *Oresteia*, especially prominent in the *Libation Bearers*, is that of compensating for bloodshed by pouring another liquid, in a sort of rehydration (cf. Zeitlin 1965). Electra outlines the Aeschylean drainage system: 'Now my father has the drink-offerings—the earth has swallowed them' (ἔχει μὲν ἤδη

γαπότους χοὰς πατήρ, *Libation Bearers* 164). The heroes' ashes returned by Ares the banker, we have seen above, expect tears. But the whole point of the trilogy is that neither tears nor libations will do, but 'it is the law that when drops of gore flow to the ground, they demand other blood' (ἀλλὰ νόμος μὲν φονίας σταγόνας | χυμένας ἐς πέδον ἄλλο προσαιτεῖν | αἷμα, *Libation Bearers* 400–2). When Clytemnestra, terrified by nightmares, sends libations to Agamemnon's tomb, Orestes is equally uncompromising (*Libation Bearers* 519–21):

τὰ δῶρα μείω δ' ἐστὶ τῆς ἀμαρτίας·
τὰ πάντα γάρ τις ἐκχέας ἀνθ' αἵματος
ένός—μάτην ὁ μόχθος. ὦδ' ἔχει λόγος.

The gifts do not match the crime.
Pour out all you have in atonement for one man's blood—
and your work is wasted; so the saying goes.
Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers* 519–21

As Anne Lebeck summarises the dynamics,

Taken together the pouring of libations and the flow of blood form complementary halves of a single idea. The ostensible purpose of the libations is to mollify those infernal powers whose wrath is roused by bloodshed. Yet no drink-offering can effect this but an offering of blood.¹²

Lebeck 1971: 86

Retribution in the *Oresteia*, therefore, is routinely conceived of as a cycle of losing and replenishing liquids in various forms, notably the bodily ones. But the crucial exception that proves the rule are liquids which rather *produce* desiccation. This peculiar process is delegated to the embodiments of revenge, the Erinyes, introduced as detestable creatures with gory ooze dripping from their eyes (ἐκ δ' ὀμμάτων λείβουσι δυσφιλή λίβα, *Eumenides* 54). Clytemnestra's ghost urges them to wither Orestes dry with bloody breath from their bellies' fire (σὺ δ' αἱματηρὸν πνεῦμ' ἐπουρίσασα τῷ, | ἀτμῷ κατισχαινίουσα, νηδύος πυρί, *Eumenides* 137–8). Their destructive potential is elaborated in the choral ode where they threaten to sterilise the earth by raining vengeful poison from somewhere within them (*Eumenides* 780–7 = 808–17; 800–4):

ἐγὼ δ' ἄτιμος ἅ τάλαινα βαρύκοτος (780)
ἐν γὰρ τῷδε, φεῦ,
ἰὸν ἀντιπεν-
θῆ μεθεῖσα καρδίας,
σταλαγμὸν χθονὶ
ἄφορον, ἐκ δὲ τοῦ
λειχρὴν ἄφυλλος ἄτεκνος, ὦ Δίκα Δίκα, (785)
πέδον ἐπισύμενος
βροτοφθόρους κηλίδας ἐν χώρῃ βαλεῖ.

...
Αθ. ὑμεῖς δὲ μήτε τῆδε γῆ βαρὺν κότον (800)

σκήψητε, μὴ θυμοῦσθε, μηδ' ἀκαρπίαν
 τεύξητ' ἀφείσαι †δαμόνων† σταλάγματα,
 βρωτήρας ἀύχμους σπερμάτων ἀνημέρους.

And I, wretched that I am, am dishonoured, grievously angry,
 releasing poison, poison
 from my heart to cause grief in revenge
 in this land—ah!—a drip falling on the land,
 such that it cannot bear! And from it
 a canker causing leaflessness and childlessness—Justice, Justice!—
 sweeping over the soil
 will fill the land with miasmas fatal to humans.

...
 Athena: So do not send down grievous wrath against this land;
 do not be angry; do not create sterility
 by releasing a dripping liquid from your lungs [?]
 to make savage **droughts** that devour the seed.
 Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 780–7 = 808–17; 800–4

Among several textual uncertainties, one is relevant for the present discussion. Sommerstein rejects Scaliger's emendation ἀύχμους ('droughts') of the MSS αἰχμάς ('spears') at 803 for the same reason for which I accept it, namely, that it 'would create a confused picture, of a poison that *drips* on the earth and yet makes it *dry*' (Sommerstein 1989: 243–4, ad loc., original emphasis). Since Erinyes represent revenge in kind, it makes sense that fluidity, which elsewhere replenishes the loss of life, assumes a lethal force when coming from them. As was the case with Agamemnon's bath, a fluid becomes deadly precisely by perverting its otherwise presumed revitalising attributes, thereby emphasising that an act of violence is committed in response to a previous crime.

Particularly telling is how exactly that works with the Erinyes. What accounts for the capacity of their excretions to cause dryness is that they result from the substance which the Erinyes had previously dried out. Apollo describes them as indigestion personified: 'Give back in agony black foam taken from human bodies, vomiting out the clots of blood that you have sucked' (ἀνήϊς ὑπ' ἄλγους μέλαν' ἀπ' ἀνθρώπων ἀφρόν, Ἰέμοῦσα θρόμβους οὖς ἀφείλκυσας φόνου, *Eumenides* 183–4; the 'clot' is a significant detail in Clytemnestra's dream; see later). He compares them to a 'blood-slurping lion' (λέοντος ἄντρον αἱματορρόφον, *Eumenides* 193; a comic derivation: Sommerstein 2002: 161), anticipating their self-proclaimed mission (*Eumenides*, 261–8):

Χο. αἷμα μητρῶον χαμαὶ (261)

δυσασγκόμιστον, παπαῖ,

τὸ διερὸν πέδῳ χύμενον οἴχεται.

ἀλλ' ἀντιδοῦναι δεῖ σ' ἀπὸ ζῶντος **ῥοφεῖν**

ἐρυθρὸν ἐκ μελέων πελανόν, ἀπὸ δὲ σοῦ (265)

βοσκὰν φεροίμαν πώματος δυσπότου·

καὶ ζῶντά σ' ἰσχνάνας' ἀπάξομαι κάτω,

ἀντίποιν' ὡς τίνης ματροφόνος δῦας.

Chorus: A mother's blood on the ground
 is hard to bring back up—papai!—
 wet blood that is shed on to the earth and disappears.
 No, you must give in return a thick red liquid
 from your limbs for us to slurp from your living body: from you
 may I draw the nourishment of a draught horrid to drink!
 And having drained you dry while you live, I'll haul you off below,
 so that you may pay in suffering the penalty of your matricide.
 Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 261–8

For Erinyes, Orestes is food to be drained into a bloodless shadow (ἀναίματον βόσκημα δαιμόνων, σκιάν, *Eumenides* 302). But eventually, Apollo says (*Eumenides* 729–30),

σύ τοι τάχ' οὐκ ἔχουσα τῆς δίκης τέλος
 ἐμῆ τὸν ἰὸν οὐδὲν ἐχθροῖσιν βαρύν.

You will shortly, when you fail to gain final victory in the trial,
 vomit up your poison and find it does no harm to your enemies.
 Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 729–30

The Erinyes' primary function, therefore, is conceived of as a physiological process: they feed on defiled fluids of criminals and generate murderous fluids in return. Simply put, they exact revenge by releasing bodily waste. Appropriately, they are regularly attributed with spitting, specifically with the compounds of the verb *ptuō* (πτύω), which 'expresses a strong ritual rejection' (Catenaccio 2011: 208, with fn. 17, cf. Hesiod, *Works and Days* 726). Apollo introduces them as 'the abominable maidens', literally 'to be spat upon' (αἱ κατάπτυστοι κόραι, *Eumenides* 68), who feast on human suffering, which other gods detest, 'spit out' (ἀπόπτυστου θεοῖς, *Eumenides* 191). The Erinyes also spit on the befouled marital bed of Atreus (ἀπέπτυσαν, *Agamemnon* 1192).

This grotesque image of slurping, vomiting, and spitting avengers is not only verging on comic—confirming Sommerstein's thesis that comic locutions 'heighten the blackness and bleakness of the vicious cycle of retaliatory violence'—but is also thematically integrated, as it recalls central events in the course of the Atreid curse. Aegisthus takes time to retell the myth of his father, Thyestes, who vomited a meal of his sons (*Agamemnon* 1598–607):

κάπειτ' ἐπιγνοὺς ἔργον οὐ καταίσιον
 ὄμωξεν, ἀμπίπτει δ' ἀπὸ σφαγᾶς ἐρῶν,
 μόρον δ' ἄφερτον Πελοπίδαις ἐπεύχεται (1600)
 λάκτισμα δείπνου ξυνδίκως τιθεὶς ἀρᾶ,
 οὕτως ὀλέσθαι πᾶν τὸ Πλεισθένους γένος.
 ἐκ τῶνδ' ἐσοὶ πεσόντα τόνδ' ἰδεῖν πάρα·
 κἀγὼ δίκαιος τοῦδε τοῦ φόνου ῥαφεύς·
 τρίτον γὰρ ὄντα μ' ἔλιπε, καθλίψ' πατρὶ (1605)
 συνεξελαύνει τυτθὸν ὄντ' ἐν σπαργάνοις,
 τραφέντα δ' αὔθις ἢ Δίκη κατήγαγεν.

Then, when he recognised the unrighteous deed,
 he howled aloud, fell backwards while **vomiting out** the
 slaughtered remains, and called down an unendurable fate
 on the house of Pelops, kicking over the table to chime
 with his curse: ‘So perish all the race of Pleisthenes!’
 It is because of this, you see, that you now behold this man [i.e. Agamemnon]
 fallen.

And I was rightfully entitled to contrive this slaying.
 I was my wretched father’s third child; Atreus . . ., drove me
 out together with him, when I was a tiny infant in swaddling clothes.
 When I grew up, Justice brought me back again.

The ‘digestive curse’ goes further back, about as far back in the bloodline as it can go. Thyestes’ father Pelops was cooked and served to the gods by his father, Tantalus, who was punished for it by eternal thirst and continuously receding water. (Alternatively, Tantalus stole nectar and ambrosia from the Olympian banquet—another nutritional violation.) The Aeschylean liquid imagery presently discussed was indeed so fundamental for the story of Atreids that it is attested operating on other media as well. Tantalus emblematised the flow of bodily fluids. An especially fascinating example of iconographic evidence is that of amulets depicting uterine jars with Tantalus invoked to drink menstrual blood—or not, since menorrhoea can be, uniquely, both pathological and beneficial (discussed by Faraone 2009). Apparently, various problems with the amount of fluids in the body—both good and bad, sometimes simultaneously—run in the family, so to speak. Calling the Atreid curse recursive is more than a pun. Revenge in the *Oresteia* operates within the body, imaged as a physiological process of intake and discharge of bodily fluids. Symptomatically, the grief for Argive heroes fallen in the Trojan war—of which the initial casualty, Iphigenia, triggered this phase of the Atreid revenge cycle covered by *Oresteia*—causes pain in the liver (ἥπαρ, *Agamemnon* 432).

Unsurprisingly, Aeschylus draws strong parallels between the trilogy’s agents of revenge, Orestes and the Erinyes. Orestes is likewise spitting, as he ‘disregards’ their threats (ἀποπτύεις, *Eumenides* 303). The nurse, troubled with the baby’s ‘urge to urinate’ (*lipsouria*, λψουρία, *Libation Bearers* 756), refers to the organ responsible for it as *nēdus* (νηδύς, 757), matching the *nēdus* of Erinyes, where, as we have seen, they are to generate the fire to dehydrate Orestes (*Eumenides* 138, mentioned earlier). The term is well chosen, since it can mean ‘bowels’ or any cavity generally but is often associated with a collection of fluids. In the Hippocratic *On Airs, Waters, and Places* (19), it directly reflects climatic humidity, responding virtually as a hygrometer. It is the epicentre of thirst and unrestrained appetite (Euripides, *Cyclops* 243–6, 303ff., 574–5; Napolitano 2003: 145–6) and is paired with agricultural irrigation (Euripides, *Suppliants* 205–7; Harry 1912). Finally, a fluid parallel between Orestes and the Erinyes is *thrombos*, the clot of blood which Erinyes would vomit back (θρόμβος, *Eumenides* 184, mentioned earlier) and the clot that Orestes-as-snake sucks with his mother’s milk in her dream (θρόμβος, *Libation Bearers* 533, 546). Evidently, Orestes and the Erinyes share a comparable anatomy and a similar diet. While Erinyes slurp the polluted blood of transgressors and excrete poisonous ooze in return, Orestes is symbolically breastfed by Clytemnestra’s toxic milk and produces murderous discharge.¹³

In such an arrangement, Cilissa washing Orestes' diapers foreshadows his eventual purification and absolution from guilt in the *Eumenides*, an outcome likewise rich in language of literal washing. Right after the Erinyes remind Apollo, the 'purifier of houses', who 'cleansed' Orestes from murder (δομάτων καθάρσιος, *Eumenides*, 63; φόνου δὲ τοῦδ' ἐγὼ καθάρσιος, *Eumenides* 578), that Orestes spilled his mother's blood—that is, his own—they imply that no community will allow him to use their lustral water (τὸ μητρὸς αἷμ' ὄμαιμον ἐκχέας πέδοι . . . ποία δὲ χέρνιψ φρατέρων προσδέξεται; *Eumenides* 653, 656).

But just as the moral and legal absolution of Orestes will take some doing, so is Cilissa at pains to keep up with her hygienic duties. The language she uses to describe the family miseries paints an image of overflowing filth which is impossible to hold back. Orestes' death is too much for her (*Libation Bearers* 747); previously, she could 'patiently put up with all the other sufferings', literally, 'drain them out' (τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλα τλημόνως ἤντλουν κακά, 748). The verb *antleō* (ἀντλέω), primarily meaning bailing out bilge water from a ship, is symbolically charged. In line with the trilogy's recurrent concern with perilous excess (e.g. *Agamemnon* 376–8), the house of Atreus is spoken of as an overburdened ship that risks going off-course and sinking (*Agamemnon* 1005–13); punishment for crime is imaged as a shipwreck resulting from excessive, confusingly mixed, illegal, unjust cargo (τὸν ἀντίτολμον δέ φαμι παρβάταν | ἄγοντα πολλὰ παντόφυρτ' ἄνευ δίκας, *Eumenides* 554, 550–65). Continuing this imagery, Cilissa's arresting alliteration τλημόνως ἤντλουν, rather than being 'probably accidental' (Garvie 1988: 247, ad loc.), literally *blends* ultimate misfortune with the inability to control the inflow and outflow of liquids. By jumbling up the letters she is practically implementing her impression that woes of this family are all 'mixed together' (συγκεκραμένα, 744).¹⁴ This is a flood.¹⁵ Like the Atreid dynastic ship, Orestes' diapers are overflowed with crime and revenge, inseparably, and they are leaking.

This close focus on Orestes' diapers raises the question of why Cilissa does not specify what exactly the discharge is. There is some debate whether she means only urine, since only the need to urinate is mentioned at 756 (so Garvie 1986: 250, on *Libation Bearers* 757), or is there, as Sommerstein understands it, a 'veiled reference to the evacuation of solid waste', because urine traces alone 'would hardly require the services of a κναφεύς ([*knafeus*] 760)', and explicit mention of faeces would be too much for tragedy where even the otherwise decent noun *kopros* (κόπρος) is avoided (Sommerstein 2002: 159). True, clothes stained with diarrhoea are cleaned by a *knapheus* (Aristophanes, *Wasps* 1126–8), and the noun *antlia* (ἀντλία, cognate of Cilissa's ἀντλέω in *Libation Bearers* 748) can mean excrements (Aristophanes, *Peace* 18). But having seen earlier all of Aeschylus' graphic descriptions unparalleled elsewhere, one wonders why he would stop short of finding a way to express the urge to defecate if he wanted to; the opening scene of Aristophanes' *Frogs* suggests such a need was well exploited in comedy, and the word Cilissa uses for the urinary pressure is a bold tragicomic compound itself.¹⁶ Perhaps a sufficient explanation would be that Aeschylus specifically points out urine to emphasise the liquidity of the process (though in ordinary circumstances a healthy infant's faeces is somewhat more liquid than solid anyway). But once we analyse how exactly Cilissa speaks of her duties, one particular effect of urine might add a further layer of meaning to her otherwise exceptionally symbolic role.

Namely, Cilissa says that in taking care of Orestes she did everything by herself, so ‘the nurse and laundrywoman had a combined duty’ (Lattimore 1953), that is, ‘washerwoman and wet-nurse shared the shop’ (Fagles 1984), or ‘launderer and a caterer were holding the same post’ (Sommerstein 2008) and, literally, ‘the nurse and launderer had the same *telos*’ (κναφεύς τροφεύς τε ταῦτὸν εἰχέτην τέλος, 760). This must convey something more than simply ‘I myself practiced these two crafts’, which she will say in those exact words in the following line (διπλᾶς δὲ τάσδε χειρωναξίας, 761). Rather, the verse 760, I argue, epitomises the trilogy’s central theme of reciprocal circularity of cause and effect: ‘the same person was giving him milk and cleaning his waste’ applies not only to Orestes’ nurse and surrogate mother who provides him with beneficial nourishment and then has to take care of his discharge but also to Orestes’ biological mother, who instead of due mother’s milk feeds him only with cursed blood-clotted heritage and consequently faces his revenge.¹⁷ The fundamental issue of the *Oresteia* is that crime is necessarily followed by counter-crime; ‘the impious deed breeds more to follow, resembling their progenitors’ (τὸ δυσσεβὲς γὰρ ἔργον | μετὰ μὲν πλείονα τίκτει, | σφετέρᾳ δ’ εἰκότα γέννα. *Agamemnon* 758–60). The ‘doer must suffer’ might as well be the unofficial subtitle of the trilogy (*Agamemnon* 1560–4):

ὄνειδος ἤκει τόδ’ ἀντ’ ὄνειδους,
 δύσμαχα δ’ ἔστι κρῖναι.
 φέρει φέροντ’, ἐκτίνει δ’ ὁ καίνων·
 μίμνει δὲ μίμνοντος ἐν θρόνῳ Διὸς
 παθεῖν τὸν ἔρξαντα· θέσμιον γάρ.

Insult comes in return for insult,
 and it is a hard struggle to judge.
 The ravager is ravaged, the killer pays;
 it remains firm while Zeus remains on his throne

that he who does shall suffer, for that is his ordinance.
 Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1560–4

The phrase receives the aura of ancient wisdom: “and for a bloody stroke let the payment be a bloody stroke.” For him who does, suffering—that is what the old, old saying states’ (ἀντι δὲ πληγῆς φονίας φονίαν | πληγὴν τινέτω. δρᾶσαντι παθεῖν, | τριγέρων μῦθος τάδε φωνεῖ. *Libation Bearers* 312–14). From this angle, therefore, the remark that ‘the nurse and launderer had the same *telos*’ acquires additional force: not only do ‘doing’ and ‘suffering’ head towards the same goal (τέλος)—that is, to each other—but the very words κναφεύς and τροφεύς have the same *ending*. This homoeoteleuton practically binds the ‘doer’ to the ‘sufferer’.¹⁸ This is where the exclusive reference to urine in Orestes’ diapers, with faeces left unmentioned, may come into consideration. Unlike faeces, urine was not only waste to be *cleaned* by the launderer but actually an ingredient *used* by the launderer as a detergent (Olson and Biles 2015: 416–17, on Aristophanes, *Wasps* 1127–8¹⁹). In other words, the *Oresteia*’s frustrating circularity would find its ultimate expression if the liquid contents of Orestes’ swaddling-clothes are in fact both the filth and the purifier, simultaneously the problem and the solution.

Thus, the central premise of the trilogy is imaged as this circulation of crime-contaminated fluids through the body of baby Orestes, which, symptomatically, no one can control. Neither can Cilissa tell if Orestes is hungry, thirsty, or needs to urinate, nor can he himself speak to say it. The uninhibited and uninhabitable neonatal metabolism serves as a fit allegory for the inevitability of cyclical wrongdoing in the *Oresteia*. The rotation of inflicting and suffering injustice is a *perpetuum mobile* beyond external control, like an incontinent infant's urinary tract, run only by its own internal reflexes: in the emended text it is *autarchēs* (αὐτάρχης), 'self-governing' (757), though the manuscript reading *autarkēs* (αὐτάρκης), 'self-sufficient',²⁰ is very tempting, as it would convey the idea of a closed, self-sustainable loop in which urine is treated with urine.

Aeschylus' imagery belongs to broader ancient tradition. On the one hand, metabolic and hydraulic metaphors will be in circulation, as it were, in various contexts. In Plato's *Symposium* Socrates compares intellectual and moral influence to water flowing from a fuller vessel into an emptier one; the *Timaeus* allegorises cosmogenesis via a peculiar irrigation system of the body (Plato, *Symposium* 175d-e; *Timaeus* 47e–84c.). The body generally, on the other hand, is an especially potent metaphor when something goes wrong. Thucydides' graphic description of the ravaging Athenian plague is followed by what Jeffrey Rusten called the 'general breakdown of moral and social restraints' (1989: 189, on Thucydides 2.52–54.1); the gruesome account of bodies falling apart may also be seen as the figurative manifestation of the imploding social order (cf. now Serafim 2019). Comedy, expectedly, prefers the 'rear entrance' for sending political messages. The memorable scene of painful constipation in Aristophanes' *Assemblywomen* resulting in the birth of faeces (317–71) is unanimously interpreted as symbolising political defeat of the Athenian male.²¹ But it is Aeschylus who cleared the ground for affirming the connection between physiological urges and external pressures and tensions—political, social, moral, and religious. He may well have been the first, and certainly for a long time the only one outside comedy and satire, to pursue so systematically this channel (so to speak) for illustrating the most pressing demands placed on humans with the basest function of the human body.

The body, in terms of consumption, digestion, and excretion, would become a widespread metaphor for social disorders, moral declines, and political crises in Latin literature, as has been surveyed by Emily Gowers (1993: 12–16), who notes, for example, that '[t]he individual body could be seen as the small-scale incarnation of national *luxuria*' (1993: 13).²² Well-established in Latin is the socio-political metaphorical use of the adjective *intestinus*, 'internal', especially in Sallust and Cicero for referring to civil war, *bellum intestinum*, and internal conflicts generally.²³ A generation later, Livy would elaborate on internal discord as an illness requiring *remedium* (2.45.4), and on civil war burning inside the entrails (*intestino et haerente in ipsis visceribus uramur bello*, 32.27; for the politics of 'body horror' in Livy, see now Hay 2018).²⁴

Especially interesting for our purposes is Livy's aetiologising of Latin intestinal metaphor with an old Greek parable of body as society. A plebeian insider delegated by patricians to pacify the seditious plebs in 494 BCE tells them a story: once upon a time, the body's limbs revolted against the stomach for doing nothing but enjoying the food the limbs provided; thus they decided to starve the belly into submission, only to end up starving themselves, and so 'with this parable, he showed the similarity between

the internal revolt of the body and the anger of the plebs toward the senators, and so won over men's minds' (*comparando hinc quam intestina corporis seditio similis esset irae plebis in patres, flexisse mentes hominum*, 2.32.8–12; trans. Warrior 2006; the parable is attested at Xenophon, Aesop, and others, and attributed to various speakers: Ogilvie 1965: 312–13, ad loc.). It may be a coincidence that two metabolic metaphors found their way into two foundational legends: Livy deploys this parable to dramatise the first plebeian secession and the institution of the magistracy of *tribunus plebis*, while Aeschylus' *Oresteia* ultimately prepares the ground for introduction of the council of Areopagus. Whatever may be the case, there is something about intestinal urges that can turn them into effective means of persuasion when major measures in the public sphere need to be carried out: body-society cannot function unless bodily urges are addressed first. They are non-negotiable. To quote a delicious truth-bomb in praise of farting thrown by the freedman Trimalchio at his dinner-guests, 'That's the one thing that not even Jupiter can prohibit' (*hoc solum vetare ne Iovis potest*, Petronius, *Satyricon* 47.4).

Notes

* Arguments from this chapter have been presented on various occasions; for useful suggestions, I thank Julia Laskaris, Tom Hawkins, Catalina Popescu, Darko Todorović, and the volume editors.

1 Text and occasionally modified translations of Aeschylus are from Sommerstein 2008; all other translations are mine unless noted otherwise.

2

[T]he Nurse, whose rustic homeliness and grotesque but natural inconsequence of speech forms, like the talk of the Herald in the *Agamemnon*, an effective contrast to the fearful drama that impends. It relieves the tension of feeling just at the crisis: and the pithy illiterate babble of the old woman about Orestes' babyhood, adds the touch of nature to the dark tragic figure of the Avenger.

(Sidgwick 1892: xvii)

for a 'comic relief' interpretation, cf. more recently Pypłacz 2009. Apparently likewise puzzled by some awkward passages, ancient sources speculated that Aeschylus wrote while inebriated: Chameleon, according to Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists* 1.21d; Plutarch, *Convivial Questions* 7.10.

3 The other two instances are *Agamemnon* 12 (Watchman's nocturnal restlessness in anticipation of Agamemnon's return and the change of ruler), and *Agamemnon* 330 (night patrol of the Greeks after the capture of Troy); cf. perhaps 'day-wandering dream vision' (ὄναρ ἡμερόφαντον ἀλαίνει, *Agamemnon* 82).

4 And prophecy: the best the nurse could do with the infant's attempts to communicate was to be a 'diviner' of his needs (πρόμαντις, 758), and the Chorus soon warns her not to be a 'bad interpreter' of the news of Orestes' death (οὐπω· κακός γε μάντις ἂν γνοίη τάδε, 777). The grown Orestes himself is an interpreter of the snake in the dream (τερασκόπον, 551; on prophecy in the *Oresteia*, see Roberts 1985). Cilissa typically mistook the baby Orestes' inarticulate signals (ψευσθεῖσα, 759), perhaps just as in the immediately preceding scene Clytemnestra mistook Orestes for a Phocaeon because he spoke with a different accent (*Libation Bearers* 563).

5 cf. also Cassandra's 'brightening' prophecy at *Agamemnon* 1120.

6

The images of the *Oresteia* are not isolated units which can be examined separately. Each one is part of a larger whole: a system of kindred imagery. . . . When related to each other and to the ideas which they illustrate or the dramatic action which

translates them into visual terms, the images cease to be discrete and arbitrary pictures and emerge as important components of the play's significance.

(Lebeck 1971: 1, 3)

Aeschylus' imagery has been studied extensively: see Goheen 1955; Van Nes 1963; Peradotto 1964; Smith 1965; Scott 1966; Fowler 1967; Garson 1983; Saayman 1993; Catenaccio 2011.

- 7 This exact ambivalence of water is nicely captured by the comedian Antiphanes (Athenaeus 1.23, fr. 228 Kassel and Austin), who parodies Sophocles' simile of stubborn trees felled by flood (*Antigone* 710–14) by reconfiguring them into those that perish by stubbornly keeping their 'thirst and dryness' (δίψαν, ξηρασίαν); elsewhere, Antiphanes also speaks of sailing as virtually suicidal (fr. 100 Kassel and Austin).
- 8 cf. Statius's description of Hypsipile (*Thebaid* 5.593–4), discussed by Krebs, present volume, Chapter 21, pp. 000.
- 9 Compare the neat transition from physiology to meteorology in Sallust's *Jugurthine War* (75.7): after Roman army struggled to secure enough water supply for a difficult campaign, 'it is said that such an amount of water fell suddenly from the sky that for the army it was enough and indeed too much' (*tanta repente caelo missa vis aquae dicitur, ut ea modo exercitui satis superque foret*). See also the landscape reflecting Dido's state of mind in Virgil's *Aeneid* 4.532–665, discussed by Krebs, present volume, Chapter 21, pp. 000.
- 10 The effect is still there even if Finglass is right that there are two different vessels mentioned, and that this *lebes* is 'not *the* urn, which was never taken inside. Clytemnestra is preparing a vessel in anticipation of the return of her son's ashes to the house' (Finglass 2007: 512).
- 11 Apparently a very Aeschylean locution: cf. 'smoke, the sister of fire' at *Seven against Thebes* 493–4; Clarke 1995.
- 12 For the idea, cf. the wine libations poured by Dido becoming '*obscenum . . . cruorem*' (Virgil, *Aeneid* 4.455): Krebs, present volume, Chapter 21, p. 000.
- 13 On 'good breast' and 'bad breast' in the *Oresteia*, cf. DeForest 1993: 137–8.
- 14 See also the political allegory of polluting a clear spring of water with mud (βορβόρω, comic word) at *Eumenides* 694–5, with Sommerstein 2002: 163.
- 15 cf. Sommerstein's own (unintentional?) phrasing: 'The effect in the *Oresteia* is as though the αἰσχρότης were breaking through in spite of all efforts to contain it' (2002: 164–5)
- 16

λιγουρία (756)—a compound that strikingly wraps together in one word a highly untragic reference to urination with a verbal root (that of λέλιμμα) so elevated that it is hardly known otherwise except from Hellenistic epic [. . .] and two passages of *Seven against Thebes* (355, 380).

Sommerstein 2002: 159

- 17 The fluid connection is foreshadowed in the choral parable of the lion cub in the *Agamemnon* (717–36): the infant lion, representing Orestes, is 'fond of the nipple but deprived of its milk' (γάλακτον . . . φιλόμαστον, 718–19), tame when pressed by 'intestinal urges' (γαστρὸς ἀνάγκαις, 726), eventually showing the character inherited from his parents as he returns grown up to take vengeance on the house 'soaked in blood' (αἷματι δ' οἶκος ἐφύρθη, 732). The 'imagery drawn from the lion parable is used to describe every figure in the *Oresteia* who acts as an instrument of the Erinys' (Lebeck (1971: 50, with references); for the parable, see also Knox 1952; Saayman 1993: 13–16; Nappa 1994.
- 18 One might also hear ritual overtones, since homoeoteleuton is characteristic of such formulae; cf. Clytemnestra's rhyming prayer: Ζεῦ, Ζεῦ τέλειε, τὰς ἐμὰς ἐσχὰς τέλει· | μέλοι δέ τοι σοι τῶν περ ἄν μέλλης τελεῖν (*Agamemnon* 973–4); see Fraenkel 1950, Volume II: 440, ad loc. for a general discussion and Hogan 1984: 9 on the rhyme. Goldhill 1984 discusses some thematically significant semantic aspects of τέλος and its compounds in the *Oresteia*.
- 19 I thank Julia Laskaris for reminding me of this.
- 20 cf. Thucydides 2.41.1 for political and medical connotations of σῶμα αὐταρκες, with Rusten 1989: 159.

- 21 ‘While his wife has risen to the highest position possible in the city, Blepyrus has sunk to the lowest’ (Henderson 1991: 102; cf. 189, §401); Sommerstein (1998: 173, commenting on Aristophanes, *Assemblywomen* 369) observes that
- during the same time that Blepyrus has been struggling with his bowels, the Assembly meeting has begun and ended on the Pnyx; thus while Blepyrus after much labour has “given birth” to a quantity of excrement, the Assembly under his wife’s guidance has been giving birth (cf. 549–50) to a new Athens.
- For parallels between the *Assemblywomen* and the *Oresteia*, see Vidović 2017, especially 41–2. for the constipation scene and Agamemnon’s death in the tub.
- 22 Gowers cites examples of Seneca who ‘pictures himself as an island of integrity in the swelling flood of luxury (*circumfudit me ex largo frugalitatis situ venientem multo splendore luxuria et undique circumsonuit* [*On the Tranquility of the Soul*] 1.4.10)’ (14, fn. 52), and Cicero’s metaphors of dregs and sewage (15); for political metaphor of bodily pollution, see Bradley 2012: 36–9.
- 23 *Bellum intestinum*: Sallust, *Catiline* 5.2; Cicero, *Against Catiline* 1.5.5, 2.28, etc. Cicero frequently pairs *intestinus* with *domesticus*, sometimes suggesting also insidiousness, as in *occultum intestinum ac domesticum malum* (*Against Verres* 2.1.39), or with an extended corporeal imagery of wounds to the state caused from within (*multa sunt occulta rei publicae volnera . . . nullum externum periculum est, . . . inclusum malum, intestinum ac domesticum est*; *On the Agrarian Law* 1.26.7); curiously, once when using *intestinus* it in its literal, biological sense, Cicero quasi-apologetically calls attention to the collocation ‘the liver’s door’ (*ad portas iecoris—sic enim appellantur*; *On the nature of Gods*, 137.1).
- 24 For accumulated metaphors, cf. also *intestino bello totae gentes consumuntur*, Columella 9.9.6.8.

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