

REVIEW OF BOOKS

SHILO (A.) **Beyond Death in the *Oresteia*: Poetics, Ethics, and Politics**. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xii + 247. £75. 9781108832748.
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In this interesting and well-researched book, Amit Shilo focuses on the presence of multiple conceptions of the afterlife in the *Oresteia*, which are attributed by Aeschylus to different characters or to the same character at different times without any attempt to reduce them to a coherent picture. Shilo's thesis is that the poet creates a 'poetics of the afterlife' and a 'poetics of plurality' that 'affects individual perspectives and outcomes, as well as notions of personal and political justice' (214). By bringing one or the other idea to the forefront, and working on their inherent ambiguities, Aeschylus succeeds in challenging core values in the fields of justice, ethics and politics. Shilo's study is particularly welcome since the topic has lacked a focused review until now.

In the introduction, after reviewing the ideas on the afterlife prior to Aeschylus, Shilo clarifies his use of the terms 'ethics' and 'politics', to which he assigns a more circumscribed value than is common in modern philosophical language. The following chapters discuss all the passages relevant to the theme: for *Agamemnon*, the scenes of the Herald and Cassandra, and the chorus' reflections on death (chapters 1, 2, 3); for *Choephoroi*, the *kommos* (Chapter 4); for *Eumenides*, the scene of Clytemnestra's spectre (Chapter 6) and the references made by the Erinyes about the prosecution of sinners after death (Chapter 7). Chapter 5 investigates references to a possible heroic future for some of the characters.

A first relevant tension is the one between the vision of death as complete annihilation and the idea that the dead can influence the world of the living. The Herald and Cassandra imagine death as liberation from suffering. This approach has ethical consequences, in the sense that they become aware of their inability to change reality; nonetheless, Cassandra (and the chorus in the *exodos* of *Agamemnon*) can draw from it an impulse to withstand their opponents. Conversely, the dead can act on the living, as in the case of the evocation of Thyestes' children and Iphigenia welcoming her father to Hades, which raise the prospect of revenge, and even more forcefully in the scene of the spectre.

A full exploitation of the poetics of indeterminacy is detected in Cassandra's scene. In Shilo's opinion, the couplet of *Agamemnon* 1160–61 'now by the Cocytus and the banks of the Acheron/it seems I will soon be singing prophecies', can be understood both as a simple allusion to death and as a divinely inspired prophecy, entailing the idea of a continuation of Cassandra's prophetic singing in Hades. This would open up a new perspective for her future, markedly different from the annihilation of which she speaks at lines 1227–30.

Central to Shilo's thesis is the analysis of the *kommos* of the *Choephoroi*, where he unravels the different ideas about Agamemnon's condition in Hades proposed by his sons, who express the unattainable wish that he had died on the battlefield (Orestes) or even had not died (Electra), and by the chorus, which simply points to the restitution of his honour as a dead man. For the difficult passage of lines 354–63, Shilo leaves open the possibility of understanding the words of the chorus as picking up Orestes' expression of a possibility in the past (Agamemnon could have had prestige in Hades if he had died gloriously) or implying a copula, so as to attribute to him a prestigious condition independent from the mode of his death.

The poetics of the afterlife plays a leading role in the *Eumenides*. Orestes, acquitted in the trial, appropriates the role of a future hero-protector capable of guaranteeing peace between Argos and Athens; this perspective strongly contrasts with the idea held by the Erinyes that his punishment should continue in Hades. The latter's vision of a perpetual individual punishment clashes with the political dimension of the new state justice founded by Athena. This conflict between two forms of justice has the consequence that the claim for revenge of Clytemnestra's spectre, though cancelled by the Areopagus' verdict, can continue to insinuate doubts about the rightness of Orestes' action and, in the extra-dramatic dimension, about the drive for external war given by Athena to the city.

Shilo's often illuminating analyses are conducted with full command of linguistic and textual issues. Some passages are discussed in more than one chapter, thus creating interconnections which allow one to better follow the development of his ideas. Sometimes the tendency to admit ambiguities goes a bit too far. I am not convinced, for instance, that *Agamemnon* 1160–61 could be understood as a real prophecy: the couplet resembles similar tragic expressions simply referring to imminent death (Sophocles *Ajax* 865 'henceforth I shall speak in Hades with the dead', Euripides *Trojan Women* 445 'Lead on at once, so I can get married to my husband in Hades'). Individual points of disagreement do not however detract from the quality of the work, which will repay study by all scholars interested in Aeschylus and Greek tragedy.

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