

From Institution to Refusal: Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mouches* (1943) as a Reception of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*.

Les mœurs d'une nation forment d'abord l'esprit de ses ouvrages dramatiques. Bientôt ses ouvrages dramatiques forment son esprit. [At first a nation's mores shape the spirit of its dramatic works. Soon enough its dramatic works shape its spirit.]¹ - Marie-Joseph Chénier, *De la liberté du théâtre en France* (1789)

French playwrights have been receiving and reshaping Greek tragedy since the Renaissance, with the Humanist recovery of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides helping to establish Greek tragedy as one of the defining influences in French drama², and with seventeenth-century dramatists looking to the ancient stage as the means through which France might rival antiquity.³ Over the next three centuries, a tradition grew not of mimesis but of different uses for the same myths.

Racine's *Andromaque* (1667), which inserts Orestes into the chaos of blocked desire at Pyrrhus' court, shows the earliest version of this tradition, removing almost entirely the political structure of Aeschylus. Racine classicizes the myth, removing any institution founded to end the cycle of vengeance as well as the original's theological and civic content.⁴ In contrast, Voltaire's *Oreste* (1750) retains Aeschylus' political framework, but reshapes it for an Enlightenment audience, reducing the matricide to an act of Fury-induced madness, a crime an Enlightenment audience could forgive more easily than a deliberate one. In this reception, Aeschylus is not so much immoral as primitive and in need of moral correction in the eyes of Voltaire's contemporaries.⁵ As Cécile Dudouyt observes, French engagement with Greek tragedy across this period was persistently structured as a form of rivalry with antiquity, a relationship that shifted from emulation in the seventeenth century towards philological recovery by the nineteenth. Both Racine's classicizing and Voltaire's moralising belong to this earlier, more competitive means of reception, in which surpassing Aeschylus mattered more than reproducing him faithfully. For instance, a century later, Leconte de Lisle's *Les Érinnyes* (1873) tries to recover the spirit of the original, by translating the opening plays of the *Oresteia* into French verse with the philological seriousness for an audience interested in what the ancient stage had actually looked and sounded like.⁶ By the last decades of the Third Republic, this had become a part of civic education, with classicists teaching the Athenian institutions as models for republican citizenship. This treatment of fifth-century Athenian political institutions, which the *Eumenides* stages the

¹ Marie-Joseph Chénier, *La liberté du théâtre* (Paris, 1789), 4, digital ed., Université Paris-Sorbonne, LABEX OBVIL, 2017, https://obtic.huma-num.fr/obvil-web/corpus/haine-theatre/chenier_liberte-du-theatre_1789?q=#mark1.

² Christian Biet, "French Tragedy during the Seventeenth Century: From Cruelty on a Scaffold to Poetic Distance on Stage," in *Politics and Aesthetics in European Baroque and Classicist Tragedy*, ed. Jan Bloemendal and Nigel Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 299-303.

³ Cécile Dudouyt, "The Reception of Greek Theater in France since 1700," in *A Handbook to the Reception of Greek Drama*, ed. Betine van Zyl Smit (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 238-42.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

founding of, presents them as a useful inheritance for a republic in its early years. Despite all of their differences, none of these receptions reject the political logic of Aeschylus' ending, and in all, the narrative development of the *Oresteia*, from the familial blood feud to civic order, is treated as something to be corrected, recovered, or put to pedagogical use.

Earlier adaptations mostly preserved the political development through which Aeschylus concludes the trilogy, that being the transformation of hereditary violence into civic order. Jean-Paul Sartre is distinctive within this French reception tradition because he rejects this development. On the one hand, Athena resolves the *Eumenides*' cycle of bloodshed by founding the Areopagus, an institution she promises will serve Athens for all time, whereas, on the other, Sartre's Orestes is offered the throne of Argos but chooses instead to become "un roi sans terre et sans sujets" (a king without land or subjects).⁷ The uniqueness of *Les Mouches* is the replacement of Aeschylus' original political logic with existential refusal and freedom, not its relocation to occupied France.

This essay argues that *Les Mouches* marks a turning point within the French reception of the *Oresteia*, where the myth stops being interpreted through Aeschylus' political settlement and instead becomes a means of rejecting it. The three primary ways in which this rejection occurs are institutional justice giving way to individual freedom; persuasion exposed as a technique of power; and divine authority transformed into existential responsibility. However, it would be reductive to suggest that the reception is only about how Aeschylus and Sartre each write tragedy shaped by the politics of their age. Both also wrote, as Chénier claims a nation's dramatic works attempt to do, in the hope of shaping that political culture in return. Aeschylus does not merely settle a case, but stages and defends the institution's legitimacy in front of an audience of citizens, whereas Sartre does not merely depict freedom but tries to make an occupied audience think and respond actively to it. This analysis is not only a comparison of two conceptions of justice, ancient and modern, but also a contrast of two attempts to use tragedy as a form of political action.

I. Institutional Justice

Athena's verdict in the *Eumenides* is phrased not as a private favour to a single defendant but as legislation: "κλύοιτ' ἄν ἥδη θεσμόν, Ἀττικὸς λεώς" (and now if you would hear my law, you men of Attica).⁸ The choice of word "θεσμόν" is significant as it is not the ordinary word for a judicial verdict but would usually be used in the context of foundational legislation. The subsequent clause further highlights this effect: "now and forever more, for Aegeus' people this will be the court".⁹ The effect is to bind the verdict to the continuing identity of the Athenian polis. Even the nomenclature of the site reflects its purpose in transforming the chaotic violence of retribution into civic peace: Aeschylus has

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mouches* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), Act III.

⁸ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Classics, 1977), *Eumenides* 681.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 684–85.

Athena explain that the hill takes its name, Areios, from the Amazons who once camped there and sacrificed to Ares before attacking the city.¹⁰

Aeschylus does not present Orestes' acquittal as the end of violence but as its incorporation into civic order. Athena's verdict establishes a court whose purpose is to contain future acts of bloodshed within legal procedure rather than vengeance. The trial is conducted before the people of Athens, and the court's legitimacy is announced to them as a permanent feature of the polis, implying that acquittal only takes on its full power by being witnessed as a civic event.

Sartre's Orestes, having killed both Égisthe and Clytemnestre, is in the position from which three generations of Argive rulers had governed before him, free to inherit the throne he has just emptied. Instead, he rejects it, choosing to become "un roi sans terre et sans sujets" ("a king without land or subjects").¹¹ Aeschylus' Areopagus is given a people and a fixed named place in the form of Athena's court. On the other hand, Sartre's Orestes refuses subjects or a kingdom. Athena declares that her institution will endure "αἰεὶ" ("always"),¹² while Aeschylus' own Orestes reinforces the permanence of this new relationship by swearing to defend the alliance between Argos and Athens "by the future years that bring their growing yield"¹³, cursing even from beyond his own grave any future Argive who should violate it.

This contrast extends beyond the court itself. Aeschylus' Orestes becomes part of the settlement through his oath, which binds him, post-mortem, to the political order that has acquitted him. Sartre's Orestes rejects this in an existential way according to Sartre's own philosophy: he chooses to turn down not simply the throne of Argos but the assumption that any sort of granted office or institutional role could determine who he is, instead opting to leave that identity to be determined by his own future actions. The comparison is not between the two courts themselves, but between what each settlement aims to achieve. In the *Eumenides*, Orestes leaves the stage incorporated into a civic order that promises permanence. In *Les Mouches*, he leaves it carrying the full responsibility of his actions, without the throne, or any kind of public court system to absorb the consequences.

II. Political Reconciliation

Apollo determines the course of Orestes' acquittal before the trial has been established, sending him to Athens with the promise not only of judges but of "θελκτηρίους μύθους" ("enchanting words")¹⁴, language designed to persuade as opposed to simply arguing in strictly legal terms. Thus, from the

¹⁰ Ibid., 685–90.

¹¹ Sartre, *Les Mouches*, Act III.

¹² Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 683.

¹³ Ibid., 764.

¹⁴ Ibid., 81–82.

outset, his acquittal is expected to depend upon more than judicial procedure alone. The trial confirms that expectation: when the vote ties, Athena must cast the deciding ballot herself. Nothing in the verdict has persuaded the Erinyes that justice has been done, and their immediate response is not to accept it but to be outraged: the “younger gods”¹⁵, they complain, have trampled the ancient laws and torn them from their grasp by force.

As a result, the subsequent scene is not a further legal argument but an act of political persuasion, with Athena not attempting to prove that the verdict is correct but instead offering the Erinyes a permanent place of honour beside the house of Erechtheus, appealing explicitly to persuasion rather than adjudication as she asks whether they “have any reverence for Persuasion”.¹⁶ Further, the renaming of the chorus, which thus far throughout the play has been addressed as the Erinyes, to the “Σεμναί” (“Venerable Ones”)¹⁷, presents not a change in the nature of the Furies, but a change in the language through which they are incorporated into the political order being constructed in Athens, with their torchlit procession completing that incorporation. As Simon Goldhill observes, the trilogy’s final reconciliation is itself achieved “by the force of persuasion”, making language the means through which civic order is established even as it remains vulnerable to manipulation.¹⁸ Athena persuades the Erinyes within the drama, but she also persuades the Athenian citizens who accompany them in procession and, beyond the fiction of the play, the citizens watching the procession in the Theatre of Dionysus.

Sartre reconstructs the same situation in order to show how these institutions of political legitimacy can also sustain tyranny. Pressed by Jupiter to explain what fifteen years of rule have required, Égisthe admits that “tous mes actes, depuis que je suis roi, je les ai faits pour construire mon image” (“everything I have done since becoming king has been to construct my image”).¹⁹ His authority depends not simply upon coercion but upon the continual maintenance of a public fiction, repeated until his subjects feel watched even in solitude and he himself can no longer distinguish his identity from the image he projects. The annual Day of the Dead ceremony, like Athena’s procession, is a public ritual through which an entire community is obliged to endorse a particular political order. The resemblance is striking because Athena’s procession seeks to secure reconciliation whereas Égisthe’s festival perpetuates guilt, showing how similar civic rituals can be used to achieve different ends. Both reveal that political authority depends upon the ceremonies through which communities are persuaded to recognise institutions as legitimate, not just the institutions themselves.

¹⁵ Ibid., 778.

¹⁶ Ibid., 885.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1041.

¹⁸ Simon Goldhill, *Aeschylus: The Oresteia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 59–60.

¹⁹ Sartre, *Les Mouches*, Act II, sc. ii.

This comparison nevertheless raises an important objection. Persuasion (πειθώ) and force (βία)²⁰ are not morally equivalent in Greek political thought: πειθώ marks civilized conduct, βία its absence, and the *Eumenides* itself frames the alternative to Athena's court in exactly these terms, warning against a city given over to despotism on one side and to anarchy on the other.²¹ It follows that democratic authority depends upon citizens being persuaded instead of compelled, possibly showing that Aeschylus is offering support for democratic legitimacy through Athena's willingness to negotiate with the Erinyes. Thus, Égisthe's carefully staged persona ends up functioning as βία rather than πειθώ, with the result that the supposed parallel with Athena's court simply falls apart. This distinction is nonetheless troubled by the play itself, since the trilogy's final reconciliation is achieved "by the force of persuasion,"²² a phrase that captures persuasion shading into coercion rather than standing as its clean opposite. Persuasion, therefore, was not a decorative rhetorical flourish but a constitutive part of how Athenian democracy actually functioned, built into the Assembly and the law courts.²³ Hence, if persuasion is constitutive of political legitimacy rather than just supplementary to it, then persuasion itself becomes the crucial civic technique in both plays. Athena and Égisthe therefore differ not in whether their authority rests on πειθώ against βία, but in whether their persuasion is part of an order citizens can still contest. Sartre, writing under the Vichy regime that made identical claims for its own ceremonies and appeals to national renewal, had good cause to distrust them.

As a result, his Orestes refuses the persuasive process upon which Athena's settlement is built. He neither bargains with the flies nor incorporates them into a new political order. There is no Argive procession, no ritual of reconciliation, and no attempt to persuade the city that a permanent political settlement has been achieved. Instead, Sartre's Orestes walks through the gates with the flies still attached to him, existentially carrying away the city's guilt in place of redistributing it within a new institution. While the *Eumenides* persuades its audience that justice has found a permanent civic form, *Les Mouches* refuses such closure, leaving freedom without institutional confirmation or ratification.

III. Existential Responsibility

At the moment of the matricide in the *Choephoroi*, Orestes' choice has already been narrowed by Apollo's oracle, which has warned that refusing the matricide will bring "winters of disaster."²⁴ Apollo's oracle determines the meaning of Orestes' action before he carries it out, leaving his freedom to be constituted by the authority of the gods rather than by the act itself. Sartre's Orestes is placed in an equivalent position, yet he refuses to accept it. Jupiter's presentation to him of the glowing stone is offered as a sign that he should abandon revenge and pursue a peaceful life elsewhere. However,

²⁰ Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 526–27, 696.

²¹ Richard Buxton, *Persuasion in Greek Tragedy: A Study of Peitho* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 58–63.

²² Simon Goldhill, *Aeschylus: The Oresteia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 59–60.

²³ Goldhill, *Aeschylus: The Oresteia*, 60.

²⁴ Aeschylus, *Choephoroi*, 270.

Orestes recognises that the sign carries no fixed meaning of its own, unlike Apollo's oracle. It is he, not Jupiter, who decides what the glowing stone signifies. When he tells Jupiter that "a thousand roads" lead back to the god's order but that he must follow his own: "car je suis un homme, Jupiter, et chaque homme doit inventer son chemin" ("for I am a man, Jupiter, and every man must invent his own road")²⁵ he reverses Apollo's oracle, with meaning no longer deriving from an external order of necessity, represented previously by Jupiter, but from the interpretation Orestes chooses to give his own action.

This reversal also is the theatrical presentation of a philosophical claim Sartre was developing in the same year in *L'Être et le Néant*: that existence precedes essence, and that there is no fixed human nature or prior identity to which a person might appeal in order to escape the burden of choice. Hence, Jupiter's glowing stone functions as an invitation to Sartre's concept of "*mauvaise foi*" ("bad faith"), the temptation to let some external sign determine who one is, instead of accepting that identity is made only through freely chosen action. Orestes' refusal of the stone therefore mirrors his rejection of the throne of Argos: both the divine sign and the political office offer him a pre-made self, and he rejects both for the same reason.

Furthermore, the reversal is physical as well as philosophical. Before the murders, Orestes describes himself as weightless, "a thread the wind has torn loose"²⁶; afterwards, he tells Électre that the heavier his deed becomes to bear, the more he will rejoice, "car ma liberté c'est lui" ("for my freedom is that very deed").²⁷ Freedom is no longer the absence of burden but the willingness to carry the weight of a freely chosen act, the meaning of which comes from Orestes' acceptance of it as his own rather than from divine command.

This redefining of freedom also changes how the play treats time. After the murders, Électre finds the darkness almost impenetrable; Orestes calmly tells her it is already daybreak.²⁸ They experience the same moment of time but view it differently: Électre remains fixed on the past they have avenged, while Orestes, existentially free, looks towards the future his act has created. Clytemnestre's final words support this older logic, invoking "the law, just and unjust, of repentance."²⁹ Orestes rejects these ideas of inherited guilt and embraces freedom according to Sartre. Argos itself is organised around that backward gaze, with the annual Festival of the Dead existing to reopen a crime committed fifteen years earlier, instead of ending this guilt. In contrast, Orestes lives in his future; his sense of freedom comes from accepting responsibility for his actions on his own terms, refusing to let its meaning be decided by preceding events.

²⁵ Sartre, *Les Mouches*, Act III.

²⁶ Ibid., Act II, Sc. 1.

²⁷ Ibid., Act II, Sc. 2.

²⁸ Ibid., Act III.

²⁹ Ibid., Act II, Sc. 2.

Sartre later connected his reception of the *Oresteia* directly to the political experience of Occupation France, observing that “after our defeat in 1940, all too many Frenchmen gave way to discouragement or yielded to remorse.”³⁰ Philippe Pétain, head of the collaborationist regime of Vichy France, had appealed to exactly that mood in his broadcast of June 1940: “vous souffrez et vous souffrirez longtemps encore, car nous n’avons pas fini de payer toutes nos fautes” (“you suffer, and you will suffer for a long time yet, for we have not finished paying for all our faults”).³¹ Guilt, therefore, was not simply an emotion but a political instrument, for a population persuaded that it was still paying for 1940 had less reason to imagine that anything could be done about 1943. In this context, Sartre’s reception of Aeschylus becomes a rejection of inherited responsibility: Orestes doesn’t rely on an oracle or on any institution to absorb responsibility on his behalf; he acts without appealing to a predetermined moral order, and he accepts responsibility for the consequences of his choices. Sartre presents his audience with this decision whose meaning is created neither by divine command nor by inherited civic order, but by the freedom of the person who performs it. This is the fundamental turning point from which *Les Mouches* departs from the tragic thought of the *Oresteia*.

IV. Rereading Athens from Occupied Paris

Reading *Les Mouches* with the *Eumenides* changes not only how Sartre appears, but how Aeschylus himself can be read. Sartre’s play supplies a vocabulary for identifying political mechanisms already present in Aeschylus’ ending: persuasion as political technique, renaming as incorporation, and ceremony as organised civic memory. Occupied Paris thus becomes not simply the setting in which *Les Mouches* was written but one of the means through which democratic Athens can be reread.

Like Sartre, Aeschylus used inherited myth to confront the political tensions of his own time. In 462/461 BCE, shortly before the trilogy’s first performance in 458, Ephialtes had carried through reforms that stripped the Areopagus of most of its civic authority³², leaving it primarily with jurisdiction over homicide, the same role which Athena assigns the court she establishes. Victor Ehrenberg reads the play’s own position as a deliberate compromise: Athena’s court accepts the reform already carried out, while warning against any further move in the same direction, a warning some have connected to the decision several years later to open the archonship to the zeugitae, extending the same democratic ideals into the Areopagus’s remaining prestige.³³ The violence surrounding Ephialtes’ assassination by an oligarchic faction provides a possible contemporary

³⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Forgers of Myths,” *Theatre Arts* 30 (June 1946); reprinted in *Sartre on Theater*, ed. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, trans. Frank Jelinek (New York: Pantheon, 1976), 191.

³¹ Philippe Pétain, radio address, June 25, 1940, as cited in Carole Vidal-Rosset, *Les Mouches de Jean-Paul Sartre*, CNDP-CRDP, “Pièce (dé)montée,” no. 140 (Dijon, January 2012), 4.

³² Aristotle, *The Constitution of the Athenians*, trans. P.J. Rhodes (London: Penguin, 1984), 25.2.

³³ Victor Ehrenberg, *From Solon to Socrates: Greek History and Civilization during the Sixth and Fifth Centuries B.C.*, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1973), 212.

commentary on the people's anxieties about vengeance and civic conflict, although Aeschylus never explicitly links mythic violence to recent events.³⁴ The *Eumenides*, like *Les Mouches*, places contemporary public institutions within mythical narratives, allowing myth to become a way of examining present political arrangements.

The circumstances of the play's own premiere sharpen this same interplay between myth and contemporary politics. *Les Mouches* opened on 3 June 1943 at the Théâtre de la Cité, itself a wartime renaming: the venue had been the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt until German authorities stripped it of her name, due to Bernhardt's Jewish identity. The fact that a play concerned with the refusal of an imposed identity premiered in a theatre which had just been made to accept one is a coincidence Sartre did not engineer, but one his first audiences could hardly have missed. The production nonetheless passed German censorship, due to the fact that its allegorical charge against Vichy and the Occupation remained visible only to those already disposed to find it.³⁵

Attendance at Sartre's premiere was modest, and many contemporary reviewers approached the play primarily as a literary work, failing to engage with its political implications.³⁶ For spectators attuned to its implications, the play's message resonated powerfully, with Simone de Beauvoir later recalling that Orestes' word "Liberty" "burst on us like a bomb."³⁷ Writing for the Resistance press later that year, Michel Leiris described precisely the transformation Sartre had effected: "from ancient tragedy to contemporary drama, the orientation has completely changed: from victim of fate, Orestes has become champion of freedom."³⁸ The response to the play was therefore divided: for many it remained a literary drama, while for others it became a statement of political freedom and a call for existential liberation.

This divided response suggests that *Les Mouches* neither converted collaborators into resisters nor transformed public opinion on any measurable scale. Its achievement was subtler, giving dramatic form to a culture in which freedom under occupation remained possible. Both Aeschylus and Sartre wrote tragedies shaped by the political cultures they inhabited in the hope of shaping those cultures in return. Reception, therefore, here is not passive inheritance but an active dialogue between texts written for different cities and different crises.

Conclusion

Sartre's refusal in *Les Mouches* is ultimately a refusal of the traditional institutional ending of Aeschylus' tragedy. Aeschylus ends the violence of the house of Atreus by giving it permanent

³⁴ Ibid., 212–13.

³⁵ Zoë Ghyselinck, "Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mouches* (1943): A Classical Tragedy Revised as a *Pièce de Résistance*?" *Euphrosyne* 39 (2011): 363.

³⁶ Ibid., 367–368.

³⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l'âge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 616–17.

³⁸ Michel Leiris, "Oreste et la Cité," *Les Lettres françaises*, no. 12 (December 1943): 1–3.

political form in the court and the oath of Orestes. Sartre's Orestes refuses the throne of Argos, rejects Jupiter's sign as binding, refuses the act of persuasion through which Athena secures consent, and leaves the city carrying its guilt away with him instead of leaving it with a new institution. Sartre's refusal extends beyond Athena's settlement and its belief that public order can absolve individuals of responsibility.

However, their disagreement over public resolution does not hide their deeper similarities. Each uses inherited myth to answer an urgent political question in each of their own historical moments. The *Eumenides* asks how violence might transform and produce new law and order; *Les Mouches* asks what occurs when law itself has become an object of suspicion. Both plays, according to Chénier, aim to shape how their communities understand themselves. Aeschylus stages the foundation of public institutions before an audience of Athenian citizens, whilst Sartre stages the refusal of institutional consolation before an audience living under occupation. In each case, tragedy becomes a form of political action rather than political commentary.

Across the French theatrical tradition of receiving Greek tragedy, dramatists repeatedly adapted the *Oresteia* by correcting, domesticating, recovering, or celebrating its political settlement. Hence, Sartre is distinctive within this tradition for his refusal. His Orestes leaves Argos without a throne, without subjects, and without the intrinsic civic link to the political foundations that Aeschylus gives to his hero. In doing so, he breaks with a tradition that had consistently found new uses for Aeschylus' institutions without questioning their underlying logic. The house of Atreus had always ended by finding comfort and conclusion in the city, the family, or the law. Sartre's tragedy ends by denying that such structures can absorb the burden of human responsibility.

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