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Aeschylus and National Socialism:

Lothar Müthel’s *Orestie* as

Nazi Propaganda

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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This thesis analyzes the text, stage design, and historical context of Lothar Müthel’s production of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* trilogy in 1936, which was sponsored by the National Socialist government during a broader publicity campaign during the Summer Olympics of 1936. The third play, *Eumenides* (*Die Versöhnung* in German) has democratic undertones, and therefore seems incompatible with Nazi ideology at first glance. There are three ways in which the Nazis made Müthel’s adaptation of *Die Versöhnung* compatible. First, in the context of the Olympics, the Nazis attempted to draw a connection or relationship between modern German and ancient Greek culture, implying themselves to be successors to ancient Greece. Second, through Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s interpretations of the Greek word δίκη (justice), a central concept in the *Oresteia*, the Nazis were able to emphasize the progression of a state from a savage, chaotic period to a new, better civilization, an idea that particularly appeals to Nazi narrative owing to their own recent history with the Weimar Republic. Third, the Nazis shifted focus from the institution of the Areopagus to the role of Athena and interpreted her to be a Germanic goddess. Müthel’s adaptation is a good case study in how, through appropriation, a political movement can interpret a text to fit their ideology.
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1. Introduction

On August 3rd, 1936, at the height of the National Socialist regime, Lothar Müthel produced Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* (German title *Orestie*) in the Staatliche Schauspielhaus in Berlin’s Gendarmenmarkt. *Orestie* was performed three times that week as a festive arrangement for the 1936 Summer Olympics, and it is evident from Müthel’s extensive cuts from the trilogy, the theater schedule in *Neue Preußische Zeitung*, and Karl Heinz Ruppel’s review in *Kölner Zeitung* that Müthel intended to condense Agamemnon, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides* into a single production.1 It is also evident from the review in the Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* and from the numerous classical-themed productions during the Olympics that *Orestie* was part of a larger propaganda campaign.2 Of the three plays, *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers* (German title *Das Opfer am Grabe*) are compatible with a Nazi context in part because of their story of taking revenge for wrong-doing, correcting perceived injustices that formed a large part of the Nazis’ anti-liberal, anti-Semitic and anti-democratic narrative. However, *The Eumenides* (German *Die Versöhnung*) is more problematic in this context because of its democratic undertones extolling the institution of the Areopagus, the institution that puts justice and the fate of the protagonist Orestes to a vote by a tribunal of Athenians. Thus the markedly democratic *Die Versöhnung* seems incompatible, at first glance, with the Nazis’ fascist ideals. How did the Nazis include it in a propagandistic adaptation? And why did they do so?

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The specific purpose of individual pieces of propaganda varies, although in general political adaptation involves trying to win over audiences to a certain ideological perspective. The exact message, however, depends on the context and on the audience, and on how much power the movement actually has. In this particular case, Orestie had been produced at a point in Nazi history in which the movement had achieved complete control over German media and institutions; a point at which, according to Hannah Arendt, a fascist regime progresses from winning people over with propaganda to completely indoctrinating them to the movement’s true aims. Arendt states,

Wherever totalitarianism possesses absolute control, it replaces propaganda with indoctrination and uses violence not so much to frighten people […] as to realize constantly its ideological indoctrination and its practical lies. […] Since totalitarian movements exist in a world which itself is non-totalitarian, they are forced to resort to what we commonly regard as propaganda. But such propaganda always makes its appeal to an external sphere—be it the non-totalitarian strata of the population at home or the non-totalitarian countries abroad.3

Müthel’s Orestie was performed before both a Nazi audience and an international audience, suggesting its producers’ intention to deliver a double message, one for the foreign delegates and Olympic Committees, and one for the Nazi officials. The first was a propagandistic message invoking the political enthusiasm or sympathies of this external sphere containing what Arendt describes as “groups of sympathizers who are not yet ready to accept the true aims of the movement.”4 The other is an indoctrinating message for those already won over. The international audience would have received Orestie differently from the Nazi audience; while there is little to no documentation of the production’s international reception, the reaction to the Olympics and the way the German government staged the event suggests that the Nazis intended

4 Ibid., 343.
to show Germany as a legitimate successor to the Greco-Roman world, and as a prosperous state that has successfully risen out of the chaos of the Weimar period. By establishing themselves as heirs to the founding civilizations of the Western World, the Nazis could claim that Germany was a founding civilization to a future Europe and had a right to rule over that future Europe.

While the international reaction to *Orestie* is difficult to gauge, the reviews in German newspapers suggest that the internal, indoctrinating message, directed at the Nazi audience, was one of appropriation. Johann Chapoutot, responding to Arendt, added, “Aussi étendues qui soient les conquêtes, la géographie ne suffit pas, et c’est l’histoire tout entière qui doit être annexée, arraisonnée à l’idéologie totalitaire.” To give legitimacy to National Socialist ideology, the Nazis incorporated history and cultural history into their narrative, ruthlessly re-writing both to fit the ideology they set forth, and their interpretation of *Orestie* was no different.

There is little scholarship on the Müthel production. Though mentioned in studies on German theater during the Nazi period, only Erika Fischer-Lichte and Hellmut Flashar delve into greater detail than a couple of sentences. This is likely due to *Orestie* being overshadowed by other pieces of publicity relevant to the 1936 Olympics, as well as to the difficulty of studying the production. There is no recording of the performances, few photographs, and limited access to the script, the only available version of which is a copy of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff’s translation, in which Müthel wrote notes and struck out scenes. Because of the difficulty of finding primary sources relevant to the performance and also obtaining access to the script, there is very little German scholarship and almost no British or American scholarship. Fischer-Lichte illustrates that the Nazis intended that the production should suggest to an

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6 Müthel’s personal copy of the trilogy is found in the archives of Freie Universität Berlin.
international audience that Nazi Germany was “the legitimate heir of, and actual successor to, Ancient Greece.” Günther Rühle devotes only a single paragraph to the production in Theater in Deutschland 1887-1945, but he describes the Oresteia as “die alte Geschichte von der Überwindung einer schlimmen Vergangenheit,” a fundamental element of the story which strongly appealed to Nazi narrative. Tangential scholarship, such as in Thomas Eicher’s Theater im «Dritten Reich» or Glen Gadberry’s “The history plays of the Third Reich” mention Orestie occasionally but usually in less than two or three sentences. Comprehensive focus on the production is rare.

Nazi scholars and analysts invented a link between ancient Greece and modern Germany intrinsically racial, cultural, and spiritual. Nazi officials drew this connection within the context of the Olympics as well as outside it. Hitler himself remarked on this in Mein Kampf: “Auch das hellenische Kulturideal soll uns in seiner vorbildlichen Schönheit erhalten bleiben. Man darf sich nicht durch Verschiedenheiten der einzelnen Völker die größere Rassengemeinschaft zerreissen lassen. Der Kampf, der heute tobt, geht um ganz große Ziele: eine Kultur kämpft um ihr Dasein, die Jahrtausende in sich verbindet und Griechen und Germanen mitgemeinsam umschließt.” Most of the commentary found in newspapers either explicitly (in Völkischer Beobachter) or implicitly (in Ruppel’s review) speak of this link. Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels

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8 Günther Rühle, Theater in Deutschland 1887-1945 (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, 2007), 799.
remarked on the performance in his diary, “Ein wirklich klassischer Abend. Wie nahe uns die Griechen stehen.”

The Nazi Party’s interest in classical antiquity, however, was hardly without precedent. The classical world has been of interest to Germans at least since the 18th Century, in connection with the Enlightenment and the rise of Romanticism. One of the earliest Germans to take extensive interest was Friedrich August Wolf, a leading figure in the history of philology, whose most famous work, *Prolegomena ad Homerum*, challenged traditional classical scholarship by proposing that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were composed orally by more than one author, and that their artistic unity was added later. Wolf’s lectures had a lasting impact on German philology and classics, and were so famous and popular that Johann Wolfang von Goethe once hid behind a curtain to hear him teach.

Goethe’s *Iphigenie auf Tauris* (1786) is the most well-known adaptation of the Atreid myths from this period. The title of this blank verse drama is a direct acknowledgement of the Euripides play, but Goethe’s *Iphigenie* presents different ideals more compatible with Enlightenment thought, in which the conflict between Orestes and Iphigenia and King Thoas is resolved through the exercise of reason and persuasion. There is no actual antagonist, only five characters who reason through their conflict and come to a sound conclusion and resolution. Adaptation of the Atreid myth continued to appear during the 18th through 20th centuries, usually reflecting some ideal or school of thought contemporary to its production. In 1903 Hugo von Hofmannsthal adapted Sophocles’ play *Elektra*, adding Freudian undertones, and Richard Strauss subsequently collaborated with Hofmannsthal on an operatic version in 1909. Sophocles’

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original and Hofmannsthal’s adaptation both present psychological interpretations of the Atreid myth, in contrast to Aeschylus’s trilogy, which emphasizes politics. Karl Vollmöller and Max Reinhardt additionally directed a stage production of the *Oresteia* in 1919 that emphasized the foundation of Athenian democracy. It was additionally the first major social event in post-
Kaiserreich Berlin.\textsuperscript{13}

The idea that there was an intrinsic connection between the Germans and the Greeks also was nothing new by the Nazi period. As early as 1856, Ernst Curtius, the German archaeologist who oversaw excavations of Olympia during the 1870s, wrote a monograph devoted to the idea that there was a deep relationship between the two cultures based on similarities between the Greek concept of *Agon* (the ancient contests between athletics, poetry, or music, to honor the gods), and the German term *Wettkampf*, meaning “competition”.\textsuperscript{14} Friedrich Nietzsche proposed a similar argument in *Homers Wettkampf* (1872). Curtius postulates that the instinct for action found in both terms is distinctive of the Aryan cultures, but not in the cultures of the east:

Diese Stämme haben alle den männlichen Trieb der Tatenlust als Erbteil empfangen; sie sind alle zu staatgründenden Völkern geworden; sie haben sich in Heldenliedern bezeugt, sie haben in Bild- und Bauwerken bleibende Denkmäler auf Erden hinterlassen. Je weiter sie aber im Osten zurückgeblieben sind, um so früher erscheinen sie uns in ihrer lebendigen Entwicklung gehemmt, in unbeweglichen Lebensformen erstarrt, oder auch mit fremdartigen Bestandtheilen dergestalt verwachsen, das jener Grundzug der arischen Völker verhüllt oder verwischt worden ist.\textsuperscript{15}

Both the use of the Atreid myth and the notion of some intrinsic cultural or ancestral connection between the Germans and the ancient Greeks had precedent in Romantic and Nationalist narratives. The inclusion of *Die Versöhnung* in the production seems surprising at first glance,

\textsuperscript{13} Günther Rühle, *Theater in Deutschland 1887-1945* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, 2007), 361.
\textsuperscript{14} Ernst Curtius, “Der Wettkampf (1856),” *Göttinger Festreden* (Berlin: Verlag von Wilhelm Erz, 1864), 17.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 2.
but by examining the *Oresteia*'s treatment of its most central themes, and the early twentieth-century German interpretations thereof, one can identify how the Nazis could have created a National Socialist interpretation of what appears to be a democratic story. The way Müthel’s production presents justice (a central concept of the *Oresteia*, which traces the progression of justice from an archaic to a more recognizably modern ideal) provides a preliminary solution to the Nazis’ seemingly paradoxical use of an ancient text, one extolling Athenian democracy, as propaganda for a fascist regime. Müthel seized the Aeschylean image of civilization rising from a chaotic, bloody period into a shining new civilization, an image that in of itself appeals to National Socialist narrative, particularly pertaining to the similar image of a new, improved, and modern German rising out of the Weimar German mess in the 1920s. He additionally used Wilamowitz’s translation, which supplements this image, through its varying interpretations of the Greek word δίκη. Other translations of the early 20th century do not reflect this image to the same degree degree. The reviews in German newspapers also indicate that German analysts viewed the democratic element of *Die Versöhnung* as either incidental or simply not there; they interpreted the Areopagus as an oligarchic rather than a democratic institution.

Overall, following Chapoutot’s position on the Nazis’ use of antiquity, I propose that the Nazis commissioned *Orestie* as part of a larger campaign to portray Germany not merely as legitimate successors of ancient Greece, but also as the *progenitor* of the classical world in order to establish themselves as rightful cultural and political rulers of Europe. It was a question not merely of claiming to be the true heirs of ancient Greece, but of appropriating the very identity of the Greeks as founders of Western culture. To demonstrate this, I first will explain the context of the 1936 Summer Olympics and the Nazis’ prolific use of classical imagery not merely as a nod to the Olympics and their roots in antiquity, but as a campaign to demonstrate the connection
between the Greeks and the Germans. I then will analyze the Wilamowitz translation and Müthel’s use thereof, the way Wilamowitz translates δίκη and how Müthel adapted it into the German stage, and finally I will look at newspaper reviews of the production and examine the way *Völkischer Beobachter* and Ruppel interpreted the production and its meaning in a broader political context.
2. The Olympics and Other Classical Themes in the Context of Nazism

While information about Müthel’s *Orestie* is available in the forms of newspaper reviews and the script, there actually is little in the production’s empirical content to indicate an inherently pro-Nazi message. The intended message was subtle, implicit rather than explicit, and to a casual observer it simply resembles a shortened production of Aeschylus’s trilogy taking place in its traditional ancient Greek setting, albeit with a grandiose stage set. However, David B. Dennis’s work demonstrates that there was very little the Nazis did of an unpolitical nature. In a lengthy analysis of *Völkischer Beobachter’s* culture page, examining National Socialist appropriation of the humanities and intellectual history, Dennis observes:

> It is apparent that those who provided these interpretations of Western culture did not conceive them as just “reflective” of Nazi ideology or instrumental tools of Nazi politics, but as core components of Nazi thought. They did not consider major cultural figures and works as simply justifying or validating their opinions, but rather as the very sources of them. From their perspective, National Socialist *Kulturpolitik* was not a cynical manipulation or abuse of cultural history, but a more accurate, genuine, authentic reading that the center-left missed because it was ideologically prejudiced by the Enlightenment.16

Because of the implicit nature of the message in *Orestie*, and the observation that the Nazis sought to appropriate the entirety of Western cultural history within the terms of their ideology, it is necessary to examine the context of Müthel’s production within the 1936 Summer Olympics. Not only did the Olympics provide a perfect opportunity to broadcast domestically and internationally the National Socialist message within a peaceful setting, the Olympics’ Greek heritage also provided an easy, natural occasion to present that message within the Nazis’ usual use of cultural and historical appropriation. Müthel’s *Orestie* was not an incidental performance that happened to be running at the time of the Olympics, but part of a larger publicity campaign. The review in *Völkischer Beobachter* indicates the significance of the production by listing

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important persons in attendance. While there is no indication that Hitler himself attended, some officials from his inner circle were present, including Joseph Goebbels, Heinrich Himmler, and Hermann Göring. The audience also included numerous other, lower profile Nazi officials, and the delegates and committees of the nations participating in the Olympics.\(^{17}\)

The National Socialists ruled on a platform of radical nationalism, racism, and autarky. It is well known that Hitler struggled with the idea of hosting the Olympics at all, because the international nature of the Olympics conflicted with Nazi ideology. The International Olympic Committee had made the decision to hold the games in Berlin before Hitler’s election as Chancellor. However, the appearance of an international boycott campaign protesting the Third Reich’s treatment of its Jewish population prompted Hitler to host the games, in spite of his reservations, because by doing so he would have “an unmissable opportunity to influence world opinion in favor of the Third Reich.”\(^{18}\) Thus, on October 22, 1934, following the death of President von Hindenburg, Hitler accepted the Committee’s request to fill the now-vacant position as patron (Fig. 1).\(^{19}\)

Once the Nazis chose to go ahead with the Olympics, they put enormous effort into making it a huge spectacle for the enjoyment of both the German people and the foreign guests. Avery Brundage of the American Olympic Committee remarked that the games “were unquestionably the largest and most magnificent yet held.”\(^{20}\) The Nazis additionally made a conscious effort to sweep anything controversial out of sight, such as their decision to withdraw

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copies of the radical Sturmabteilung newspaper Der Stürmer from display in Berlin while the Games were running. William L. Shirer notes that the Nazi government also scrupulously hid all negative propaganda:

The signs “Juden unerwuenscht” (Jews Not Welcome) were quietly hauled down from the shops, hotels, beer gardens and places of public entertainment, the persecution of the Jews and of the two Christian churches temporarily halted, and the country put on its best behavior. No previous games had seen such a spectacular organization nor such a lavish display of entertainment. Goering, Ribbentrop and Goebbels gave dazzling parties for the foreign visitors […]. The visitors, especially those from England and America, were greatly impressed by what they saw: apparently a happy, healthy, friendly people united under Hitler—a far different picture, they said, than they had got from reading the newspaper dispatches from Berlin.

The reactions of Brundage and of Baron Pierre de Coubertin reflect the positive international reception of the Nazis’ Olympics that Shirer observed.

Throughout his career, Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee, emphasized an “Olympic ideal” that centered on the ancient Olympics as the ultimate athletic competition, extolling the ancient Greek celebration of the body, mind, and character. Coubertin emphasized the Greek heritage of athletic competition, Agon, and the life of the ancient gymnasium. He aimed to restore this to the modern world in the form of the modern Olympics: “The life of the gymnasium was an admirable compromise between the two sets of forces which struggle within man, and which it is so difficult to reconcile once their balance has been upset. Muscles and ideas coexisted there in brotherhood, and it seems that this harmony was so perfect as even to unite youth and old age.” He also believed that the virtues of the Greek gymnasium

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were lost in the “degrading arena of the Roman circus” and ended entirely with Christianity.\(^\text{24}\) To protect the “athletic revival” in the modern Olympics, Coubertin proposed elements of moral strength that should serve as this Olympic ideal:

> Healthy democracy, wise and peaceful internationalism, will penetrate the new stadium and preserve within it the cult of honour and disinterestedness which will enable athletics to help in the tasks of moral education and social peace as well as of muscular development. That is why every four years the revived Olympic Games must give the youth of all the world the chance of a happy and brotherly encounter, which will gradually efface the peoples’ ignorance of things which concern them all, an ignorance which feeds hatreds, accumulates misunderstandings, and hurtes events along a barbarous path towards a merciless conflict.\(^\text{25}\)

In his speech at the close of the Berlin games, Coubertin proclaimed that the efforts of the German Organizing Committee and the result completely reflected this ideal: “The swaying and the struggles of history will continue, but little by little knowledge will replace dangerous ignorance; mutual understanding will soften unthinking hatreds. Thus the edifice at which I have labored for half-a-century will be strengthened. May the German people and their head be thanked for what they have just accomplished!”\(^\text{26}\) Additionally, in a report to the American Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage expressed confidence that the Berlin 1936 Olympics had satisfactorily improved international relations, a result of the image of international peace and cooperation the National Socialist government and the German Organizing Committee consciously and carefully put forth both for the German public and the international audience. His opening remarks were particularly optimistic:

> As a result of the Games of the Eleventh Olympiad, one more stride has been taken toward a better general understanding between the peoples of the world. Fulfilling the visions of its founder, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, once again this great quadrennial celebration has demonstrated that it is the most effective influence toward international peace and harmony yet devised. Despite the fact that the world seethes with political

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 8.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 10.
\(^{26}\) Ibid., 136.
intrigue, social unrest, economic confusion and bitter national hatreds, for three weeks in August and for ten days in February the athletic representatives of fifty-two different nations laid aside all national jealousies and rivalries and, notwithstanding the strenuous competition in which they were engaged, lived and worked together in a most friendly spirit. 

Later in his report, Brundage defended the German Olympic events from American accusations leveled against the Nazi government and German Organizing Committee of discrimination against the American team. His and Coubertin’s reactions to the Olympics and to the German organizing effort indicate the success of the Nazi government’s campaign to present Germany as a peaceful, powerful, and prosperous nation in spite of the chaos of the Weimar era and any lingering ill feeling from the Great War.

In spite of Hitler’s initial reluctance to host the games, there was already precedent for this effort to improve Nazi Germany’s international image. By 1936, in a time when Hitler was both actively and subliminally preparing the German people for war, the Nazis were already engaged in an internationally directed campaign proclaiming a peaceful message. Leni Riefenstahl’s notorious film *Triumph of the Will*, a 144-minute documentation of the 1934 Nuremberg rallies, conveys an oddly mixed message of militarism and peace. During the Olympics, she was engaged in a project documenting the games in a film called *Olympia*, the

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28 Ibid., 33.
29 The film contains excerpts of speeches from Hitler and most of his inner circle. These speeches all convey a positive image of Nazism, using words appealing to the ideal of world peace. It is interesting to note that not once in the film do the Nazis discuss their anti-Semitic platform, except for a veiled comment by Julius Streicher concerning the preservation of racial purity, an element that Riefenstahl readily pointed out years later (the quote is found in the documentary *The wonderful, horrible life of Leni Riefenstahl*). At the same time, however, *Triumph of the Will* also documents militaristic events such as the outdoor rally of the Reichsarbeitsdienst (Labor Service) showing hundreds of men doing pseudo-military drills with spades rather than rifles. (*Triumph des Willens: Das Dokument vom Reichsparteitag 1934*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (1935; Bloomington, IL: Synapse Films, 2000), DVD.)
first ten minutes of which overtly draw this connection between Germany and ancient Greece. The title sequence features stone tablets with the words “OLYMPIA: DER FILM VON DEN XI OLYMPISCHEN SPIELEN BERLIN 1936” in Roman epigraphic script (Fig. 2). A sequence directly follows showing images of Greek ruins from the Acropolis and the Parthenon. The scene then changes to images of Greek statues, settling on the Discobolus of Myron, which then fades out, revealing a live, mostly nude German athlete in exactly the same position, who then throws the discus (Fig. 3).

While Riefenstahl’s film is the most well-known propaganda piece from the 1936 Olympics, it is evident that the German Organizing Committee consciously made further efforts to bring Greek antiquity to the public consciousness. In 1934, the Organizing Committee opened an “Olympic Exhibition” that ran on and off from its opening through June 1936, the purpose of which was to “enlighten visitors concerning the history, development and aims of the Games” and “to reveal the direct connection between the modern Olympic Games and those of antiquity as well as to portray their rapid growth since 1896.” The official Olympic poster, designed by Werner Würbel, shows a glorious Olympic hero in an olive wreath rising over the quadriga on the Brandenburg Gate (Fig. 4). The Organizing Committee also introduced customs to the Olympics that were inspired from images or traditions associated with the ancient Olympic games. The traditional torch relay, first performed at this particular event, was an idea Carl Diem, Secretary-General of the Organizing Committee, proposed in 1934, and inherently draws a connection between modern Germany and ancient Greece by overtly connecting Berlin with Greece.

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30 *Olympia*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl (1938; Venice, CA: Pathfinder Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD.
32 Ibid., 369.
with Olympia. Additionally, the gold-medalists were given an olive wreath\textsuperscript{34} and “a small oak tree in commemoration of the victory won in Germany” which would “grow to the honour of victory, as a living inspiration for future generations” (Fig. 5).\textsuperscript{35} The olive wreath references those given to ancient Olympic victors, while the oak tree is in reference to the prophetic power of Zeus, who “manifested himself in the sounds of the holy oak-tree […] and in doves, whose call from the holy oak-tree or whose flight are used as divine signs.”\textsuperscript{36} The use of these symbols appears to have been unique to the 1936 Summer Olympics, although the torch relay remained in modern Olympic tradition.

To further cultivate this peace message with their international audience, and to continue drawing the proposed connection with ancient Greek culture, the Organizing Committee also provided the delegates and Olympic committees with “festive arrangements”, multiple artistic, musical, or theatrical performances, most of which were classically themed. These included a production of Handel’s oratorio “Herakles” (performed August 4, 7, 16, 17, and 18), which was chosen by the Reich Chamber Music and the Organizing Committee “because there existed an inner link with the Olympic idea.”\textsuperscript{37} Additionally they put on “a programme of highest artistic merit representing a happy blend of classical Greek and German art” in the Pergamon Museum on July 29\textsuperscript{th}, which included works by Schein and Hadyn, a commemoration for the fallen


\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 127.


soldiers in the Great War, the “Hymn to Apollo”, and the “Chaconne” from Gluck’s “Paris and Helen” (Fig. 6).  

At first glance, the National Socialists’ use of and interest in Greek theater and Greek themes may seem contradictory to their usual emphasis on Teutonic culture and custom. In a speech on November 15th, 1933, only a few months after Hitler’s rise to power on January 30th, Goebbels remarked,

We intend to be the patron saints of German art and culture. The hunger which has gripped the German people does not only extend as far as their stomachs. It is just as much a hunger of their souls; this too needs to be sated. Like every genuine revolution, ours too aims for a radical transformation of our cultural life and spiritual creativity. […] The new national art of Germany will only enjoy respect in the world and bear witness beyond the frontiers of our country to the intense cultural dynamism of the new Germany if it is firmly and ineradicably rooted in the mother earth of the natural culture [Volkstum] which produced it. The world must discover anew what is German and genuine. 

But, as Dennis comprehensively demonstrates, the Nazis gladly appropriated most or all of Western culture into their narrative, either as examples of National Socialist sentiment in previous ages or as examples of artists, thinkers, or intellectual movements they considered anathema. Their use of the Olympics was part of this. To draw a connection between German and ancient Greek culture suggested that Nazi Germany was destined to be the ancestor and founder of a new cultural age and a new period of civilization. In effect, the Nazis predicted that Germany would be to the future Europe what Greco-Roman antiquity is to the Western World today.

38 Ibid., 506.  
Müthel’s *Orestie* is only briefly mentioned in the Organizing Committee’s report, which lacks the descriptive detail given to “Herakles” and the entertainment in the Pergamon Museum, but it is noteworthy that the report mentions the large number of official guests, and that they were invited to the production by “the Government of the Reich.”

This is unique, because the report indicates that most of the other events were sponsored by the Organizing Committee, but *Orestie* is the only event, apart from the official reception of the guests to Germany, in which “the Government of the Reich” is explicitly stated to be involved. While actual documentation has proven difficult to locate, this does indicate the possibility that *Orestie* was produced at the behest of the Ministry of Propaganda itself, possibly Benno von Arendt, the newly-appointed “Reichsbühnenbildner”. If so, this begs the question *why* they would have requested Aeschylus’s trilogy, especially with its democratic undertones. Neither Goebbels’s commentary nor the Organizing Committee’s report give much insight, and the Ministry of Propaganda does not appear to have left much, if anything, to indicate their reasons for requesting *Orestie*.

However, the content of the production, as well as the reviews in newspapers, suggest the possibility that the propagandistic message lies in the play’s overall message about justice and retribution, the role of Athena, and similarities between Aeschylus’s plot and elements of Nazi narrative, particularly the Dolchstoßlegende of the 1920s and the implications of the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. If the Nazis could subtly highlight similarities between Aeschylus’s play and their own worldview while downplaying contrary ideals like Athenian rationalism and democracy, they could transform the *Oresteia* into an ideologically compatible play.

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40 Ibid., 507.

41 Günther Rühle, *Theater in Deutschland 1887-1945* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag GmbH, 2007), 798.
3. The Wilamowitz Translation and Müthel’s Adaptation

Few (if any) of the international commentators reviewed Müthel’s *Orestie*. So, their reaction is not very clear. But, they likely would have been receptive to the story presented in the trilogy. The rise of a society from a savage, bloody state to a more civilized state through the acts of reason and democratic justice, appeals to both the rational sensibilities of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophies upon which most democracies are founded, and to international peace and cooperation found in Coubertin’s ideal. The horrific eye-for-an-eye vengeance with which Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon for the sacrifice of Iphigenia and her own murder in turn by Orestes illustrate an older archaic notion of justice that Aeschylus insists only perpetuates violence rather than settle disputes. Near the close of the trilogy Athena institutes tribunals and legalistic justice which takes justice out of the hands of the individuals in the dispute and into the hands of a third party, the Areopagus, which settles the dispute through rational discourse and investigation. These represent similar ideals to those of modern democratic societies, but the progression of society also appeals to Nazi ideology if the element of rationalism and democracy is removed or minimized.

The Nazis could spin a very different message from the *Oresteia* by focusing on varying interpretations of justice and on the role of Athena in the story. For Müthel came the editorial challenge of adapting the concepts of justice and its progression within this pro-National Socialist context. The use of the word δίκη and the variety of ways Wilamowitz translates it to reflect this progression lend themselves to the Nazi narrative of Germany rising from its previous chaotic state during the Weimar period to its current state (albeit without the democratic ideals), supported with the classical-themed propaganda they used throughout the Olympics to present Germany as a great and prosperous nation. The way Wilamowitz presents the concepts of justice
and revenge, especially as used by Orestes and Athena, appeals to the Nazis’ self-conception that
the German nation that had been wronged and now would actively seek justice. Additionally the
stage set in Die Versöhnung made Athena the most prominent figure in the third part of the
trilogy and moved attention from the Athenian citizens to Athena herself. From this point
forward, I will use the terms The Libation Bearers or Eumenides to refer broadly to the
Aeschylean plays, while Das Opfer am Grabe and Die Versöhnung refer specifically to the
Wilamowitz translation or to Müthel’s production.

Wilamowitz’s usual word choices for δίκη or its derivatives are Vergeltung, Recht, or
Rache. Δίκη is a complicated key concept throughout the Oresteia, frequently appearing
throughout the trilogy. The words Recht and Rache also have certain nuances unique to the
German language that are important to understanding how Wilamowitz translated δίκη and its
derivatives. Simon Goldhill explains that δίκη was a legal term, but it also carried a more abstract
meaning:

Dikē is a central term of the public language of the fifth-century polis. Its range of sense
runs from abstract ideas of ‘justice’ or ‘right’ through ‘retribution,’ ‘punishment,’ to the
particular legal senses of ‘law court,’ and ‘law case.’ It is a fundamental term for the
expression of social order in that it both indicates the proper organization of society as a
whole and delineates right action for individuals and the institutions through which order
is to be maintained. It is a principle -- and a practice -- constantly appealed to in fifth
century discourse. [...] The word dikē and its derivatives are used obsessively in the
Oresteia, where the plotting of revenge leads towards a resolution through the new
institution of the law court. This has led to what is still a standard reading of the trilogy,
namely, that the Oresteia traces a transformation of dikē as revenge to dikē as legal
justice -- a move from the bloody repetition of vendetta to the ordered world of the polis
and its institutional resolution of conflict through the words of the court.42

To really examine the usage of δίκη and how Wilamowitz translates its use in the trilogy, it is
necessary to flesh out the full meaning of the term, as well as the meaning and etymology of the

Companion to Greek Tragedy, ed. P.E. Easterling, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1997), 137.
German words translators typically use. The Oxford *Greek-English Lexicon* cites the earliest usage of δίκη in Homer’s *Odyssey* as “way”, as in “This is the way of mortals”, “this is always the way, when…”43 Pindar has a similar usage in *Pythian*, “in the way of, after the manner of.”44 In the *Iliad* it appears as “order, right,… nothing short of what is fit”45 and in Hesiod’s *Theogonia*, δίκη first appears as the goddess Dike,46 daughter of Zeus and personification of justice.47

In the *Iliad* δίκη also refers to “duly, rightly”48 and righteous judgment.49 In Herodotus’s time it meant “the object or consequence of the action, atonement, satisfaction, penalty,”50 while a century later, for Plato, δίκη obtained a more legalistic meaning as well: “lawsuit” in Plato’s *Euthyphro*, or a “private suit or action” in Lysias’s *Fragments*.51 We can infer from Goldhill’s explanation and from the *Greek-English Lexicon* that the evolution of δίκη from its “eye for an eye” meaning to a more legalistic meaning is not merely a construction found in Aeschylus’s

43 The citation reads: “custom, usage, ἀπὸ τῆς ἐστὶ βροτῶν this is the way of mortals, Od.11.218; ἦ γάρ δ. ἐστι γερόντων 24.255 etc.; ἦ τ᾿ ἐστι δ. θείων βασιλέων 4.691 etc.; ἦ γάρ δ. ὀππότε 14.59 etc.; ἦ γάρ δ., ὀππότε this is always the way, when…” (Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones, et al, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 430)
44 “adverb. in acc. δίκην, in the way of, after the manner of, c. gen., λόγῳ Pi.P.2.84.” (Ibid.)
45 “order, right, μὴ τι δίκης ἐπιδευές nothing short of what is fit, Il.19.180” (Ibid.)
46 *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 430.
47 The *OCD* describes Dike as “[the] personification of Justice, daughter of Zeus and Themis, and one of the Horae, with eunomia and Eirene (Hes. *Theog.* 901-3). She reports men’s wrongdoing to Zeus (Hes. *Op.* 256-62), and sits beside him (Aesch. fr. 281a Radt; Soph. *OC* 1381-2, Orph. fr. 23 O. Kern). … In Archaic art she punishes Injustice (e.g. chest of Cypselus, Paus. 5.18.2), and later she is shown with a sword in Underworld scenes.”(Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 451.)
48 *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 430.
49 “δίκην ἰθύνατα εἰπεῖν give judgment most righteously (cf. ἰθύς), II.18.508.” (Ibid.)
50 “δίκην ἐκτίνειν, τίνειν, Hdt.9.94.” (Ibid.)
51 Ibid.
trilogy; the evolution is linguistic and not literary. However, it is clear that throughout ancient and classical Greek development, δίκη had a sense of “rightness” in its nuances.

Wilamowitz’s interpretations of δίκη mostly have their roots in the terms Recht or Rache but he occasionally uses the personification Dike or the term Vergeltung. In Die Versöhnung he also regularly translates δίκη as Verhandlung. The frequency with which he uses these words (whether directly in translation of δίκη or not) might be indicative of the reasoning behind his choice of words. In the 2nd edition of Agamemnon, Recht or its derivatives appear twelve times, while Rache appears seventeen times. Additionally, Vergeltung appears four times, while Dike only appears once.

The concepts of justice, revenge, and retribution appear very quickly in Agamemnon, largely in the discourses of the Chorus as Argos incrementally receives news of the fall of Troy and Agamemnon’s impending return. The Chorus reminisces on the start of the Trojan War in their opening lines and later on the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Wilamowitz repeatedly uses the words Rache or Rachekrieg to describe the Trojan War and the Greeks motivations in the passage from lines 40 to 82.52 A small segment of the Chorus’s opening passage reads:

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ὕπατος δ’ ἄων ἡ τις Απόλλων
ἡ Πᾶν ἡ Ζεὺς οἰωνόθροον
γόνιν δέμιόν τὸν ἐνεμηκὸν
ὕστερόποινον
πέμπει παραβάσιν Ἐρινύν (Aes.Ag.53-59).
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Though this passage doesn’t use the word δίκη, it still touches upon a similar concept to justice in the term ὑστερόποινον, meaning “late-avenging”,55 which Wilamowitz translates to “Komme

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52 Aischylos, “Agamemnon,” Griechische Tragoedien, trans. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (Berlin: Wiedmannsche Buchhandlung, 1901), 2:53. All further references to the second edition of Wilamowitz’s translation will be abbreviated WM.
53 All references to the Greek text are from the Loeb Classical Library.
sie auch spät, Vergeltung kommt,” but the late retribution mentioned here supports a much later passage in lines 750-782, which will shortly be covered. It is not translated from δίκη in the above passage, but Wilamowitz does use “Vergeltung” for δίκη on several occasions. Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm state in their dictionary that Vergeltung in its origins holds a monetary connotation, although they also stated that in the 19th century, this was seldom used: “im anschlusz an nr. 2 des zeitworts, gegenleistung in geld, zurückzahlung, geldzahlung für erwiesene dienst.”56 Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of justice, outlined in On the Genealogy of Morals, also had this monetary connotation. Nietzsche traces the origins of guilt, justice, and mercy to the relationship between buyer and seller and debtor and creditor:

It was here that one person first encountered another person, that one person first measured himself against another. […] Setting prices, determining values, contriving equivalences, exchanging—these preoccupied the earliest thinking of man to so great an extent that in a certain sense they constitute thinking as such. […] ‘everything has its price; all things can be paid for’—the oldest and naívest moral canon of justice, the beginning of all ‘good-naturedness,’ all ‘fairness,’ all ‘good will,’ all ‘objectivity’ on earth. Justice on this elementary level is the good will among parties of approximately equal power to come to terms with one another, to reach an ‘understanding’ by means of a settlement—and to compel parties of lesser power to reach a settlement among themselves.57

If the pledge between parties was broken, however, “the community, the disappointed creditor, will get what repayment it can, one may depend on that.”58 More common usage of Vergeltung does not have the overt monetary connotation, but it retains the sense of repayment, of something owed to somebody. In Neuhochdeutsch, Vergeltung in the context as presented in the above passage in Agamemnon carries a particular sense as an action as well as repayment: “im üblen

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58 Ibid., 507.
In the entry “Vergeltungsrecht,” the Grimms add “das recht, nach welchen empfangenes gutes oder böses vergilt.”

Vergeltung, in short, means something closer to repayment, retribution, or recompense in English than the alternative words Wilamowitz uses for justice, Recht or Rache. The Chorus states that evil-doers, “Übelthätern,” must and will pay for their crimes, either now or later, and repeat this sentiment at lines 1535-1536 after Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon: “Zu neuen Freveln wetzt an neuem Steine / das Schicksal der Vergeltung Richterschwert.” The term appears throughout Agamemnon and Das Opfer am Grabe, usually in reference to retribution against Clytemnestra, though on line 1606, Aegisthus describes his actions against Agamemnon as Vergeltung, translated from the personification Δίκη. On line 1280, Cassandra describes Clytemnestra’s fate as “Vergeltung” when she states, “Es kommt und nimmt Vergeltung auch für meinen Tod / den Vater rächend muttermörderisch der Sohn.” In Das Opfer am Grabe, on line 61 the Chorus calls for a “Vergeltungsschlag,” indirectly in translation of Δίκας while at line 144 Electra, in her prayer to her father’s spirit, pleads, “Vater, lass einen Rächer auferstehn für dich, und wer getötet sterbe den Vergeltungstod,” from “ἡμῖν μὲν εὐχὰς τάσδε, τοῖς δ᾿ ἐναντίοις λέγω φανήναι σοῦ, πάτερ, τιμάορον, καὶ τοὺς κτανόντας ἀντικατθανεῖν δίκη” (Aes.Ag.142-144). Orestes likewise uses the term on line 380, though not as a translation of δίκη. The Chorus, Electra, Orestes, and Cassandra all agree that Clytemnestra must pay for the crime she commits,

59 Grimm, Deutsches Wörterbuch, 12:411.
60 Ibid., 12:412.
61 WM 2:108.
62 Ibid., 2:111.
63 Ibid., 2:97.
65 Ibid., 173.
and Orestes, in Agamemnon’s place, must seek repayment. They interpret this as Clytemnestra meeting the same fate as Agamemnon.

At the beginning of *Agamemnon* the Chorus speaks of retribution as the consequence for Paris violating the rules of hospitality (which Wilamowitz translates as *Gastrecht*\(^\text{66}\)) by stealing Menelaus’s wife Helen. The Chorus then goes on to describe the sacrifice of Iphigenia and Agamemnon’s choosing honor and necessity over his daughter: “Und als er erst dem Joch der Not sich beugte, / den Sinn auf Frevel, auf Verbrechen wandte, / da war das Schwanken aus, da wagt’ er alles / Der Mensch wird kühn, hat ihm erst Leidenschaft den Sinn berückt.”\(^\text{67}\) The Chorus ends their description of Agamemnon’s deed with the conclusion for both Troy and Iphigenia, “Δίκα δὲ τοῖς μὲν παθοῦσιν μαθεῖν ἐπιρρέπει” (Aes.Ag.250), though strangely Wilamowitz does not directly translate Δίκα, instead simply translating the sentence to “Doch durch Leiden soll man lernen.”\(^\text{68}\) However, some time later, they continue to reminisce very strongly on justice in the aforementioned lines 750-782, which Wilamowitz does translate, concluding these long passages on Troy and Iphigenia:

\[ \begin{align*}
\text{παλαιφατος} & \text{ δ’ \ ἐν βροτοίς γέρων λόγος} \\
\text{τέτυκται}, & \text{μέγαν τελεσ-} \\
\text{θέντα φωτός ὀλβον} & \text{τεκνούσθαι μηδ’ ἀπαιδα θνάσκειν,} \\
\text{ἐκ δ’ ἀγαθάς τύχας γένει} & \text{βλαστάνειν ἅκορεστοι οἰζόν.} \\
\text{δίχα δ’ ἄλλων μονόφρων εἰ-} & \text{τὸ δυσσεβὲς ἔργον} \\
\text{μετὰ μὲν πλείονα τίκτει,} & \text{μετὰ μὲν πλείονα τίκτει,} \\
\text{σφετέρᾳ δ’ εἰκότα γέννᾳ·} & \text{σφετέρᾳ δ’ εἰκότα γέννᾳ·} \\
\text{οἴκων γὰρ εὐθυδίκως} & \text{οἴκων γὰρ εὐθυδίκως} \\
\text{καλλίταις πότιμος αἰεί.} & \text{καλλίταις πότιμος αἰεί.} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{Ein altes, oftgehörtes Wort sagt, dass ein} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{volles Menschenglück} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{unfehlbar sich den Sohn erzeugt, den Erben.} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{Sohn und Erbe wird} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{des Glücks unermesslich Elend.} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{Dass kann ich nicht glauben, ich bleibe} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{dabei:} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{fortwuchernd entspriesst aus Sünden und} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{Schuld} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{zahlreiche den Eltern gleichende Brut.} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{Ein Haus, das Recht und Tugend bewahrt,} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{vererbts auch dauernden Segen.} \\
\text{φυλεὶ δὲ τίκτειν ὑβρεὶς} & \text{Die Hoffart treibt ihr grausam Spiel}
\end{align*} \]


\(^{67}\) Ibid., 2:59.

\(^{68}\) Ibid., 2:60.
The Chorus has concluded that no one can escape justice, and that the Furies will catch up with the wrongdoer even if he escapes punishment in life. Though this particular passage occurs in reference to Paris and Troy, the long discourse on Artemis’s retribution (directed at Zeus: the killing of an innocent for the killing of a hare in her woods), is equally important to this passage: Iphigenia’s sacrifice, and the vivid, disturbing image of Agamemnon putting aside his sorrow at Artemis’s demand and slipping into the “Joch der Not” put a new spin on this discourse. The Chorus could just as easily apply this treatise on justice to the Atreids and their blood-soaked history as to Paris and the Trojans. Iphigenia is only the latest victim in a long line of murders and death that has beset the house of Atreus ever since Tantalus. The Chorus’s appeal to justice in this passage therefore could be interpreted as a plea for Zeus and Dike to put an end to the Atreids’ curse.

69 Ibid., 2:77.
70 Ibid., 2:59.
Similar to the English cognate *right*, the German word *Recht* has an even broader meaning than *δίκη*. One possible meaning is divine law and order: *das recht ist zunächts eine von got gesetzte ordnung, die für jeden menschen lebenslanglich den festen stand und die damit verbundenen befugnisse und pflichten bedingt.* It also can mean a natural order of things, rights either as class privileges or as human rights. *Recht* likewise can refer to duty: “*dem rechte im angegebenen sine steht die pflicht gegenüber: ein recht schlieszt eine pflicht in sich; gleiche, rechte, gleiche pflichten*”; and to ethical principles: “1) *die vom sittengesetzt gegebene norm, vorschrift für unser sittliches handeln, und das demgemäsze. a) in verbindung mit anderen sittlichen begriffen: recht ist warheit, warheit ist recht. recht ist das das weder got noch menschen natur taddeln kan.*” It also can be an adjective describing actions based on judgment and consideration. It also means justice in the sense of seeking legal recourse: “*recht, von der anwendung der gesetzlichen norm auf den einzelfall. a) das dieser norm gemäsze, eine gerechte sache; … b) geordnete feststellung eines rechtsanspruchs, die eine partei sucht. … c) die entscheidung eines richters in einem solchen falle,*” including in contrast with compassion: “*g) der strenge dieses rechts gegenüber steht die barmherzigkeit, gnade.*” When contrasted with *Rache* and *Vergeltung*, *Recht* is a much closer translation to *δίκη* in its sense of general “rightness”. Broadly, it means doing *right* by something or somebody. Another noteworthy meaning is related to ownership: “*allgemein, was sich gehört oder gebührt,*” as this echoes Nietzsche’s own take on justice and mercy in *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

A modern audience may interpret the progression of Aeschylean *δίκη* as a demonstration of the difference between “revenge” and “justice”, i.e. Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon is

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72 Ibid., 8:367-382.
73 Ibid., 8:365.
little more than personal vengeance, while Athena in *Eumenides* establishes a system based on
real justice; yet the difference between justice and revenge is not directly evident in the language
of Classical Greece, nor in the German language, nor in the English language until the post-
Enlightenment age. Clytemnestra’s first use of δίκη after the double murder of Agamemnon and
Cassandra is found on line 1404, and was not cut out of Müthel’s script:

> ἐστίν Αγαμέμνων, ἐμὸς
> πόσις, νεκρὸς δὲ, τήσδε δεξιὰς χερὸς
> έργον, δικαίας τέκτονος, τάδ’ ὀδ’ ἔχει.
> (Aes.Ag.1404-1406)\(^{74}\)

Dieser Leichnam hier / ist mein Gemahl, ist Agamemnon, und sein Tod / ist meiner Rächerhände Werk, ein Meisterwerk.\(^{75}\)

The prefix *Rächer-* in the phrase *Rächerhände Werk* (roughly meaning “work of my avenging hands”) is a derivation of the word *Rache* or its verb form *rächen* as a translation of δικαίας. If we examine the varying definitions of *Rache* in *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, we will find that Wilamowitz’s choice of *Rache* rather than a derivative of *Recht* possibly could be tied to the Middle High German rendering of the concept as a more divine form of vengeance: “3) rache, *dem lat. vindica entsprechend, bezeichner das gewaltsame greifen auf einen übelthäter vorzugsweise seitens des höchsten göttlichen richters.*”\(^{76}\) The Grimms also provide the biblical injunction found in Deuteronomy 32:35: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay” as an example illustrating this meaning.\(^{77}\) Another sense the brothers Grimm provided, dated to a later period, was that of a godly endorsement of humans inflicting retribution for some wrong or injustice: “vergeltung eines unrechts durch menschen, unter göttlicher billigung und hilfe.” Another

\(^{74}\) Emphasis added.


\(^{77}\) Ibid.
relevant possible meaning of *Rache* as used in Wilamowitz’s translation, described in *Deutsches Wörterbuch* as “der heute gewöhliche sinn”, conveys a much baser, more passionate, selfish and irrational sense of the word: “rache, welcher leidenschaftliche und unedle bewegtheit bei verfolgung eines unrechts in sich schlieszt.” To further illustrate this meaning, the dictionary provides the bloody, vengeful deeds of Kriemhild in *Niebelungenlied* as an example of this form of *Rache*.\(^7^8\)

Thus, by using the word *Rache*, Wilamowitz’s Clytemnestra could be saying that her actions are the result of divine retribution, in one sense by a vengeful deity acting through her; her own words support this possibility when she claims that the murder was the work of the “δαίμων” (daemon) that has inhabited the house of Atreus and causes the murders associated with Atreus and his family: “Wagst du dies Verbrechen mein zu nennen? Wähst du Agamemnons Weib zu sehen? Nein, des Hauses alter grimmer Dämon borgte die Gestalt von seiner Gattin.”\(^7^9\) The Grimms’ second definition indicates that Clytemnestra also could be saying that she is simply acting with divine endorsement. But this word, to a modern audience, also conveys the third, more modern notion of revenge as a base, selfish retaliation, revenge contrasted with justice. In that sense, Wilamowitz’s translation holds an important etymological double-meaning. While *Recht* would be a closer translation to *δίκη* than *Rache*, it does not convey the sense of absolute horror impressed upon the Chorus and upon the audience at the unending cycle of murder and revenge that has cursed the Atreid family, which Clytemnestra, no matter how justified she feels, has only continued. In their horror, the Chorus calls for Orestes,

\(^7^8\) Ibid., 15.

\(^7^9\) Aischylos, “Orestie,” *Griechische Tragoedien*, Zweiter Band, Elfte Auflage, Trans. Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (Berlin: Wiedmannsche Buchhandlung, 1929. Contains handwritten notes by Lothar Müthel), 107. All further references to Müthel’s copy will be abbreviated LM.
Agamemnon’s son, to return from exile and bring justice upon Aegisthues and Clytemnestra,\footnote{Ibid, 113.} echoing their earlier plea for Zeus to impose real justice to the house of Atreus.

The seer Cassandra does not seem to use \textit{δίκη} anywhere, but nonetheless does comment on vengeance and retribution several times throughout her dialogue, especially as she predicts that Orestes will avenge her death as well as Agamemnon’s (\textit{Rächerinnen}, line 1190, \textit{Rache}, line 1223, \textit{Vergeltung}, line 1280).\footnote{WM, “Agamemnon,” \textit{Griechische Tragoedien}, 2:93, 95, 97.} Clytemnestra’s lover Aegisthus also uses both terms: referring to the fraternal feud between his father Thyestes and Agamemnon’s father Atreus, he declares the day of the murder “Tag der Rache” at line 1577, and declares his and Clytemnestra’s actions as \textit{Vergeltung} at line 1606.\footnote{Thyestes and Atreus, both sons of Pelops and descendants of Tantalus, contributed to the chain of murders in the family when Atreus, in retribution for Thyestes committing adultery with his wife, murdered his brother’s sons and served them up to him at dinner.}

Wilamowitz’s emphasis on \textit{Rache} and \textit{Vergeltung}, often choosing to translate \textit{δίκη} as these terms rather than its closer translation \textit{Recht}, likely is to emphasize that Clytemnestra’s and Aegisthus’s actions are not true justice, that Clytemnestra’s \textit{δίκη} cannot be Zeus’s \textit{δίκη}, an interpretation the Chorus echoes with its repeated calls for \textit{Recht}. The second story in the trilogy, \textit{Das Opfer am Grabe}, is the beginning of a transition to a far different tone in \textit{Die Versöhnung}, when the question of blood vengeance comes up again: Orestes returns from exile, reunites with his sister Electra, and they plot to avenge their father with the deaths of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Unlike in \textit{Agamemnon}, \textit{Recht} occurs more frequently than \textit{Rache} in \textit{Das Opfer am Grabe}, with the former appearing in the text seventeen times, and the latter fifteen. \textit{Vergeltung} additionally appears five times, and \textit{Dike} once. Additionally, we see the appearance of the derivative \textit{Gerechtigkeit} that more specifically means “justice” (as opposed to the much broader
meanings of Recht). On line 61, the Chorus speaks of “Vergeltungsschlag,” a blow or strike of retribution, and at line 120, after the Chorus’s call for some god or man to come down upon the murderers, Electra asks “Als Richter oder Rächer?” to which the Chorus responds, “Sprich rund heraus: die Todesstrafe zu vollzieh’n.” Contrary to Clytemnestra’s version of justice in Agamemnon, Electra is more cautious, making a distinction between a judge and an avenger, but the Chorus harks back to the eye-for-an-eye approach, insisting that a death penalty be carried out.

After Orestes reunites with Electra, they and the Chorus all speak of Recht and Vergeltung more often than of Rache: Electra, at line 397, prays, “Recht heisch’ ich, Recht wider den Frevel,” and at line 461, Orestes declares “So soll’s gescheh’n, Recht um Recht und Blut um Blut.” Thus while Electra earlier made the distinction between a judge and an avenger, repeatedly calling for Recht, Orestes calls for the same eye-for-an-eye justice as the Chorus.

Throughout the play the audience and the characters confront the confusing and vexed question of whether Orestes’ δίκη is any different from his mother’s. Similarly to Clytemnestra, he is calling for archaic justice, demanding blood for blood. At Apollo’s command, Orestes is about to avenge Agamemnon and must do so by killing the murderer, his mother. In an interesting use of imagery, at line 248, Orestes describes Clytemnestra as a snake whose embrace Agamemnon fell into (“in der argen Schlange Ringelknoten”), while in a portentous dream that had disturbed Clytemnestra, at line 528 Orestes is described as a dragon she has given birth to and nursed. Then at line 928, just before he kills her, Clytemnestra describes him as a viper (“die Natter

84 Ibid., 2:160, 162.
85 Ibid., 2:174, 177.
86 Ibid., 2:168, 180.
Both Orestes and Clytemnestra are portrayed as serpents. Throughout Das Opfer am Grabe the images associated with justice are violent by nature; Orestes completely echoes archaic justice: “Dein Urteil ist gesprochen durch des Vaters Tod” and through the image of Clytemnestra birthing a dragon or a viper, Orestes is portrayed in an equally terrifying, grotesque way as Clytemnestra in Agamemnon. Ultimately the message Aeschylus sends, as Wilamowitz’s translation conveys, is that this is the unnatural end that blood revenge leads to. This is poignantly made clear when at the end of the play, Orestes flees from the scene in terror as the Erinyes appear to haunt him, taking the story to Die Versöhnung.

The Eumenides stands out from the other two because it is the first time Aeschylus clearly presents two different forms of δίκη; the first is the Erinyes’ notion, which remains as the old, archaic blood-for-blood justice. Orestes has killed Clytemnestra, who must be avenged; with the rest of the family either dead or party to her death, the Erinyes are the only ones left to avenge her. In Wilamowitz’s translation, the word Recht first appears at line 85, it is spoken by Orestes in a plea for Apollo’s aid, while at line 125 the spirit of Clytemnestra calls for the Erinyes to avenge her (“Verfolge, räche”). The Chorus, who are the Erinyes, speaks of justice as both Recht and Rache throughout, but when Apollo or Orestes speak of justice, they usually use either Recht or Vergeltung, just as Orestes had in the previous play. Only the Erinyes use the words justice and revenge interchangeably in the Wilamowitz translation. When the trial Athena presides over begins, δίκη is most frequently translated either as a form of Recht or as the more legalistic term Verhandlung, or a trial or case, which is most commonly used by Apollo or Athena.

87 Ibid., 2:197.
88 Ibid.
89 LM 260.
An interesting passage occurs before the trial, shortly after Athena’s first appearance, in which the Chorus describes their function to Athena: “Den Muttermörder jagen wir aus seinem Haus,” but on the matter of justice, Athena remarks to them “Recht haben wollt ihr, Recht zu üben sträubt ihr euch,” conveying an opinion that the Erinyes want justice but fail to practice it actually. Another passage occurs later at line 490, when the Erinyes say of Athena, “Neues Recht bricht herein, wenn die Sache, wenn die Sünde dieses Muttermörders siegt.” Their lament about “new justice” brings us to the theme of the younger gods triumphing over the older gods, and new justice over the old archaic justice. When Orestes is acquitted at the end of the play, Athena persuades the Erinyes to accept a new role as residents of Athens ensuring the city’s prosperity, doing away with old justice entirely and leaving new justice in the hands of the Areopagus. Just as importantly, Orestes is allowed to return to Argos, the curse over his family lifted. Overall, in the Wilamowitz translation, Recht and its derivatives appear thirty-one times, Rache twenty-two times, and Vergeltung once.

Wilamowitz’s choice of when to use Recht, Rache, their derivatives, Vergeltung, Verhandlung, or any other translation over the course of the trilogy indicate an intention to portray the progression of eye-for-an-eye vengeance in Agamemon and Das Opfer am Grabe to legal justice in Die Versöhnung, true justice, as it were. This interpretation of δίκη and its different possible meanings is compatible with the image of a nation rising from a previous chaotic or savage age into a new era of civilization, an image the Nazis frequently emphasized for Germany rising out of the political and economic turmoil of the Weimar Republic. At the same time, the fact that Orestes and Electra both use the terms Vergeltung and Rache to describe

91 LM 274.
92 Ibid., 275.
93 Ibid., 277.
the death of Clytemnestra falls in line with the Nazis’ vengeful sentiments towards the perceived perpetrators of the German defeat in the Great War and the subsequent Weimar era chaos. Though impossible to prove with the current available resources, Müthel and his producers might have intended viewers of the *Orestie* to observe the narrative parallels between the Dolchstoßlegende and the *Oresteia’s* primitive execution of justice. The “Dolchstoßlegende” or “stab-in-the-back myth” was the notion that Germany lost World War I because left-wing German revolutionaries and Jews overthrew the monarchy and by so doing betrayed the German military, effectively stabbing them in the back.\(^94\) Just as Cassandra, in Wilamowitz’s translation, refers to Clytemnestra’s coming actions as “ein neues Verbrechen,”\(^95\) similarly numerous anti-democratic, anti-socialist reactionaries (including the Nazis) frequently called the advocates for the German revolution of 1918-1919 “Novemberverbrecher”. Just as Orestes removes Argos from the usurpers, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, Hitler and the Nazi Party similarly stated their goal of removing Germany from the “November criminals,” in equally vengeful terms, as Peter Fritzsche observes:

>This embattled vision of history, which Nazis shared with many other Germans, helps explain the fantasies of extreme violence the Nazis harbored. […] The ways in which Nazism promoted an ideal of German life were inextricably linked to the near-death they believed Germany had suffered in 1918. The Nazis delivered upon their enemies the very destruction they imagined awaited Germans.\(^96\)

The similarities between these plot elements of *Orestie* and the narrative of Nazi ideology do not end with the Dolchstoßlegende, which was a prevailing myth primarily during the 1920s. In 1936, the most recent major event in Nazi politics, that would have been relatively fresh on the minds of Müthel’s Nazi audience members, was the Nuremberg Laws of 1935. Implemented less

\(^{95}\) WM 2:88
than a year before the Olympics, these laws stripped Germany’s Jewish population of all their rights of citizenship and forbade them from marriage or extramarital intercourse with Aryans. The citizenship law formed a distinction between “citizens” and “subjects,” effectively stripping Jewish “subjects” of all civic rights, while the marriage law was implemented to protect the racial purity of Aryans. The drafts of the marriage and sexual relations law make the extent to which Hitler emphasized racial purity clear. As historian Saul Friedländer notes:

[…] Hitler demanded a citizenship law broad enough to underpin the more specifically racial-biological anti-Jewish legislation. The party and particularly such individuals such as Gerhardt Wagner, Lösener wrote, insisted on the most comprehensive definition of the Jew, one that would have equated even ‘quarter Jews’ (Mischlinge of the second degree) with full Jews. […] Hitler crossed out a decisive sentence introduced into the text by Stuckart and Lösener: ‘These laws are applicable to full Jews only.’ That sentence was meant to exclude Mischlinge from the legislation; now their fate also hung in the balance.97

The title page of every issue of Julius Streicher’s paper Der Stürmer, featuring the sentence “Die Juden sind unser Unglück!” indicates the essential place Jews held in the Nazi narrative as a population collectively responsible for Germany’s economic and political upheaval during the Weimar era. The assertion that Jews collectively were Germany’s misfortune and the understanding of race in biological terms made it nearly impossible for fanatical Nazis to tolerate any element of the Jewish race in German society, including in blood relations; thus Hitler chose to exclude Germans with even a quarter Jewish ancestry as “full Jews.”

If the Dolchstoßlegende resembles the narrative of the Oresteia, part of that resemblance lies in the roles of the Jews themselves as foreign corrupters. Viewed in this way, the Jews are comparable to Aegisthus, the only character involved in the intrigue between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra and Orestes who wasn’t actually an immediate member of the family. Aegisthus

thus would be the foreign corruptor, and Clytemnestra the traitor who allowed the foreign influence to corrupt her. We could also draw a connection between sexual nature of the relationship between Aegisthus and Clytemnestra in the narrative and the biological element of Nazi racism. In the narrower perspective, they resemble the Dolchstoßlegende as those who directly tore down the legitimate establishment: the resemblance is also visible in a famous 1919 cartoon from the magazine *Kladderadatsch* that features a German soldier being speared in the back by a Medusa figure in a Phrygian cap (Fig. 7). Medusa naturally is a reference to Greek mythology, while the feminine figure wearing a Phrygian cap, a symbol associated with the French Revolution, may indicate both liberalism and foreign ideas. While the figure might not directly refer to Clytemnestra, it is worth noting that she was compared to a snake in *The Libation Bearers*, and the backstapper has snakes for hair.98 In the broader perspective, the corrupting, backstabbing element found in Aegisthus and Clytemnestra may be applicable to the Nazi image of Jews and other “non-German” influences hijacking German life and German culture and even German biology, this corruption being indicated and combated in the 1935 Nuremberg Laws. In this manner, the plays fit into the Nazi worldview.

Müthel would have had to portray the evolution of justice in his adaptation within a Nazi context, but the only form of the script available is the Freie Universität’s archival copy, Müthel’s personal copy of the second volume of *Griechische Tragoedien*, in which he penciled in copious notes, cuts, occasional rewordings and the casting. Though Fischer-Lichte and Flashar both looked at this copy, they do not examine the notes except in generalized statements. Flashar only remarks “Lothar Müthel hat die Übersetzung für die Aufführung ◄eingerichtet► und dabei

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manches gestrichen.” For her part, Fischer-Lichte omits most detail on Müthel’s edits, only commenting that she did not find anything indicating that Müthel’s edits indicate a propagandistic purpose:

He made only slight changes to the translation by removing many of the Christian terms and other expressions which sounded too outdated or too slanted. It seems, then, that the most important reason for using Wilamowitz’s translation grew from the need to construe a certain kind of continuity between the pre-war German Empire and the “Third Reich.” However, the changes and cuts made by Müthel do not suggest any ideological or political statement. In this sense, the critics seem to be right when praising the production as “true to the text.”

The lack of commentary on Müthel’s notes may be due to the non-political nature of the edits and possibly because Müthel’s handwriting at best is extremely difficult to read, even for native speakers, which opens up a future project in fleshing out Müthel’s full script from his notes. Most of his edits are cuts, rather than changes to the wording, seemingly for the purpose of condensing the three plays into a single performance, which, according to Flashar, lasted approximately four hours, roughly half of what a full production of the Aeschylean trilogy might have lasted. A schedule for the Schauspielhaus found in the August 2nd, 1936 issue of *Neue Preußische Zeitung* also indicates this abridgement of the trilogy into a single production, showing only three 7:30 performances on Monday, August 3rd, Tuesday, August 4th, and Friday, August 7th, simply under the title “Die Orestie.” Systematically applied, such abbreviations reduce the text’s volume by about a third.

Fischer-Lichte and Flashar’s omission notwithstanding, the editorial decisions are worth examining, if only to establish better whether there is anything implicitly political in his changes.

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or if they were simply for stylistic reasons or for brevity. In *Die Versöhnung* Müthel cuts out the entire opening with the Pythia, large portions of Orestes’ speeches, and most of the Erinyes’ songs, all of which indicate the need for brevity in this condensed production. In other places he moves portions of the dialogue around. To illustrate this, on line 94, as the ghost of Clytemnestra finds the Erinyes sleeping, Müthel adds “Auf!” at the beginning of the speech and cuts “taugt es, daß ihr schlafend liegt”, moving line 122 to its place. The result is “Auf! Ihr schlaft wohl? Holla, mein Mörder, seiner Mutter Mörder ist einflohn.”¹⁰³ The changes add an element of forcefulness to the passage that Müthel seemed to think necessary to increase the drama. When he does reword portions, it does seem to be either for emphasis or to sound more modern, as Fischer-Lichte suggests. For example, on line 144, the Chorus originally says “Geschlagen sind wir, weh, wie schmerzt, wie bitter brennt die Wunde,” but Müthel changed it to “Geschlagen sind wir, ja wir sind betrogen.”¹⁰⁴ Another example is found at lines 202-203, when he rewrites the chorus leader’s and Apollo’s lines. Originally the lines read:

**CHORFÜHRERIN**

Dein war der Spruch: du triebst ihn zu dem Muttermord.

**APOLLON**

Mein war der Spruch: dem Vater bring’ Vergeltung, ja.

Müthel, however, scratched these out and wrote in: “Du gabst den Spruch, dass er die Mutter morden soll,” “Ich gab den Spruch, dass er den Vater [illegible] soll.”¹⁰⁵

Like Fischer-Lichte, Flashar is skeptical that Müthel’s adaptation was inherently political, his edits instead being of a purely practical nature: “einer politischen Tendenz lassen sie sich

¹⁰³ LM 260.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 262.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 265.
This is indicative in Müthel’s cutting some political or controversial ideas in one place and leaving the same idea in another. When Athena first decides to institute the Areopagus, Müthel cuts out line 484 “Und diese Stiftung setz’ ich ein für alle Zeit,” making it sound like she intends the Areopagus to only be used in peculiar cases like Orestes’. But in lines 681-684, Müthel does not cut Athena’s stated intention for the Areopagus to be a permanent institution. On another occasion, Müthel cuts line 606, when Orestes first rejects the Erinyes’ statement that he is blood-kin to Clytemnestra. But he retains lines 658-660, in which Apollo claims that the Erinyes’ entire argument is baseless because only the father can be the true parent: “Erzeugerin des Kindes ist die Mutter nicht, wie man es glaubt, nur Nährerin des jungen Keims. Erzeugen kann allein der Vater.”

None of the edits alone explain how Müthel produced Die Versöhnung with the desired purposes, or how he managed to make a play extolling Athenian democracy and the institution of the Areopagus compatible with Nazi ideology. The answer to this problem might, however, be found not in the script, but in the set designs for the three plays in the trilogy. Flashar and Fischer-Lichte both provide good descriptions of the performance, compiled from reviews in newspapers. According to the latter, the set designer, Traugott Müller, created the front steps of a grand palace for Agamemnon, while Das Opfer am Grabe featured the huge funeral monument of Agamemnon (Fig. 8 and 9). For Die Versöhnung, Müller constructed a two-story columned structure, with a gigantic statue of Athena at the center, which stood on a pedestal that the actors

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107 LM 277.
108 Ibid., 285.
109 Ibid., 284.
were just tall enough to see over (Fig. 10). Overall, the set designs were very grandiose and classically styled, both characteristics of an architectural style Hitler favored.110

This third stage setup offers the most important indicator: the monumental design was consistent with the image of a glorious nation state, which the Nazis promoted with the frequent use of neoclassical art and architecture. Additionally, the gigantic statue of Athena at the center, modeled after the Parthenon’s lost statue “Athena Parthenos”, looms over the characters and the audience and moves the focus from the Athenian elders’ democratic proceedings to Athena herself and her intervention at the end of the trial. Job Zimmerman’s review in *Völkischer Beobachter* lends further evidence supporting this hypothesis, focusing on the presence of Apollo and Athena:


Here Zimmerman, following the Aeschylean motif of young and old gods representing new and old justice, credits Apollo and Athena for the end of the cycle of blood-revenge and the

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110 Evans writes that “the new public buildings of the Third Reich were all conceived in [a] massive, pseudo-Classical, monumental style” which Hitler and his architect and armaments minister Albert Speer spent hours working with architects developing, and draws a comparison between Hitler’s plans for Berlin and the center of the Federal capital in Washington D.C., but adds, “What distinguished Nazi civic architecture and city planning was not the Classical derivation of its style but the maniacal gigantism of its scale.” David B. Dennis, in *Inhumanities*, briefly comments: “It is important to underscore, … especially as pertaining to ancient Greek culture, that it was the visual aspects of this culture, as rendered in ancient design and architecture, that Hitler respected most, and not necessarily its intellectual content.” (Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power* (New York: Penguin Group Inc., 2005), 181, 186; David B. Dennis, *Inhumanities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 127.)

reconciliation with the older gods, the Erinyes, while the Athenian tribunal is only mentioned. To
the correspondents of *Völkischer Beobachter*, the presence of democratic justice seems merely
incidental.

Aeschylus places these judges in two camps: Orestes should be punished for
Clytemnestra’s murder, or he should be acquitted. There is no question of Orestes’ responsibility,
as he does not deny that he did indeed commit the deed.\footnote{112}{LM 281.} Instead the debate is whether or not
Orestes was justified in his actions. Half of the judges vote in accordance with Apollo, who
makes it clear that the situation called for Clytemnestra’s death; while the other half vote in favor
of the Erinyes, who protest that Orestes committed the crime of matricide, no matter how one
looks at it. Ultimately, however, the verdict is decided when Athena votes in Orestes’ favor.\footnote{113}{Ibid., 288, 289.}
The shifting of the production’s focus to Athena herself and her decision strongly indicates the
possibility that the Nazis interpreted *Die Versöhnung* as the assertion of divinity, which
ultimately endorses Orestes’ actions as perfectly right and just, and that he therefore should not
be punished.

The Nuremberg Laws provide another interesting context by which the conclusion of the
*Oresteia* could also be interpreted. The Ministry of the Interior promised forthcoming anti-
Jewish legislation in March 1935 following an outbreak of anti-Jewish violence from frustrated
party members, to a degree that prompted the regime to take action, “mainly because the regime
could ill afford to give the impression inside and outside Germany that it was losing control of its
own forces by allowing the spread of unbridled violence, particularly in view of the forthcoming

\footnote{112}{LM 281.}
\footnote{113}{Ibid., 288, 289.}
Olympics.”114 By giving a new, concrete legal basis for anti-Semitism, the Nazis could give legitimacy to anti-Jewish actions committed by the state (rather than by vigilantes). This difference between legalistic action and vigilantes resembles the conclusion of the Oresteia. The Eumenides shows the progress of justice from vengeful blood feuds to true justice through the means of law, overseen by the gods. It extolls the idea of lawmaking itself. The context of the recent Nuremberg Laws might have been lost on the international audience at the performance of Orestie, but likely not on the Nazi party members.

Drawing from these notions of moving from old justice to new, and the comparison of the “Dolchstoßlegende”, the Nuremberg Laws, and the corruption and rebirth of Germany as part of the Nazi narrative, the Nazi officials in the audience at the production may also have seen in Orestes a savior figure with a purpose similar to Hitler’s goal to pull Germany out of the Weimar era chaos and remove those he believed had put Germany in that situation. Additionally, supplanting the old with the new is an idea that appealed to the Nazis, owing to their almost paradoxical desire to break from the recent past (and everything that went wrong with Germany in the recent past) by looking to their distant past, looking to mythic or historical figures like Arminius, Parzival, or Siegfried. In the form of Athena, it is possible to see this pattern in the Oresteia. The Athenian judges do not come to a resolution themselves, which fits the indecisive, inconclusive image of democracy that the Nazis maintained; Athena is the tie-breaker in Orestes’ trial, and she can be viewed as divinity, deus ex machina, endorsing Orestes’ actions, and the trial as a whole is an effort to propel civilization into a new era.

4. Ethos, Genos, and Mythos: Greeks and other Germans

Goebbels’ reception of Müthel’s production is ambiguous. Aside from “Wie nahe uns die Griechen stehen,” his other remarks on Müthel’s production included complementing the performances of Hermine Körner and Hilde Weiβner (who played Clytemnestra and Athena respectively), and his only criticism was that the play was “etwas zu ekstatisch, wie immer bei Müthel.” Overall, he stated that the play was “gut gemacht,” and that the evening was “wirklich klassischer,” but there is nothing from Goebbels’ diary to indicate what precisely prompted him to remark on the similarity between the Greeks and his “Volk.”

German newspapers are the main source by which one can gauge the extent of the reception of Müthel’s production. Some, such as the article in Neue Preußische Zeitung (6 August 1936) mostly remarked on the aesthetic strengths of the production, but others, such as Völkischer Beobachter, convey a much more ideological lens by which the writer viewed Müthel’s adaptation. Karl Heinz Ruppel’s article in Kölnische Zeitung (7 August 1936) was clearly an important review. For the most part, Ruppel discusses the production in terms of its Aeschylean context. In a critique of the abrupt change from the poetic, Dionysian scenario in Agamemnon and Das Opfer am Grabe to the somewhat anti-climactic court scene in the more political Die Versöhnung, Ruppel’s main point is that Aeschylus signaled the “end of the heroic age”, and Müthel effectively staged it:

Die beiden ersten Teile betonen das Archaische mit einer bannenden, erschreckenden und aufwühlenden Wucht. Müthel scheut sich nicht von der dionysischen Raserei. Wenn Kassandra in seherischem Rausch, blutschnuppernd wie ein Tier, über die Treppe des Atridenpalastes läuft, wenn Klytaimnestra mit dem Mordbeil in der emporgereckten


The “state mentality” (Staatsgesinnung) Ruppel mentions, while not the main point of his article, offers another important window into how the Nazis, and possibly German academia as a whole, might have interpreted Die Versöhnung. Earlier in the article Ruppel’s remarks make it clear that he does not view Orestie as a democratic drama at all.

Aischylos lebt für das heutige deutsche Theater wieder aus seiner Staatsgesinnung, deren großartigstes Dokument die Einsetzung des Areopags durch Athene selbst am Schluß der “Orestie” ist. Diese Szene ist nichts andres als eine Kundgebung des Dichters für die Heiligkeit der alten aristokratischen Staatseinrichtungen, die die fortschreitende Demokratie mehr und mehr ihrer Rechte beraubte.118

Ruppel sees the tribunal in Die Versöhnung as more oligarchic in nature than democratic. By stating that the growing democracy increasingly deprived the traditional aristocratic institution of its rights,119 Ruppel likely is cognizant of the reforms of Ephialtes in 462/1 BC, who moved “politically significant judicial powers (possibly those affecting the control over officials and eisangelia cases) from the Areopagus to the council of five hundred and the jury courts,” though the Areopagus retained its right to try cases of homicide, arson, or some religious cases.120 Moreover, the Oresteia was first performed in 458, only a few years after Ephialtes’

118 Ibid.
reforms, and almost certainly the appearance of the institution of the Areopagus in *Eumenides* is in response to that. Scholars differ on Aeschylus’s actual political point in *Eumenides*, but Ruppel interprets the “best of the citizens” who constitute Aeschylus’s Areopagus to be the aristocracy. What is especially interesting in Ruppel’s remarks, though, is his assertion that this “Staatsgesinnung” makes Aeschylus’s play compatible with modern German theater, but he does not clarify what he means by this. His remark does, however, recall Goebbels’ likening Greeks to “us” and again raises the question of how and why Germans felt that their culture was connected in some way to Greek culture.

The review in *Völkischer Beobachter*, however, gives another spin on this that helps explain the National Socialist view of the ancient Greeks. Along with the many instances of classical imagery throughout the Olympics, this review reflects the Nazis’ campaign that year to portray Germany as a successor to ancient Greece. Additionally, in the ideological lens of Nazism, emulating the virtues of such prestigious German figures as Henry the Lion or Frederick the Great, e.g. the warrior culture of the former and the old Prussian military’s success and discipline attributed to the latter, provided the ideology with a basis for an ethos, especially such virtues that flatter “l’inclination hégémonique de l’impérialisme nazi, l’épopée teutonique illustre...”

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121 Colin Macleod disagrees with this interpretation, asserting that the passages in *Eumenides* “show that any notion of the Areopagus as other than a judicial power is quite foreign to the dramatist, for two reasons. First, because the Areopagites are identified with the Athenian people. For it is the people [...] who are said to be judging the case; and these judges we also know to be the Areopagites. [...] So if the Areopagus is ‘the best of the citizens’, that is to emphasize not that they are superior, but that they perfectly represent the city, being the flower of its manhood. A ‘conservative’ too might have spoken of the council int his way, to stress that its membership was drawn from the two highest property-classes in the state; but if Aeschylus echoes such language, it is to give it a larger, and no longer partisan, sense.” (Colin Macleod, “Politics and the *Oresteia*,” *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Aeschylus*, ed. Michael Lloyd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 271)
cet esprit de conquête qui anime une race en quête d’espace vital.”  

However, National Socialism, particularly as an ideology oriented with biological race, also needed a genos to give their idealized Germany and idealized Aryan race some semblance of historical and cultural legitimacy. In this quest for a legitimate racial mythos, the National Socialists inevitably ran into a glaring problem, “le manque patent de prestige,” the reality that before the fall of the Roman Empire and the appearance of the Merovingian and Carolingian Frankish kingdoms the Germans do not have much prestigious history to speak of, no idealized period of antiquity with the prominence of those of ancient Greece and Rome, that they can hark back to. As such, the Nazis therefore appropriated the civilizations of antiquity by re-imagining the Greco-Roman world with a Nordic patrimony. They inverted the traditional scheme by having all the prestige of modern and ancient Europe originate in ancient Teutonic culture: “La référence antique racialisée offre aux nazis l’opportunité de fabuler un discours des origines.”

*Völkischer Beobachter*’s review of the production portrays this tendency to re-imagine historical origins on several occasions. Athena is described as “die herrliche nordische Göttin.” This was not the only occasion in which the National Socialists portrayed Athena as Nordic. Chapoutot cites a parade in Munich on October 15, 1933, celebrating the history of German art, which opened with a float carrying a large statue of Athena. Additionally, the article postulates Aeschylus’s approach to the role of fate in *Orestie* as inherently Nordic: “Das Schicksal ist, wie in der griechischen Tragödie überhaupt, auch hier der große Mittelblock, um

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123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
den alle Begebenheiten, alle dramatischen Beziehungen sich ordnen. Die Haltung aber, die der handelnde Gestaltenkreis diesem Schicksal gegenüber einnimmt, ist gerade bei Aischylos mehr als bei jedem anderen griechische Dramatiker typisch nordisch.”

Co-opting the story and narrative of the Oresteia as a Nordic-Germanic drama, particularly the role of fate and the will of the narrative’s hero to take action in response to face, fits the “method of infallible prediction” Arendt maintains to be characteristic of totalitarian movements. A totalist lens requires everything to conform to the narrative, which is “marked for its extreme contempt for facts as such.” For National Socialism to legitimize itself, reality had to become subjective. While Arendt’s statements are controversial on the topic of totalitarianism as a whole, Ian Kershaw maintains that “her emphasis on the radicalizing, dynamic, and structure-destroying inbuilt characteristics of Nazism have been amply borne out by later research.” It is more accurate therefore to narrow her statements to the Nazis.

Therefore a Nazi-sponsored Oresteia cannot be presented except as a part of this mythos of Germany as a progenitor rather than a mere successor, and the above newspaper reviews demonstrate the particulars of this hermeneutic. Ruppel’s denial that Aeschylus’s Areopagus was democratic in any way, along with his praise of the Dionysian elements of the first two plays without mention of the usual Nietzschean accompaniment of the Apollonian in tragedy, both conform to a self-oriented view of Greek culture in the German romantic tradition, which David B. Dennis describes:

Nazi disinclination toward the rational-democratic side of Athenian history was consistent. Völkischer Beobachter contributors invariably dismissed the Apollonian-

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Socratic tradition, instead aligning themselves and their preferred cultural heroes with the emotional orientation they associated most directly with the more “romantic” works of Homer. In doing so, Völkischer Beobachter editors and authors pressed for a National Socialist culture infused with the “passion” and “spirituality” ultimately associated with Romanticism.130

In short, Greek culture is molded to become German culture, and the Oresteia as a Greek play becomes a German story. It is not democratic but heroic, and it is not based in rationalism but in the spiritual, ecstatic, Dionysian. The young victorious gods propelling civilization into a brighter age, Athena specifically, are Nordic gods. In this way, the Nazis presented the Oresteia within the frame of a radical hermeneutic explaining reality in a way that justifies the need for a National Socialist overhaul of Germany and the rest of Europe.

Narrative is an essential aspect of fascist movements, because it appeals to human nature’s need to make sense out of chaos: “What the masses refuse to recognize is the fortuitousness that pervades reality. They are predisposed to all ideologies because they explain facts as mere examples of laws and eliminate coincidences by inventing an all-embracing omnipotence which is supposed to be at the root of every accident. Totalitarian propaganda thrives on this escape from reality into fiction, from coincidence to consistency.”131 Dennis backs this broader notion as well as Fischer-Lichte’s conclusions with his assertion that the Nazis “did not consider major cultural figures and works as simply justifying or validating their opinions, but rather as the very sources of them.”132 Jackson Spielvogel backs Chapoutot’s conclusions by remarking on art, “Since the Aryans were the bearers of true culture, only they could produce true art. ‘Racial decline’ had caused military defeat in war and resulted in Weimar democracy which fostered modern ‘degenerate’ art. Now, as Hitler pointed out, the Nazis had

130 David B. Dennis, Inhumanities (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 129.
laid the foundations for a ‘new and genuine German art.’” As discussed earlier, the Nazis embraced a narrative that in part involved Germany rising from the turmoil of the Weimar Republic into a new, hopeful, and greater Germany. Such is visible in Gottfried Feder’s 1933 speech,

> Today chaos reigns on earth, confusion, struggle, hate, envy, conflict, oppression, exploitation, brutality, egotism. [...] People have lost their bearings! The so called legal circles do not realize that there never can and never will be a friendship between the eagle and the snake [...] thus they put all their weight and constitutional efforts into shoring up the disorder which has become an ‘order’, namely political chaos, political impotence. [...] The whole economy has become debased, depersonalized, has turned into joint stock companies. The producers have delivered themselves into the hands of their greatest enemy, finance capital. [...] Leagues, lobbies, associations for professionals, Civil Servants, employees, for savers, small property owners, creditors of the Reichsbank, paramilitary leagues, guilds, clubs, federations, trade unions, peasant and farmers organizations, clubs, or whatever other name such strange bodies may adopt—all pointless in the chaos of public life today, however reasonable in their basic idea—try to create order. They do so in vain, because they are not incorporated organically into society, into the higher totality of the people. [...] Our aim is: Germany’s rebirth carried out in a German spirit to create German freedom.

In short, part of the Nazi narrative was that Germany fell into its state in the 1920s because of bad influences. Feder uses detailed examples in a broad context, but the Nazis constantly used propaganda to make clear what they meant on a broader scale. Fulfilling the need of the masses to have a comprehensible explanation for the multiple factors Feder lists as part of the chaos in pre-Nazi Germany, Hitler gave that explanation in the form of a Jewish conspiracy that had resulted in the warfare and liberalism that generated the chaos of the Weimar era, tied in with the

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134 Feder was one of the earliest members of the Nazi party, who had some influence over Hitler’s platform in the 1920s and is repeatedly mentioned in *Mein Kampf*. His lectures drew Hitler into the party.
135 Gottfried Feder, “Let there be Light,” *Oxford Readers: Fascism*, ed. Roger Griffin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 122. This is also found in Roger Griffin’s *Oxford Readers: Fascism*. He gives the original citation as *[Das Programm der NSDAP* (Franz Eher: Munich, 1933: 1st edn. 1928), 25-6, 35, 64.]
promise to put an end to the problem by restoring Germany to a state of Teutonic purity, which Goebbels makes plain in his 1933 speech previously noted, in which he emphasized the need for the world to “discover anew what is German and genuine.”

In a fascist lens, because of the importance of fulfilling the masses’ need for consistency and the dictator’s need for complete infallibility, everything that enters into totalitarian discourse must, one way or another, be part of the totalitarian narrative. Arendt stresses that before seizing power, such movements “conjure up a lying world of consistency which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations,” before the seizure of power enables the movement to “drop iron curtains” and completely block the real world from the consciousness of the masses.136 It is at this point that propaganda becomes indoctrination.

What makes Müthel’s production of Orestie especially interesting is its propagation of a mixed message to a mixed audience. Though there was a wide diversity of people present at this production, logistically the audience can be divided into two groups: Nazis and non-Nazis. The Nazi audience already would have gone through years of exposure to the Nazis’ totalistic explanations of the world through the lens of a Jewish conspiracy and the need for a radical upheaval freeing Germany from said conspiracy.

The reaction of the international, non-Nazi audience members does not have the clarity the reviews in Völkischer Beobachter and Kölnische Zeitung provide for the Nazi reception, though the overall reaction of the foreign Olympic Committees, shown in the American Committee’s report and in Shirer’s observations about the success of internationally-directed

136 Ibid., 353.
propaganda at this time, portraying Germany as a prosperous country that had successfully risen out of economic and political turmoil, appear to fit the image of the rise of true justice from archaic justice present in *Orestie*. The Ministry of Propaganda may have chosen the Orestes myth for this exact reason, not only to continue their promotion of the idea that the Greeks and the Romans were in fact of Nordic descent, but also to perpetuate an image of Germany rising out of the turmoil, inflicted by foreign influences, by re-assuming its Nordic heritage to occupy the place in European culture that ancient Greece and Rome once held. The Nazis may also have chosen Aeschylus’s rendition of the myth in particular because of its political undertones, where the renditions of Sophocles and Euripides hold psychological or satirical undertones; the review in *Völkischer Beobachter* makes it clear that this kind of rendition of the myth is undesirable by a quick remark on Max Reinhardt’s plays (likely referring specifically to his own renditions of the *Oresteia* in 1911 and 1919), which the newspaper describes as “psycho-analytischen Zerfaserung.”

To those indoctrinated in Nazism, the message did not need to be overt, because the context itself makes even a traditional rendering of *Orestie* a display of German purity in which “un-German” elements have been removed.

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5. Conclusion

The study, formation, and practice of cultural or literary appropriation into a political agenda, or with a particular social cause, whether to keep the status quo, reform elements of society, or revolutionize society entirely, is common practice. It is at present and it was in the past. Arthur Trace remarked of this practice, “For [dogmatists], the purpose of literature is to promote certain political values and ideologies which they themselves embrace and which they are convinced everyone should embrace. […] They plunder literary works for their extra-literary values, not as repositories of myths or symbols or psychoanalytical or anthropological value, but for their political ideology.”¹³⁸ Most such politically-motivated analysts seem to think of criticism as a form of conscience and/or of an educator, but this kind of analysis fails to account for the fact that within the parameters of their respective ideologies, repressive movements also appropriate culture and literature in this way. The Nazis’ use of the Oresteia demonstrates this fully. Any ideology can read itself into a work, regardless of the work’s original aims or point.

This kind of politicized criticism also betrays a failure to recognize that it is very difficult to control or influence other people’s interpretive lenses, as human beings are inclined to view the world according to the world and environment they were raised in. Every culture has works that have been handed down across generations, most of which were created in a world very different from modern culture, but everyone in the modern world by inclination sees things as they are in modernity and not as they used to be. In the scope of twenty-first century American democracy, therefore, one might be inclined to believe, on the basis of what we know of Greek culture, that the Nazi interpretation is based on a false view of history, and does not make sense in terms of Aeschylus’s values. But to be perfectly fair, that twenty-first century American view

of the matter might also be a false view. The idea that a production of Aeschylus’s *Eumenides* and Nazi ideology has an inherent incompatibility might seem apparent to an American scholar in the 21st century, but that scholar did not take into account that many German scholars and critics from the Nazi and Kaiserreich period may have interpreted the *Oresteia* differently from the way American scholars typically do now. The Nazis were inclined to view the *Oresteia* through the lens of their own ideology, and there was and is a possibility that neither interpretation portrays the societal and governmental codes as practiced by the ancient Athenians completely accurately. Words such as “democracy” or “dictator” change their meaning over time, and, when taken unawares by an older meaning, we are in danger of interpreting a word, a phrase, or an entire work to mean something it does not.

What the National Socialist interpretation of ancient Greek culture, including Müthel’s production of *Orestie*, make clear is that it is not only culture that influences how we interpret the world, but the lens of ideology particularly. The art of interpretation is susceptible to the beliefs of the interpreters. Fanatical ideologies, such as Nazism, are particularly prone to this. The result is a subjective view of history in which everything in the world becomes reflective of the ideology, and this is how the Nazis could not only claim that Germany was destined to become the new Greece to the future Europe, but also that ancient Greece was a Nordic culture.

Of fascism as a whole, Stanley Payne remarked,

Fundamental to fascism was the effort to create a new “civic religion” of the movement and of its structure as a state. This would build a system of all-encompassing myths that would incorporate both the fascist elite and their followers and would bind together the nation in a new common faith and loyalty.139

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The all-encompassing myths he mentions, broadly referring to interpretations of the nation’s origins and its opposition to the corrupting elements of modernity, reflect a kind of ideological narcissism typical of National Socialism or other fascisms. Roger Griffin also stresses the importance of a mythic core that forms the basis of “generic fascism”:

[The mythic core] crystallizes in the image of the national community, once purged and rejuvenated, rising phoenix-like from the ashes of a morally bankrupt state system and the decadent culture associated with it.140

Consistent with its tendentially charismatic nature is fascism’s frequent repudiation of rationalism and its overt celebration of myth. It is not so much irrational as anti-rational, seeing the most distinctive human faculty not in the reason celebrated in the Enlightenment, humanist, and positivist tradition, but in the capacity to be inspired to heroic action and self-sacrifice through the power of belief, myth, symbols, and idées-forces such as the nation, the leader, identity, or the regeneration of history.141

But ideological narcissism is not exclusive to fascism. The appropriation of history and of culture into an ideology and into propaganda, broadly speaking, is indicative of fanaticism, and any ideology that values dogma or fanaticism will be prone to totalist thinking. Moreover, because, as Arendt stresses, such thinking must be “infallible,” dogmatists and fanatics cannot accept the possibility of contingencies, and “can never admit an error.”142 Everything must be twisted to suit their worldview, and Arendt’s overall point is that totalist ideologies betray a need for absolute control, as only through absolute control can they make this historical appropriation appear as reality.

It would, however, be a mistake to assume that universally the Nazis consciously appropriated the *Oresteia* or any other work of art or literature. As Dennis suggests, in the case of Nazism, appropriation mostly took the more passive form of confirmation bias, than the more

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141 Ibid., 6.
active, conscious, and deliberate appropriation Arendt describes. This does not necessarily contradict Arendt’s point that fascist propaganda betrays a need for absolute control, but understanding National Socialism entails not only understanding order in their ideology and their hermeneutics but also chaos, understanding that they weren’t systematic in how they approached art and culture. At the same time, it is difficult to imagine a believing Nazi in Müthel’s audience watching Orestie and not thinking in the framework of their ideology, interpreting Aeschylus’s trilogy according to their already-present system of belief. Charles Martindale, following the Rezeptionsästhetik of Hans Robert Jauss, adds another theoretical dimension to classical reception in any context:

A “text” [...] is never just “itself,” [...] rather it is something that a reader reads, differently. Most versions of reception theory stress the mediated, situated, contingent (which of course does not mean the same as arbitrary) character of readings, and that includes our own readings quite as much as those of past centuries. There is no Archimedean point from which we can arrive at a final, correct meaning for any text.143

In this sense, the 1936 production of Orestie is a case study of the significance of the reader’s relationship with the text in determining the text’s meaning, and the additions of state sponsorship and the audience adds another important element to the hermeneutics of Müthel’s Orestie. While it is important to understand that all texts are products of the time and place of their creation, especially in the case of the classics it is impossible to know the exact message the author intends to convey. Historicists can speculate on the Oresteia’s original meaning based on what little we know of Aeschylus, the politics of classical Athens, historical circumstance, and of the staging of ancient Greek drama, but such speculation is seldom the purpose of adaptation. The adapter approaches the original with a purpose and with their own interpretation, and the audience’s reception is an interpretation of that interpretation. Müthel’s own intentions aren’t

very clear either, but the purpose of propaganda is to manipulate the audience toward a certain worldview. Thus the meaning and overall effect of *Orestie* lies in the Nazi audience, in a cyclical effect between the purpose of the propaganda and the confirmation biases of ideologues. Confirmation bias is a very common form of misreading, one that can be very difficult to avoid. The tendency to view everything within one’s own belief system is not necessarily a symptom of fascist or totalist thinking, but of human thinking. To avoid falling into the trappings of propaganda, and to avoid producing propaganda, it is therefore instructive to remain conscious of one’s own biases when interpreting a text.
Appendix: Images

Fig. 1
Hitler’s letter accepting the position of patron of the Organizing Committee.
Fig. 2
*Olympia* title cards
Fig. 3
*Olympia* Discus Thrower
Fig. 4
Official Olympics Poster
Fig. 5
Jesse Owens with the olive wreath and oak tree awarded to gold medalists.
Fig. 6
Evening entertainment at the Pergamon Museum
Fig. 7
Dolchstoßlegende Kladderadatsch cartoon
Fig. 8

*Agamemnon.* Clytemnestra (Hermine Körner) after the murder of Agamemnon

Source: Flashar. *Inszenierung der Antike*
Fig. 9

*Das Opfer am Grabe*

Orestes (Hans Georg Laubenthal) and the Chorus

Source: Fischer-Lichte: “Resurrecting Greece in Nazi Germany”
Fig. 10

*Die Versöhnung*

Athena (Hilde Weißner) in front of her statue, standing before the Furies

Source: Flashar. *Inszenierung der Antike.*
Works Cited


