Hour 17: Birth of a Polis
Minutes by Cameron Croy

Polis: “city-state.” Greece was not a nation. It was an aggregate of city states. Aristotle defined a human being as an organism that reaches it full potential in the Polis. Oristieia trilogy is about the birth of a polis. From an Athenian point of view. Very partisan for Athens. Iliad and Odyssey make it seem as if there is not a Polis yet, however it is alive and well in both. Agamemnon and his actions deal with origins of the city-state.

Key word: timē – surface meaning: honor; under surface meaning: honor paid to superhuman force.

Immortality of cult hero is imagined as timē that will never wilt

Kleos – unwilting; kleos that Achilles gets.

Passage A:
Furies is negative way of talking about spirits of unfinished business; type: anger (anger of a hero). The hero comes back as ghost like figure, intimidating/haunting. Orestes will not be killed for killing his mother. The jury does not condone the evil of killing his mother, but considers homicide as what happens within the context of the city (polis). Focused on the law. Tried to focus on the positive rather than the negative. Athena is talking to these Eumenides in terms of hero cult. When you add the three tragedies together, the spirit of vengeance is taking place in a realm of due process or procedure. The rule of law is taking place whether right or wrong. Erekhtheus is “the son Athena never had” – GN. Athena was not just a virgin goddess but a mother goddess as well. Every year the mother is recycled back into a virgin, as we see in the rituals concerning Hera. Democracy sort of froze Athena as a virgin. The concept of the mother/virgin is still alive today in some modern Christian contexts, especially in the Mediterranean world. The Eumenides are to be integrated into the city-state. Society or city state, also civilization, is being born, and Athenians still believe that they are descendants of this mother god.

Passage B:
Daughter of Agamemnon is performing cult honors. Cult heroes are stylized ancestors who are heroes. Most people can only reconstruct ancestors so far.
However, these heroes and gods are remembered, and people connect themselves with these heroes. All came from Erekhtheus. To them there was not much difference between ancestors and heroes, pre-poli s. Anthropologists would not be able to tell if people were worshiping ancestors or heroes. Electra did not know how to perform libation for dead father. When Electra is getting her instructions, she must have the right mindset, a positive mindset.

**Passage C:**
Stylized form of ancestor worship. She calls her dad a Daimon. Daimon becomes demon in later times. Instructed by the chorus, Electra gets it right. The Eumenides come to life by seeing things in a positive way.

**Passage D:**
Atê = disaster
Erinyes = Fury
When “we” in the fifth century BCE sacrifice, “we” shed the blood of a ram or ewe. Back in the heroic age, however, people could do things that “we” consider wrong. Catastrophe in myth, success in ritual. “We” can relate to these things by putting them in terms of what “we” would do today, in the fifth century BCE. It is a very common practice to kill animals to make up or compensate for a mistake or wrongdoing. This is connected to the guilt “we” all feel for our capacity to kill another human.

**Passage E:**
Here the libation is human blood. This is perverted from the view of the classical period. And when we are not in Athens, there is catastrophe. Vendetta, Italian for vengeance.
Another way to refer to the birth of a polis, vendetta versus trial by jury. Back in the heroic age, those heroes were righting wrongs that led to new wrongs that had to be righted, on and on.
Now we have trial by jury which is achievement of the city-state. The heroic age is defined by this vengeance.

Video: film maker enhances (through cinematography – tears, fear, anger, perspiration...) conflicting emotions.

**Passage F:**
Hegel – German thinker, was deeply moved by the Oresteia trilogy. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis are used and evolve into one another. The goal of this cycle of vengeance is ultimate justice, but it cannot be reached. Once the institutions of a society are perfected (formation of the Polis) absolute justice can be hoped for. This process is the procedures of law. Eumenides still have unfinished business:
The polis of Athens is simply the name of a goddess. Athena means the goddess Athena and everything she synthesizes. Elliptic plural.

**Passage G:**
Unfinished business of the Eumenides. Fertility will be expressed in terms of Dikê. The dikê is expressed through a flourishing garden. The conclusion of this drama is the role of the Eumenides as furies and the beginning of law. Eumenides will learn the song of fertility, leading to the glorification of Athens and of civilization.