

The economy of punishment in greek myth: disturbance, response, and the limits of retribution

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Abstract

This article develops a relational account of punishment in Greek myth, asking not what kinds or quantities of suffering count as punishment, but what makes a harmful consequence intelligible as a punitive response. Across sources from Homer and Hesiod to tragedy, Hellenistic poetry, and later mythography, we identify a recurring field of positions, honours, obligations, and boundaries whose disturbance generates demands for response. We call this field a responsive relational economy, within which punishment is one possible mode of response. Punitive consequences need not reproduce equivalent suffering: they may redistribute, reverse, transform, prolong, or limit features of the disturbed relation. Mimetic correspondence is thus one form of punitive fit, not its defining principle, nor does it necessarily ensure closure. Retaliation may generate new claims, while repetition, deprivation, or frustrated desire may prevent completion. Cases such as Tithonus and Midas further show that severe harm is not punitive unless it responds to an antecedent disturbance. Greek punitive narratives therefore reveal problems of response, limitation, and closure rather than a unified doctrine of justice.

Keywords: greek myth, punishment, retribution, responsive relation, *hybris*, *miasma*.

Resumen

La economía del castigo en el mito griego: perturbación, respuesta y los límites de la retribución

Este artículo desarrolla una concepción relacional del castigo en el mito griego, preguntándose no qué tipos o cantidades de sufrimiento cuentan como castigo, sino qué hace inteligible una consecuencia dañina como respuesta punitiva. A través de las fuentes antiguas identificamos un campo recurrente de posiciones, honores, obligaciones y límites cuya perturbación genera exigencias de respuesta. Denominamos este campo *economía relacional responsiva*, dentro de la cual el castigo constituye una posible modalidad de respuesta. Las consecuencias punitivas no necesitan reproducir un sufrimiento equivalente: pueden redistribuir, invertir, transformar, prolongar o delimitar aspectos de la relación perturbada. La correspondencia mimética es así una forma de adecuación punitiva, no su principio definitorio, ni garantiza necesariamente el cierre. La represalia puede generar nuevas pretensiones, mientras la repetición, privación o frustración pueden impedir la culminación. Casos como Titono y Midas muestran además que un daño grave no es punitivo si no responde a una perturbación antecedente. Estas narraciones revelan problemas de respuesta, limitación y cierre, no una doctrina unificada de la justicia.

Palabras clave: mito griego, castigo, retribución, relación responsiva, *hybris*, *miasma*.

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§ 1. Introduction

Punishment occupies a conspicuous place in Greek myth, yet its forms are strikingly heterogeneous. Retribution may involve loss, pollution, exclusion, repeated frustration, bodily transformation, or an apparent benefit that proves destructive. This diversity makes punishment difficult to identify by the kind or quantity of suffering imposed. Divine agency is no sufficient criterion either, since Greek narratives also contain divinely caused harms, transformations, and disastrous boons whose punitive status cannot be assumed. A more basic question therefore precedes any taxonomy of penalties: what makes a harmful consequence intelligible as punishment at all? We approach this question relationally. Rather than treating suffering as an isolated outcome, we ask what prior position, claim, obligation, or boundary has been disturbed, what demand for response that disturbance generates, and how the response reorganises the relation at issue.

The elements of this problem have been examined with considerable precision across several areas of scholarship. Studies of Homeric values and social relations have clarified the connections among *moira*, *geras*, *timē*, honour, reciprocity, and compensation, while work on *hybris*, responsibility, *ātē*, pollution, and purification has shown why these phenomena resist reduction to simple modern categories of guilt or moral culpability (Adkins, 1960; Long, 1970; Cairns, 1993, 1996; Seaford, 1994; Fisher, 1992; Williams, 1993; Parker, 1983; Wilson, 2002). Research on revenge and dispute settlement has further illuminated proportionality, reciprocity, and social resolution, while studies of metamorphosis have shown how altered form can reorganise agency, identity, and vulnerability (Gagarin, 1986; Burnett, 1998; Forbes Irving, 1990; Buxton,

2009). These lines of inquiry need not be collapsed into a single theory or institution in order to be brought into analytical relation. Our intervention is to place them within a shared comparative framework and to ask how allocation, transgression, retaliation, deprivation, transformation, and settlement can function as different moments or configurations within a broader structure of disturbance and response.

To articulate this framework, we use the term «economy» analytically rather than as the translation of a single Greek category or the name of a unified ancient doctrine of punishment. The distinction between «relation» and «economy» is important here. A relation names the field in which positions, claims, recognition, and obligations are constituted with respect to one another; an economy names the patterned movement within that field —the allocation, transfer, loss, redistribution, compensation, and limitation through which those positions and claims are altered. A share can establish a position; a recognised position can ground a claim; disregard or appropriation of that claim can produce a loss; and the resulting disturbance can generate a demand for response. The response, in turn, alters the relation in which the disturbance occurred, whether or not it restores what was previously in place. This economy is therefore broader than punishment proper: it includes the relational preconditions, competing claims, and modes of settlement through which punitive response becomes intelligible. An «economy of punishment» designates not a fixed sequence reproduced by every narrative, but a dynamic relational process in which disturbance and response acquire meaning through the redistribution, persistence, or limitation of positions, claims, and consequences.

The same analytical caution governs our use of «transgression» and «punishment». Transgression functions here as an umbrella term rather than as the translation of a single Greek technical concept: *hybris*, for example, is one historically variable articulation of transgressive self-assertion and should not be made synonymous with every breach of a social, human, or divine limit. Nor can punishment be identified by suffering alone. Metamorphosis, deprivation, reversal, or destructive fulfilment may produce severe harm without constituting punishment. We therefore propose a minimal criterion: punishment presupposes a responsive relation in which a harmful condition is organised as an answer to an antecedent disturbance and becomes intelligible through that relation. By «organised as an answer», we do not require an

explicitly avowed punitive intention by an individual agent. The responsive connection may instead be marked by an agent's stated purpose, ritual or institutional procedure, or the narrative's own causal and relational framing. What matters is that the source independently links the harmful condition to the antecedent disturbance—through motive, reciprocal language, causal attribution, adjudicative structure, or marked reversal—rather than merely placing suffering after a wrong. This criterion neither presupposes a modern, all-or-nothing conception of individual culpability nor requires the recipient of the response always to coincide with the agent of the prior disturbance. It does, however, distinguish punitive response from misfortune, accidental harm, and destructive consequences that answer no prior wrong.

Because this relational account concerns recurrent structures rather than a single institution or doctrine, the corpus crosses periods and genres, moving from Homer and Hesiod through Pindar and tragedy to Hellenistic poetry and later mythographic traditions; later reception is used only to clarify boundary cases. The corpus is contrastive rather than exhaustive or statistically representative: cases isolate different configurations of allocation, disturbance, response, correspondence, non-completion, and punitive form, while boundary cases test where the criterion ceases to apply. The aim is not to infer frequency or typicality from their recurrence, but to test whether the same analytical distinctions remain informative across materially different configurations. Such comparison requires caution. Different versions of a myth cannot be fused into a single canonical sequence, later motives or causal explanations cannot be projected backwards, and recurrent structures do not establish an invariant «Greek mentality». We therefore read each configuration within its own textual and historical setting and retain differences rather than harmonising them. We do not reconstruct a timeless Greek system of punishment; we ask whether historically and generically distinct narratives can organise disturbance and response through comparable relations of allocation, loss, correspondence, reversal, persistence, and limitation.

Within these methodological limits, we argue that the punitive narratives examined here are best understood through a responsive relational economy. A disturbance of an allotted position, recognised claim, obligation, or boundary can generate a demand for response, and punishment gives form to that demand by redistributing, reversing, reproducing, transforming, prolonging, or bounding some feature of the relation at

issue. These operations need not coincide in every narrative, nor do they constitute a single punitive formula. Mimetic correspondence is one especially visible possibility: a response may reuse or invert the medium, mechanism, role, or claim implicated in the wrong. Yet mimesis neither defines punishment as such nor guarantees proportionality, legitimacy, or closure. A formally fitting retaliation may generate further loss and thereby renew the very structure of claim and counter-claim it seeks to answer; conversely, punishment may operate by withholding completion rather than restoring equilibrium. Punitive response is therefore not the mechanical matching of suffering to offence, but a variable reorganisation of relations whose success depends on what the response selects from the disturbance, how it corresponds to it, and whether the resulting claim can be limited or brought to an end.

The argument develops in five stages. Section 1 reconstructs the relational background of punishment through shares, honour, reciprocity, and compensation, showing how positions generate claims and constraints upon their exercise. Section 2 turns to the disturbance of such relations through *hybris*, *ātē*, and *miasma*, distinguishing transgression, responsibility, and the persistence of disruptive consequences. Section 3 examines punitive response through the problems of measure, correspondence, and closure, asking how redress can answer a wrong without necessarily bringing the resulting claim to an end. Section 4 isolates different structures of non-completion and asks how, when they are organised within a responsive relation, repetition, deprivation, and duration can themselves become punitive. Section 5 tests the limits of the framework by distinguishing punitive metamorphosis, presentation, and reception from harmful or self-defeating fulfilments that answer no prior wrong. Taken together, these analyses treat punishment not as an isolated event appended to transgression, but as one phase within a changing relational structure whose central problems are what has been disturbed, how that disturbance is answered, and under what conditions the response can—or cannot—bring the resulting claim to an end.

§ 2. An economy of shares: *moira*, honour, reciprocity, and compensation

Before punishment can be understood as a response to transgression, it is necessary to ask what has been disturbed in the first place. In archaic Greek poetry, this question

repeatedly directs attention to shares, positions, honours, and claims. *Moirā*, although commonly translated as «fate», also carries the more concrete sense of a share or allotment. Adkins draws attention to this usage and relates expressions such as *kata moiran* to conduct appropriate to a given situation or position (Adkins, 1960: 20-21). Yet this observation should not be expanded into a homogeneous reconstruction of «Homeric society». As Long cautions, Homeric evaluative language must first be interpreted through the internal logic and particular contexts of the poems rather than treated as transparent evidence for a single historical social system (Long, 1970: 122). Read within these limits, the language of allotment reveals a recurrent pattern: a share situates its recipient within a relation, and that position can generate claims concerning what is due, fitting, or excessive. The argument, therefore, is not that *moira* constitutes a complete Greek theory of justice, but that distributive language provides one important way in which archaic poetry represents normative relations. Punishment, on this reading, presupposes a prior economy of positions, shares, and claims.

The Hesiodic account of the sacrifice at Mecone offers an especially revealing instance of this distributive logic. Prometheus divides the sacrificial animal into two portions and invites Zeus to choose between them (*Theog.* 535-616). In Vernant's reading, this division does more than allocate food. Prometheus' act defines the status of mortals in contrast to that of the gods by assigning separate shares to the two groups; the division of the victim thus marks the distinction between two modes of existence (Vernant, 1989: 27). Sacrifice subsequently perpetuates this distinction: what mortals and immortals receive corresponds to the different positions they occupy within the relation established at Mecone. The episode therefore makes visible a principle that will remain important throughout the present argument: allocation does not merely distribute things; it distributes positions. By establishing different shares, it also establishes the boundary that separates those to whom the shares belong.

The boundary established by allocation becomes analytically significant when distribution itself is distorted. In Vernant's reading, Prometheus does not merely divide the sacrificial victim; he assumes the role of an allocator while arranging the shares in a partial and deceptive manner. Hesiod's contrast is instructive. The good king settles conflict by giving the injured party compensation and thereby re-establishing an appropriate equilibrium, whereas Prometheus, *heterozēlōs diedassao*

moiras, divides the shares partially and disrupts rather than restores that equilibrium (Vernant, 1989: 28-35). Distribution can therefore become a source of disorder precisely because it has already established differentiated positions and claims. A similar concern appears in the *Works and days* (Op. 27-41), where improper acquisition and the attempt to gain at another's expense are opposed to an order in which claims and possessions remain bounded. The point is not that Hesiod formulates a systematic theory of distributive justice, but that a disturbance of allocation can itself generate the imbalance to which a subsequent response is directed.

A comparable distributive conflict, though in a different poetic and social setting, structures the opening quarrel of the *Iliad*. Briseis is not simply a possession taken from Achilles: she is a *geras* previously allotted to him by the Achaeans, and the seizure of that prize therefore affects the *timē* that the allocation publicly recognises (Il. 1.161-171, 275-284). Wilson's analysis makes the connection particularly clear. Homeric *timē* operates in both material and non-material forms, so that the loss of a prestige object can simultaneously alter the status of the person from whom it is taken; in the quarrel, Agamemnon's seizure of Briseis becomes explicitly a loss of Achilles' *timē* (Wilson, 2002: 64, 86). The episode also exposes an important limit on hierarchical claims. Against Adkins's reading that Agamemnon's superior status gives him a claim to take Achilles' prize, Long emphasises Nestor's reminder that the Achaeans had already allotted the *geras* to Achilles: being *agathos* does not authorise Agamemnon to override that prior allocation (Long, 1970: 127). The quarrel thus sharpens the distributive principle developed above: an allotted share is simultaneously a possession, a public recognition of status, and the basis of a claim that even superior power does not automatically cancel.

The claim embodied in *timē*, however, is not unilateral. Because honour is relational, the recognition of one's own standing takes place among the claims of others and can therefore impose limits on self-assertion. Cairns's analysis of *aidōs* is especially important in this respect. In Homeric epic, personal honour can promote co-operation as well as competition: concern for one's own standing may require the fulfilment of obligations toward comrades, allies, guests, or other *philoī*, while *aidōs* can register an agent's recognition of claims grounded in such relations (Cairns, 1993: 85-103). The point is not that Homeric honour ceases to be hierarchical or competitive, but that

hierarchy does not eliminate relational constraint. A hero may possess a legitimate claim to *timē* and nevertheless be required to acknowledge the position of another. This is why successful or powerful action can itself become inappropriate when it exceeds the limits implicit in a relation. An economy of honour therefore distributes not only claims but also constraints upon the exercise of those claims.

These relational limits also explain why reciprocity should not be treated as external to the pursuit of honour. In Seaford's broader account, gift-exchange and vengeance represent different forms of reciprocity: accepting a gift creates an expectation of eventual return, while injury can generate an expectation of eventual retaliation, even though neither response is automatically guaranteed (Seaford, 1994: 223). Homeric epic gives such reciprocal expectations a specifically relational form. Glaucus' reproach of Hector after the death of Sarpedon (*Il.* 17.142-150), for example, concerns not merely Hector's failure in battle but his failure toward an ally, guest-friend, and companion whose previous support has placed him under an obligation of response. Long accordingly describes Hector's failure as a failure to repay what is owed to Sarpedon and to honour his status, while Cairns emphasises the ties of *charis*, guest-friendship, and comradeship that sustain the obligation (Long, 1970: 124; Cairns, 1993: 86-87). Reciprocity, then, does not introduce a second moral system alongside honour. It describes one way in which a position within a relation becomes an obligation to respond.

Once a relational claim is violated, the economy of shares and recognition becomes an economy of compensation. Wilson identifies loss as the starting point of the Homeric compensation theme: one party takes something of value from another, and the resulting loss alters the relative *timē* of the parties, producing what she terms a «status disequilibrium» (Wilson, 2002: 16). The response to that loss, however, does not always have the same relational effect. *Apoina* may recover what has been lost while preserving the victor's superior position, whereas *poinē* takes repayment or satisfaction from the party responsible for the loss and can thereby redress the disequilibrium it created (Wilson, 2002: 16, 38-39). This distinction is particularly illuminating in the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles. Agamemnon's abundant offer in Book 9 does not automatically restore the relation damaged by his seizure of Briseis, because the form and conditions of the offer can preserve precisely the hierarchy that Achilles contests.

Wilson accordingly reads the offer as an attempt to compensate without relinquishing Agamemnon's dominant position (Wilson, 2002: 82). Recompense, then, is not simply a transfer of value. Its significance depends on what kind of loss it answers and on how the response reconfigures the relation between the parties.

Yet the claim generated by injury contains a danger of its own. A legitimate demand for recompense can cease to redress a disturbed relation when the response itself exceeds its proper measure. Wilson's distinction is again instructive: whereas the conventional rhetoric of *apoina* emphasises abundance, *poinē* is normally conceived as repayment corresponding to a loss; the *Iliad* nevertheless repeatedly explores extraordinary extensions of *poinē* and *tisis* beyond such limits. Achilles provides the most consequential case. After the death of Patroclus, his pursuit of *poinē* becomes effectively unlimited, and Wilson argues that this extension drives social and cultural order toward dissolution rather than resolution (Wilson, 2002: 134-146). Cairns reaches a complementary conclusion from the perspective of *aidōs*: after Patroclus' death, Achilles' conduct becomes increasingly excessive, culminating in his treatment of Hector's body, and the loss of *aidōs* is associated with his departure from the normal limits of human conduct (Cairns, 1993: 132). Long likewise stresses that Homeric evaluative language can condemn excess as well as deficiency and that the logic of *timē* requires attention to the claims of others, however hierarchical those claims may remain (Long, 1970: 138-139). The economy of recompense therefore requires not only a response to injury but a limit upon that response: redress can itself become a new disturbance when it reproduces the logic of excess it was meant to answer. This possibility brings the distributive logic of the preceding discussion directly into the problem of transgression. If positions and claims are constituted through relations of allotment, recognition, and reciprocity, transgression can be approached as the appropriation, disregard, or destabilisation of the limits implicit in those relations. The concepts of *hybris*, *ātē*, and *miasma* articulate different dimensions of this problem and its consequences.

§ 3. Transgression, responsibility, and pollution: *hybris*, *ātē*, and *miasma*

The preceding section showed how allotted shares and recognised positions generate limits within unequal relations. Crossing such a limit becomes analytically

legible as transgression¹ without requiring a single Greek term to name every case. In the Iliadic quarrel, Agamemnon's loss of Chryseis gives him a claim to compensation, but not licence to satisfy it by taking an already allotted *geras* and using the seizure to assert superiority over Achilles (*Il.* 1.118-120, 184-187, 275-284). The boundary at issue is not equality but a constraint internal to differentiated claims. A different social and poetic setting presents a comparable structure in Hesiod's *Works and days*: Hesiod and Perses have already divided their *klēros*, yet Perses takes more and seeks to secure his advantage through the judgment of the gift-eating kings (*Op.* 27-41). Hesiod does not yet call this conduct *hybris*. These cases establish that allocation and recognition can generate limits whose appropriation or disregard becomes intelligible as transgression. *Hybris* names one historically specific articulation of that problem rather than transgression as such.

Hybris, however, should not be treated either as a synonym for transgression or as a general Greek term for excessive pride. Fisher places its centre in acts that deliberately inflict dishonour upon others, and his reading of Agamemnon's treatment of Achilles shows why this emphasis matters: the seizure of the *geras* becomes *hybris* not merely because something is taken, but because the act is used to demonstrate superiority and publicly diminish another's *timē* (Fisher, 1992: 152-154; *Il.* 1.184-214). Cairns retains the connection with honour while arguing that Fisher gives too little weight to the agent's disposition: *hybris* can also involve an inflated assertion of one's own standing that disregards the legitimate claims of others, even where deliberate insult to a particular victim is not the primary aim (Cairns, 1996: 1-8)². The two emphases are best treated as complementary here: *hybris* concerns neither self-assertion alone nor injury alone, but a relational misvaluation in which the assertion of one claim diminishes, overrides, or fails to acknowledge another. Hesiod places the concept in a different setting, opposing *hybris* to *dikē* after the fable of the hawk and

¹ Throughout this section, «transgression» is used as an analytical umbrella rather than as the translation of a single Greek technical term. This distinction is especially important for *hybris*: the passages discussed here do not support treating every breach of an allotment, status, or human/divine limit as lexically or conceptually identical with *hybris*.

² Fisher gives primary weight to deliberate acts of dishonour directed against others, whereas Cairns accepts the honour/dishonour nexus but argues that a victim-specific model of intentional insult is too narrow: *hybris* can also be dispositional, involving an excessive claim to one's own honour that encroaches upon the legitimate claims of others. See Fisher (1992: 148; 152-154; 493-496); Cairns (1996: 1-8; 13-16).

nightingale and within a discussion of crooked judgments and the treatment of others (*Op.* 202-224). The contexts differ, but in both poems *hybris* becomes intelligible through relations in which power or standing is asserted without adequate regard for claims that constrain its exercise.

The relational character of *hybris* also cautions against identifying it with every form of dishonour, excess, or offence against divine order. The opening of the *Iliad* marks a useful distinction. Agamemnon explicitly dishonours Chryses, and Apollo responds to the treatment of his priest with the plague, yet the poem does not thereby make dishonour and *hybris* interchangeable; *hybris* language becomes especially pointed later, when Agamemnon's assertion of superiority is directed against Achilles' recognised *geras* and *timē* (*Il.* 1.11-12, 93-100, 184-214). Hesiod offers an even clearer warning against defining *hybris* simply as an offence against the gods. The Silver Race cannot restrain its *hybris* toward one another and, in a separate clause, refuses to honour the immortals and sacrifice at their altars; Zeus destroys them because they fail to accord the gods their due *timai* (*Op.* 134-142). The juxtaposition connects human and divine relations within a wider field of recognised claims without collapsing the two offences into a single category. Fisher is therefore right to resist treating *hybris* as inherently religious, even though divine honour can become the object of *hybris* in particular later texts (Fisher, 1992: 148, 493-496; Cairns, 1996: 13-16)³. Such cases should be established from their own textual contexts rather than projected backwards into a general Greek doctrine of mortal limits. *Hybris* remains one historically variable way of articulating transgressive self-assertion, not a universal label for every violation of human, social, or divine boundaries.

The problem of transgression therefore leads to a second question: how is an action attributed to an agent when the conditions under which it is performed are represented as disturbed? The same Agamemnon whose seizure of Achilles' *geras* is marked as *hybris* in Book 1 later redescribes that act through the language of *ātē*. In the reconciliation scene of *Iliad* 19, he responds to the Achaeans' reproaches by declaring

³ Fisher's rejection of an essentially religious definition does not entail that a god can never be the object of *hybris*. Cairns stresses that divine *timē* can be infringed in particular classical texts. The methodological point is narrower: such cases require lexical and contextual demonstration and should not be projected backwards into a universal Greek doctrine of «mortal limits». For that reason, mortal/divine boundary cases are not treated here as *hybris* proof-texts merely because a boundary is crossed. See Fisher (1992: 148; 493-496); Cairns (1996: 13-16).

that he is not *aitios*⁴: Zeus, *moira*, and the mist-walking Erinys, he claims, cast *ātē* into his mind on the day when he took Achilles' prize (*Il.* 19.85-94). The explanation does not deny performance or intention; Agamemnon explicitly says that he himself took the prize. It instead contests how blame should attach to an intentional action formed in a state of *ātē* that he attributes to Zeus, *moira*, and Erinys. Yet this displacement of blame does not make the consequences disappear. After recalling the power of *Ātē* even over Zeus, Agamemnon declares that he wishes to appease Achilles and offer abundant *apoina* (*Il.* 19.134-140). Disturbed agency thus qualifies the attribution of blame without denying either the act or the relational loss that still demands repair. In this Homeric context, *ātē* exposes a gap between performing an action, bearing blame for it, and remaining answerable to its consequences.

Responsibility in this scene is therefore better understood as a configuration of distinct relations than as a single all-or-nothing status. Williams distinguishes four elements that may enter into judgments of responsibility —cause, intention, the agent's state, and the response subsequently required— and *Iliad* 19 keeps them conspicuously apart (Williams, 1993: 50-55)⁵. Agamemnon disputes how blame attaches to him without denying the deed, while still accepting the need to repair its consequences. Konstan sharpens the point by reading the appeal to *ātē* as an exculpatory strategy within reconciliation: Agamemnon displaces personal blame while acknowledging the wrong done to Achilles and offering compensation, rather than seeking forgiveness through confession and remorse in a modern sense (Konstan, 2013: 427-432)⁶. The subsequent scene makes this structure materially and publicly

⁴ Lattimore (1951: 394) renders *οὐκ ἐγὼ αἰτιός εἰμι* at *Il.* (19.86-87) as «yet I am not responsible», but «responsible» should not be treated as a one-to-one equivalent of a modern, all-or-nothing concept of moral responsibility. In the same speech Agamemnon explicitly says that he himself took Achilles' prize. Williams is useful precisely because he separates causal involvement, intention, the agent's state, and the response required; see Williams (1993: 50-55). See also Konstan (2013: 427-432).

⁵ Williams sharpens the point by contrasting Agamemnon with Telemachus: Telemachus accepts being *aitios* for an unintended failure, whereas Agamemnon denies *aitios*-status for an intentional act carried out in an abnormal state. The contrast shows why Homeric responsibility cannot be reduced to intention alone. See Williams (1993: 50-55).

⁶ Konstan argues, against Dodds's reluctance to treat Agamemnon's account as exculpatory, that Agamemnon is indeed attempting to exculpate himself while still acknowledging the injury and offering compensation. His comparison with later rhetorical categories is illuminating as a structural analogy, but it need not imply that Homeric reconciliation simply follows the later rhetorical handbooks. See Konstan (2013: 427-438).

visible. The promised *apoina* are brought before the assembly, Briseis is restored, Agamemnon swears that he has not slept with her, and Odysseus calls for a feast of appeasement before urging the king to deal more justly with others in future (*Il.* 19.172-196; 249-265). Repair therefore exceeds payment: it reorders a damaged relation through restitution, oath, public recognition, and renewed expectations of conduct. The scene allows blame to be contested without allowing the claim generated by loss to disappear. Responsibility lies not only in how an act is attributed to its agent, but also in the continuing demand to answer for what the act has done.

If *ātē* complicates the relation between action and blame, *miasma* shifts attention from attribution to the condition produced by an act. Pollution should not be treated as a synonym for guilt or as a single, uniform Greek doctrine. Parker stresses that the language of defilement embraces situations whose ritual and social consequences vary considerably, even when they involve exclusion from sacred space, danger to others, or the need for purification (Parker, 1983: 3-11). Homicide makes the distinction especially clear: a killer may incur pollution and require purification or separation even where the killing is accidental or involuntary, while intention, justification, and responsibility can still affect the character and intensity of that pollution (Parker, 1983: 104-120)⁷. *Miasma* is therefore better approached here as a religious and social condition generated by a disruptive act, not as either a physical stain or a synonym for moral culpability. Parker's evidence is particularly important because pollution may attach to the deed, to the person who performs it, or in some cases to the person regarded as ultimately responsible; these relations do not map neatly onto legal or moral guilt. Where *ātē* separated action, blame, and response, *miasma* raises a different question: how can the consequence of an act persist as a condition requiring ritual and social management?

The *Oresteia* shows why such persistence should not be imagined as the mechanical transmission of a single inherited stain. In the *Libation-Bearers*, the chorus initially imagines retaliation as the means by which an older pollution will be answered: the

⁷ The work cited as Parker (1983) is the original Clarendon Press edition; the 1996 paperback is a reprint with a new preface and only minor corrections to the main text. Parker repeatedly cautions against treating pollution as one uniform system. Homicide pollution does not map neatly onto intention or moral/legal culpability: accidental or involuntary killing may still require purification or separation, while justification and responsibility can affect the character of the pollution. See Parker (1983: 3-11; 104-120); Parker (1996: Preface).

Erinyes brings a child back into the house to exact payment for the defilement produced by earlier bloodshed, and shortly before the matricide Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are hailed as the «two polluters» from whom the house is about to be released (*Choe.* 646-652; 935-952). Yet Orestes' revenge does not remove pollution once and for all. After killing his mother, he describes the victory itself as polluted and, almost in the same breath, insists that he killed her «not without justice» (*Choe.* 1010-1028). The conjunction is crucial: an act performed as retribution for an earlier wrong can remain intelligible as a claim of *dikē* while generating fresh pollution. The appearance of the maternal Erinyes at the end of the play makes the renewed claim visible, and in the *Eumenides* they pursue Orestes as avengers of bloodshed, distinguishing the bearer of pure hands from one who conceals murderous hands (*Choe.* 1048-1061; *Eum.* 169-170; 312-320). Meinel accordingly argues that pollution in the trilogy is repeatedly regenerated through successive acts of homicide rather than inherited as one continuous substance (Meinel, 2015: 122-125). Nor should this sequence collapse pollution into family curse, inherited guilt, or the Erinyes themselves, which remain distinct though interacting registers of transgenerational disorder (Sewell-Rutter, 2007: 73-78; 78-109)⁸. What persists across generations is therefore less a single transmitted stain than a damaged relational structure: injury creates a claim for retaliation, retaliation produces a fresh injury and a newly polluted agent, and the attempt to answer the past becomes the source of another demand for response.

The persistence of this renewed claim also shows why purification or exclusion cannot by themselves bring the sequence to an end. In practices surrounding homicide, exile could form part of a wider purificatory process rather than constitute a distinct form of punishment in its own right⁹. The *Oresteia*, however, makes even completed

⁸ Meinel, Sewell-Rutter, and Parker converge on a crucial distinction: *miasma*, family curse, inherited guilt, and Erinyes may interact in tragedy without naming a single inherited substance or causal mechanism. Sewell-Rutter treats curses and Erinyes separately from inherited guilt; Parker likewise distinguishes family curses and structures of rights from pollution; Meinel's reading of the *Oresteia* emphasises fresh pollution generated by successive homicides. See Meinel (2015: 122-125); Sewell-Rutter (2007: 73-109); Parker (1983: ch. 6).

⁹ Exile is therefore not treated here as a fourth, freestanding category of punishment. In homicide contexts it can form part of separation and purification, sometimes followed by further rites before readmission. In the *Eumenides*, moreover, Orestes' prior purification does not end the Erinyes' claim; it makes possible his reception as a pure suppliant and the subsequent adjudication. See Parker (1983: ch. 4 and app. 7); Meinel (2015: 135-139).

purification insufficient as a final settlement. Orestes tells Athena that the blood on his hands has faded and that the *miasma* of matricide has been washed away, allowing him to address her with pure lips, and Athena subsequently receives him as a *katharos* suppliant who poses no threat to her household (*Eum.* 280-289; 445-474). Yet the Erinyes' claim survives this change in ritual status. As Meinel argues, purification functions here as a precondition for adjudication rather than as the ultimate means of release (Meinel, 2015: 135-139). Athena therefore transfers the dispute to judgment, convening jurors and establishing a *thesmos* intended to endure beyond the particular case (*Eum.* 470-490; 681-710). This transition should not be read as a simple displacement of ritual by law¹⁰. Its narrower significance here is that purification can alter Orestes' ritual status without extinguishing the competing claim against him. The problem of pollution thus reaches its limit at the threshold of adjudication: ritual cleansing can make judgment possible, but it cannot by itself decide which claims may continue to authorise a response.

§ 4. Measure, correspondence, and closure in the economy of punishment

With this framework in place, the question can shift from the existence of a demand for response to the form and limit of that response. The wider economy includes compensation, retaliation, revenge, and adjudication without treating them as a single institution; what matters here is how a response alters recognition, status, obligation, or burden after a prior disturbance. Three problems therefore become central: what measure makes redress adequate, how the response corresponds to the wrong, and under what conditions the resulting claim can be brought to an end.

Reciprocity supplies one route from injury to response, but it is not punishment as such. Benefits and injuries may each generate expectations of return without making response automatic (Seaford, 1994: 223). Homeric *poinē* gives the injurious side a more determinate form: loss creates a claim for redress against the responsible party or that

¹⁰ The move from purification to adjudication should not be read as a linear historical replacement of ritual by law. The trilogy continues to require both registers: purification makes Orestes a receivable suppliant, while adjudication addresses a competing claim that ritual cleansing cannot settle. For the broader danger of historicising the ending as the invention of legal settlement, see Gagarin (1986: 19-50; esp. 41-43; 50); cf. Sommerstein (2008: xxi-xxiv).

party's *philoí* (Wilson, 2002: 38-39). What matters here is this minimal structure: retribution begins from relational loss and a claim that something is owed, not from a universal rule that every wrong must be answered by suffering.

The response need not reproduce the loss it answers. As the preceding analysis showed, property may be restored while hierarchy remains altered, or standing and obligation may be reconfigured without literal replacement. Punitive response is therefore better understood as relational redistribution than as simple restitution. Once identical replacement is abandoned, the problem shifts to adequacy: what makes a response fitting to the wrong it addresses?

That question first appears as one of measure, but measure should not be confused with literal equivalence. Burnett frames revenge as the problem of finding a response that is proportionate and similar when identical suffering cannot simply be returned; retaliation therefore often proceeds by substitution rather than replication (Burnett, 1998: 3). This model is useful so long as similarity is not treated as identity. Gagarin's analysis of early Greek dispute settlement likewise shows that adequate settlement may involve restitution, acknowledgment, compromise, or acceptance rather than a single calculus of equal exchange (Gagarin, 1986: 23; 42-43). The Agamemnon-Achilles settlement discussed above supplies one instance: the quantity of the gifts does not by itself determine whether Achilles' standing has been recognised or the damaged relation repaired (Gagarin, 1986: 39-43). Proportionality is therefore better understood here as a constraint on redress than as an arithmetic identity between injury and punishment: a response must remain intelligibly related to the disturbance it addresses, but neither equal suffering nor equal material value can determine adequacy on its own. The question thus shifts from how much is returned to how the redress corresponds to the wrong.

Once adequacy is understood in these terms, correspondence may be qualitative: redress may answer the relation, norm, object, or position implicated in the wrong rather than its magnitude. Pindar's Ixion provides a clear relational case. On his winged wheel, Ixion is made to proclaim the reciprocal norm he violated—that a benefactor should be repaid with gracious returns—after responding to Zeus' exceptional favour by attempting to violate the marital honour of his benefactor and host (*Pyth.* 2.21-44). Pindar thus turns Ixion into the bearer of the norm he breached

and presents him as having brought about his own four-spoked bond; the redress reverses his position within the corrupted relation rather than reproducing his offence in kind. Fisher accordingly emphasises the conjunction of reciprocity, *xenia*, and marital honour in the episode (Fisher, 1992: 236-240)¹¹. A different qualitative symmetry structures Achilles' account of Niobe. Her boast rests on the numerical superiority of her offspring over Leto's two children; Apollo and Artemis destroy those children, turning the very basis of the claim into the site of loss (*Il.* 24.602-612). Richardson notes that the verbal patterning stresses the recompense for Niobe's boast, while the story's immediate Homeric function remains consolatory rather than doctrinal (Richardson, 1993: 339-342)¹². In both cases, the form of redress answers the form of the claim without reproducing the original act. Qualitative symmetry thus names a non-quantitative correspondence between claim and reversal; only in some cases does that correspondence become mimetic in the stronger sense developed below.

In some narratives, qualitative correspondence becomes mimetic in a stronger sense: redress reuses, reverses, or reclaims the medium or relational mechanism through which the wrong was produced. The Hesiodic Salmoneus episode offers a particularly clear case at the level of medium. Salmoneus simulates Zeus' thunder and lightning through chariots, bronze vessels, and fire; Zeus answers with actual thunder and the blazing thunderbolt, reclaiming the very medium through which the mortal's competitive claim had been staged (*Cat.* fr. 27 Most = fr. 30 MW)¹³. Fisher accordingly reads the offence as deliberate competition with and dishonour of Zeus, whose

¹¹ Fisher develops a stronger mimetic reading of Ixion's punishment by connecting the four-spoked wheel with the *iunx*, the erotic binding device, so that the figure who sought to «bind» Hera is himself bound. This is an interpretive extension rather than an explicit statement of Pindar's text and is therefore not made part of the main argument. See Fisher (1992: 236-240).

¹² Richardson treats *Il.* (24.614-617) not as a further punishment but as an image of grief continuing in petrified form; he also stresses that the immediate function of the Niobe exemplum is to justify eating even under extreme sorrow. The argument above therefore confines the punitive correspondence to Niobe's boast and the destruction of her children (*Il.* 24.602-612), rather than incorporating petrification into a single symbolic punishment sequence. See Richardson (1993: 339-342).

¹³ The Salmoneus material belongs to the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*, not securely to Hesiod himself. Most's fr. 27 corresponds to fr. 30 in Merkelbach and West (1967). The surviving papyrus is fragmentary, so the apparatus of artificial thunder and lightning should not be treated as though preserved in a continuous, complete narrative; the broader correspondence between Salmoneus' simulation and Zeus' actual thunderbolt is nevertheless supported by the fragment and by Fisher's discussion. See Most (2007: preface and fr. 27); Fisher (1992: 185-186).

retaliation exposes the inadequacy of Salmoneus' imitation by confronting it with the power it sought to appropriate (Fisher, 1992: 185-186). Euripides' *Hecuba* develops a more complex correspondence at the level of relation and role. Polymestor, Priam's hereditary *xenos*, murders the child entrusted to him for his gold; Hecuba then draws him into her power by exploiting the same mechanisms of trust, secrecy, and anticipated wealth that had enabled his betrayal (*Hec.* 6-30; 710-720; 981-1022). His sons are killed and he is blinded, turning the killer of another parent's child into a bereaved parent himself (*Hec.* 1035-1053). Burnett therefore describes the retaliation as a close reflection of the original crime, in which betrayed trust is answered through recreated trust and child-loss through a reversal of Polymestor's parental position (Burnett, 1998: 164-171). Yet the reenactment is structural rather than literal: Hecuba does not reproduce the same *xenia* relation but turns its enabling mechanisms against the betrayer. Nor does mimetic fit determine adequate measure. Zeus' retaliation extends beyond Salmoneus himself, while Hecuba answers the murder of one son by killing two and adding blindness. Mimetic correspondence thus identifies a form of narrative fit—the reuse or inversion of a wrong's medium, mechanism, or role—without by itself establishing proportionality or legitimacy¹⁴.

Formal fit, however, does not ensure closure. The preceding discussion of Achilles has already shown that a claim to *poine* can become effectively unlimited, turning repayment toward dissolution rather than settlement (Wilson, 2002: 134-146). Euripides' *Medea* sharpens the problem. Jason's betrayal is repeatedly framed through broken oaths and damaged *philia*, yet Medea eventually makes the destruction of their children the means of inflicting the most decisive loss upon him (*Med.* 764-810; 1021-1080; 1293-1414). The *exodos* reverses their positions—Medea moves from abandonment and vulnerability to control, while Jason is reduced to helpless grief—but that reversal is achieved by producing losses that cannot be contained within the original conflict between the two adults (Mastronarde, 2002: 372-385)¹⁵. The *Oresteia*

¹⁴ The moral status of Hecuba's revenge remains contested. Fisher emphasises Polymestor's charge of *hybris* and the added savagery of killing two sons and inflicting blindness, while also recording the division between readings that regard the revenge as excessive and those that defend it as proportionate or justified. This disagreement is precisely why formal correspondence is not treated here as a sufficient test of proportionality or legitimacy. See Fisher (1992: 430-431); Burnett (1998: 164-171).

¹⁵ The textual unity of *Med.* 1056-1080 has long been disputed. Mastronarde notes proposals ranging from authorial alternatives to interpolation, treats the passage as substantially genuine in his

exposes the limit once more from a different direction: Orestes' retaliatory matricide can be claimed as *dikē* while nevertheless generating fresh pollution and a renewed claim embodied by the Erinyes (*Choe.* 1010-1061; *Eum.* 169-170, 312-320). Correspondence can therefore explain why retaliation is intelligible as an answer to injury without explaining why it should end the dispute. Once redress produces additional losses or fresh claims, formal fit ceases to provide a principle of closure.

The need for closure therefore changes what counts as a successful response. If formal fit cannot determine its own limit, redress cannot be completed simply by finding a suffering that adequately answers the original loss. Gagarin's analysis of early Greek dispute settlement points instead to procedures that reduce strife by bringing competing claims within an accepted settlement rather than by identifying a single equivalent return (Gagarin, 1986: 23; 42-43). The *Eumenides* makes this logic particularly clear once purification has ceased to be the decisive issue. Orestes and the Erinyes submit rival claims to Athena's judgment, but the verdict that releases Orestes does not by itself close the dispute. The Erinyes experience the acquittal as a loss of *timē* and threaten to redirect their anger against Athens; Athena responds not by expelling them but by persuasion, offering a dwelling and a recognised position of honour within the city (*Eum.* 681-710; 778-891; 916-1047). Closure therefore requires more than adjudication in the narrow sense of a verdict: it requires an accommodation that redistributes recognition and changes what the surviving claims are permitted to authorise. The result is not a simple replacement of vengeance by law¹⁶. Rather, the form of redress changes: adjudication bounds the claims that may continue to operate, while settlement reorganises the relation so that those claims no longer authorise further violence. The «economy» of punishment, as the term is used here, therefore concerns three distinguishable problems: the measure of response, the form through

commentary, and discusses the main difficulties in detail; he nevertheless regards 1062–1063 as interpolated. The present argument does not depend on the authenticity of any single disputed line: the use of the children as instruments of revenge and Jason's final bereavement are independently established elsewhere in the play and in the exodos. See Mastronarde (2002: 339-342; 388-397).

¹⁶ The ending should not be historicised as a linear shift from vengeance to law. Gagarin argues that formal procedures for the peaceful settlement of disputes predate the earliest written Greek laws; the *Eumenides* therefore dramatises a particular reconfiguration of competing claims rather than the invention of adjudication ex nihilo. After Orestes' acquittal, moreover, the Erinyes' grievance persists as a loss of *timē* and is resolved through persuasion, dwelling, and civic honour. See Gagarin (1986: 19-50, esp. 41-43, 50; *Eum.* 778-891, 916-1047); cf. Sewell-Rutter (2007: 103-109); Sommerstein (2008: xxi-xxiv).

which it corresponds to a wrong, and the conditions under which the resulting claim can be brought to an end. Stability depends not on equivalent suffering alone, but on reconfiguring and bounding claims before redress becomes a fresh disturbance. The following sections can therefore ask of punitive forms not merely how much suffering they impose, but how they select, reproduce, reverse, transform, or suspend the relations implicated in a disturbance—whether by moving toward closure, making its denial itself punitive, or testing the boundary between punishment and harmful consequence.

§ 5. Punishment as non-completion: repetition, deprivation, and unsatisfied desire

The preceding section treated closure as a condition under which redress ceases to generate further claims. The same problem, however, exposes a contrasting punitive possibility: a response may be organised around the systematic denial of an end. In such cases, suffering lies not only in what is inflicted or withheld but in the way an activity, desire, or need remains directed toward a completion it cannot secure. Repetition and deprivation can therefore be approached not as a single ancient category, but as related narrative forms in which a process remains oriented toward an unattainable terminus. The formal structure of non-completion must nevertheless be distinguished from punishment proper: where a narrative does not identify an antecedent disturbance to which suffering responds, the form of suffering alone is not sufficient to establish a punitive relation. The Homeric scenes of Sisyphus and Tantalus will therefore first serve to isolate different structures of non-completion before later configurations show how such structures can become explicitly punitive.

The Sisyphus scene in the *Odyssey* gives one such structure its clearest spatial and temporal form. Odysseus sees him straining with hands and feet to force a massive stone toward the crest of a hill; whenever he is about to drive it over the summit, the stone turns back and rolls again to the plain, and Sisyphus resumes his effort (*Od.* 11.593-600). The torment lies not merely in strenuous labour but in labour organised around a repeatedly cancelled completion. Sisyphus can act and the stone can advance; the summit remains the visible end of the task, but progress cannot become accomplishment. The very moment at which the labour should terminate instead

restores its beginning. His torment thus takes the form of a recurrent sequence—effort, near-completion, reversal, renewed effort—in which movement persists while arrival is withheld. Cyclicity here is not the mere recurrence of a physical act, but purposive activity rendered incapable of reaching the end that gives it direction.

The *Odyssey* does not explain why Sisyphus is subjected to this labour. A later tradition attributed to Pherecydes, however, places the same form of non-completion within an explicitly responsive structure by connecting the stone-labour with Sisyphus' repeated attempts to evade death and escape Hades. In the scholion preserving Pherecydes fr. 119, Sisyphus first frustrates death by binding Thanatos and later secures a return from Hades through the absence of his own funerary rites; once restored to the upper world, he refuses to return below. When he dies again, Hades compels him to roll the stone so that he will not escape once more. The later narrative does not make the punishment literally reproduce any one of these acts. It instead effects a functional reversal: a figure repeatedly able to convert movement into escape is confined to movement that can no longer produce departure. Mobility persists, but its power to alter Sisyphus' position has been removed. In this later configuration, non-completion becomes punitive in the stricter sense used here because the imposed condition answers an antecedent pattern of escape. The Pherecydean tradition thus reinterprets the stone-labour without supplying its cause retroactively to Homer¹⁷.

With Tantalus, the Homeric scene shifts the formal problem from action to desire. In the *Odyssey*, the objects capable of satisfying bodily need are not absent but kept in perceptible proximity. Tantalus stands in water that reaches his chin, yet whenever he bends down eager to drink, it disappears and leaves the ground dry; above him trees hang heavy with fruit, yet whenever he reaches toward them, a wind carries them away (*Od.* 11.582-592). Water and fruit remain present enough to sustain expectation and provoke movement, but each attempt to reach them converts nearness into renewed deprivation. The contrast with Sisyphus sharpens the distinction. His labour

¹⁷ The *Odyssey* gives Sisyphus' stone-labour without stating its cause. Heubeck and Hoekstra emphasise that no reason for the labour is supplied at *Od.* 11.593-600 and that later explanations vary. The explanatory account discussed above belongs to a later explanatory layer: it is preserved in a scholion on *Il.* 6.153 that cites Pherecydes (fr. 119 Fowler). In that tradition, after the binding of Thanatos and Sisyphus' return from Hades, the stone-labour is imposed expressly so that he will not escape again. The causal linkage is therefore not projected back into Homer. See Heubeck and Hoekstra (1989: 112-115); Fowler (2000: 339, fr. 119).

advances toward an end but is reversed at the point of completion; Tantalus approaches what could satisfy desire only for the object to withdraw. Desire is consequently sustained by the very proximity of what would terminate it. Homeric deprivation here is not simple absence but recurrent nearness without attainment.

Pindar reconfigures Tantalus rather than extending the Homeric scene of receding water and fruit. Here, unlike in the Homeric configuration, deprivation is explicitly organised as a response to an antecedent abuse of privilege. In *Olympian* 1, Tantalus enjoys exceptional access to the gods but abuses that privilege by stealing nectar and ambrosia and sharing them with mortal companions; his punishment is represented instead through a great stone suspended above him and deprivation of the *euphrosynai* associated with his former privilege (*Ol.* 1.54-64). Gerber situates this loss within a wider sympotic pattern in the ode: Tantalus' privileged participation in divine commensality ends, after its abuse, in exclusion from the pleasures that had accompanied it (Gerber, 1982: xii-xiii, 39). Deprivation therefore changes register. In the *Odyssey*, desired objects remain perceptibly near but cannot be attained; in Pindar, what is withdrawn is a privileged mode of relation and enjoyment. The punishment remains intelligibly related to the offence without mimetically reproducing it: misused access gives way to exclusion from the enjoyment that access had made possible¹⁸.

Erysichthon pushes the structure further: the desired object can now be attained and consumed without bringing appetite to an end. In Callimachus' *Hymn to Demeter*, the motive for his assault on the sacred grove is explicitly convivial: its timber is to roof a banqueting hall in which he and his companions will feast continually (*Hymn* 6.24-55). Demeter answers this projected abundance with a mocking fulfilment, afflicting him with a fierce and insatiable hunger so that meals indeed come thick and fast (63-69). Hopkinson stresses the fit between motive and punishment: projected endless feasting is fulfilled ironically as endless appetite (Hopkinson, 1984: 7-10; 18)¹⁹. Unlike Tantalus,

¹⁸ The Homeric and Pindaric Tantalus configurations should not be fused into a single canonical scene. *Od.* 11.582-592 presents the receding water and fruit but does not state Tantalus' offence; *Ol.* 1.54-64 instead specifies the illicit sharing of nectar and ambrosia and represents Tantalus beneath the suspended stone. Gerber reads the loss of *euphrosynai* within the ode's broader sympotic pattern and also stresses that Pindar gives no clear indication of where Tantalus undergoes his punishment. See Gerber (1982: xii-xiv, 39, 97-100); cf. *Od.* (11.582-592); *Ol.* (1.54-64).

¹⁹ Insatiable hunger is not first attested in Callimachus. Earlier material in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of women* and in Hellanicus associates Erysichthon/Aethon with raging or insatiable appetite, although the fragmentary evidence does not securely provide Callimachus' full offence-punishment sequence. The

Erysichthon reaches what might satisfy him and actually consumes it. Attainment occurs; completion does not. Eating no longer terminates hunger but leaves the need intact, so that consumption generates renewed consumption while progressively exhausting the household that sustains it. Callimachus extends this failure outward: Erysichthon's appetite brings shame and ruin upon his family and finally reduces him to beggary at the crossroads (Hopkinson, 1984: 8-10; 18). His punishment is therefore not hunger without food but consumption without satisfaction, in which the activity normally capable of ending need becomes the mechanism through which need persists²⁰.

Taken together, these configurations reveal different ways in which the relation between a process and its ordinary terminus can be broken. Sisyphus makes progress without reaching accomplishment; Tantalus remains oriented toward objects that cannot be attained; Erysichthon attains and consumes what he desires, yet consumption cannot produce satisfaction. The relevant distinction is therefore not simply between repetition and deprivation, but between the different points at which completion can fail. Action may be prevented from becoming accomplishment, desire from becoming attainment, and consumption from becoming satiety. In each case, the process itself remains operative while the relation through which it would ordinarily come to an end is disabled. Repetition follows from this disruption rather than defining it: labour recommences because accomplishment is cancelled, desire is renewed because attainment fails, and consumption continues because satisfaction never arrives. Non-completion names this formal structure; it becomes punitive, within the present framework, when the disabled relation to an end is itself organised as an answer to an antecedent disturbance.

Once non-completion is organised within a responsive relation, duration itself can acquire a punitive function. Such punitive configurations do not merely unfold repeatedly over time; their continuation depends on the repeated failure of a process

claim made here is therefore narrower: Callimachus supplies the earliest extant detailed narrative in which the desecration of Demeter's grove, the projected banqueting hall, and divinely imposed insatiable hunger are explicitly integrated. See Hopkinson (1984: 18, 25); Hes. (fr. 43 MW).

²⁰ Callimachus does not narrate Erysichthon's death. The self-cannibalism motif belongs to Ovid's later version, and Hopkinson treats autophagy as a characteristically Ovidian grotesque elaboration. It is therefore not used here to complete the Callimachean punishment sequence. See Hopkinson (1984: 24); Ov. (*Met.* 8).

to reach the point at which it would ordinarily cease. The future is consequently organised around anticipated completion —a summit to be crossed, an object to be reached, a need to be satisfied— while the punitive structure prevents that anticipated end from becoming present as completion. Time is therefore more than the medium in which suffering occurs: it becomes one of the relations through which punishment is organised. This exposes the inverse of the problem of closure examined in the preceding section. Where settlement seeks to bound claims, terminate exchanges, or prevent retaliatory responses from generating further claims, punitive non-completion makes the withholding of an end its operative principle. Punishment can thereby shift from a bounded response to an enduring condition in which activity or desire repeatedly reopens the process that completion would have closed. This temporal reorganisation raises a further question about the medium of punitive response: can punishment become more deeply attached to the offender —not principally by reorganising what one does, seeks, or consumes, but by transforming the body, form, capacity, or distinctive power through which one acts at all?

§ 6. Punitive form and its limits: metamorphosis, gift, and self-defeating fulfilment

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The question of medium now sharpens the distinction between punitive form and harmful consequence. Altered bodies, attractive gifts, and fulfilled wishes can each mediate severe harm, yet transformation, deprivation, or destructive fulfilment does not by itself establish a punitive relation. Such reversals can resemble one another without belonging to the same punitive economy. Within the framework developed here, punishment presupposes a responsive relation in which a damaging condition is organised as an answer to a prior disturbance. Form matters because it can reorganise the relations through which suffering becomes possible —how a figure acts, is recognised, receives what is given, or inhabits the consequences of a response. The question, then, is not simply what form harm takes, but what makes such a form punitive at all.

Actaeon makes this question especially difficult because the surviving traditions do not uniformly combine offence, metamorphosis, and destruction. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, Cadmus invokes him as a warning to Pentheus: Actaeon boasted that he

surpassed Artemis in hunting and was torn apart by his own hounds on Cithaeron (*Bacch.* 337-340). The passage makes the hunter's reversal unmistakable but narrates no bodily transformation. The *Bibliotheca* organises the material differently: after distinguishing Acusilaus' account, in which Zeus is angered by Actaeon's pursuit of Semele, from the more widespread story of his seeing Artemis bathe, it has Artemis transform him into a deer and drive his hounds mad, so that they destroy their master without recognising him (*Bibl.* 3.4.4). Motive, metamorphosis, and death are thus distributed differently across the traditions rather than forming one stable sequence. What recurs more securely is the reversal itself. Forbes Irving accordingly treats the transformation as one element in a larger inversion by which hunter and master becomes victim or prey (Forbes Irving, 1990: 86-87). Where metamorphosis is explicit, it intensifies that reversal by giving the hunter the bodily form of the quarry²¹.

What changes in such a punitive metamorphosis is therefore not simply appearance but the sufferer's position within a field of possible relations. A body conditions how its bearer can act, what can act upon it, and how it can be recognised by others. In the *Bibliotheca*, Actaeon's deer-form places him bodily in the position of quarry, while the maddening of the hounds redirects the instruments of his former mastery against him; their failure to recognise their victim as their master further marks the collapse of the relation that had organised hunter, dogs, and prey. Metamorphosis is not the sole mechanical cause of his death, since the hounds are also divinely maddened. Its punitive force lies instead in making the reversal inhabitable as a bodily condition. Buxton's discussion of Actaeon in visual art sharpens the point: representations range from fully human figures to modest horns, substantial antlers, a deer's head, or a deerskin, without yielding a single fixed iconography of transformation (Buxton, 2009: 101-104). Across these variations, Actaeon is reassigned from the position of the one

²¹ The Actaeon traditions should not be fused into a single canonical sequence. Eur. *Bacch.* 337-340 gives the hunting boast and destruction by his own hounds but does not narrate metamorphosis; Acusilaus fr. 33 connects Zeus' anger with Actaeon's pursuit of Semele, while later Artemis-centred motives vary. The *Bibliotheca* then distinguishes the Semele version from the bathing story before narrating deer-transformation and the maddening of the hounds. The distribution of motive, transformation, and death across these sources therefore does not support a simple linear development. See Dodds (1960: ad *Bacch.* 337-340); Seaford (1996: ad 337-341); Fowler (2013: 370-371, ad Acusilaus fr. 33); Forbes Irving (1990: 197-201); *Bibl.* (3.4.4.).

who hunts to that of the one who can be hunted. Punitive metamorphosis thus reconfigures agency, vulnerability, and recognition through embodiment²².

If Actaeon shows punitive form operating through the altered position of the sufferer, the Hesiodic first-woman narratives shift attention to the form in which harm itself is presented. The *Theogony* does not name this figure Pandora, but it leaves little ambiguity about the purpose for which she is fashioned. After Prometheus steals fire back for mortals, Zeus contrives an evil for human beings «in exchange for fire» (*Theog.* 570); Hephaestus moulds the likeness of a modest maiden, Athena adorns her, and the resulting figure becomes a *thauma idesthai*, a wonder to behold (570-584). The conjunction of attraction and injury then becomes explicit: Zeus has fashioned a *kalon kakon*, a «beautiful evil», in exchange for the good, and gods and mortals marvel at the *dolos* that human beings cannot evade (585-589). Beauty is not a benign quality that later acquires harmful consequences; it belongs to the design through which the response becomes attractive. Vernant reads this fabrication as a reversal of Promethean deception: the manipulation of appearance that marked Prometheus' dealings with Zeus is turned back against mortals when Zeus' counter-move itself assumes a desirable form (Vernant, 1989: 62-63). Punitive form here operates through presentation: what is designed as harm is fashioned so that appearance mediates rather than reveals its injurious purpose²³.

The *Works and Days* carries this logic of presentation into the act of reception. Here the first woman is explicitly named Pandora and is sent to Epimetheus within a relation of giving (*Op.* 80-89). Prometheus has warned his brother never to accept a *dōron* from Olympian Zeus but to send it back, lest some evil come upon mortals;

²² The visual tradition does not require one uniform degree of animalisation. Buxton surveys images in which Actaeon remains fully human, bears small horns or large antlers, has a deer's head, or appears in a deerskin; he also stresses the interpretive ambiguity of the deerskin motif. In *Bibl.* 3.4.4 the hounds are divinely maddened as well as unable to recognise their master, so metamorphosis should not be isolated as the sole mechanical cause of death. Ovid's later emphasis on a deer-form retaining a human mind (*Met.* 3.194-252) is therefore not used here as evidence for a general Greek conception of transformed consciousness. See Buxton (2009: 100-105); Forbes Irving (1990: 198-201); *Bibl.* (3.4.4.).

²³ The two Hesiodic configurations remain distinct. In *Theog.* 570-616 the first woman is unnamed and no *pithos* appears; in *Op.* 42-105 the figure is named Pandora and the narrative develops the *dōron* and *pithos* sequence. West's commentary on *Theog.* 585-589 emphasises the linkage between *kakon ant' agathoio*, *kalon kakon*, and *dolos*. Vernant's reading of Zeus' fabrication as a counter-deception to Prometheus is an interpretive articulation of this textual pattern rather than a separate ancient doctrine of punitive symbolism. See West (1966: ad *Theog.* 570-589); Vernant (1989: 62-76).

Epimetheus nevertheless receives what is sent and recognises the *kakon* only after he has it (85-89). The gift-form therefore matters not only because of how the harmful object appears but because of what that appearance makes possible: acceptance becomes part of the punitive mechanism. What Zeus intends as harm is presented in a form that permits its recipient to admit it into his household before fully recognising its character. «Punitive gift» is useful here not as an ancient category but as an analytical description of this conjunction of hostile purpose and receivable form. Its ambivalence belongs to the recipient's position rather than to Zeus' intention: what enters the household as something given operates there as a *pēma*. Punishment can thus organise not only what is suffered, but the conditions under which harm is recognised, accepted, and made effective²⁴.

Tithonus marks the point at which the resemblance between a harmful boon and punishment must be resisted. In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, Eos asks Zeus to make Tithonus deathless and allow him to live for ever; Zeus consents, but she fails also to ask that he remain young and be freed from destructive old age (*Aphr.* 218-224). While youth lasts he lives with Eos, but as age advances she withdraws from his bed while continuing to sustain him, and eventually he can no longer move or raise his limbs (225-238). He remains alive as the capacities through which that life had been lived progressively disappear. Faulkner reads the episode alongside the preceding story of Ganymede: Ganymede supplies the successful contrast, whereas Tithonus exposes the separation of immortality from agelessness (Faulkner, 2008: 270-271). The sequence nevertheless lacks the structure of retaliation. No offence by Tithonus precedes his condition, Zeus does not impose ageing as a response to a wrong, and the destructive outcome follows from what Eos' request omitted rather than from hostile intention built into the grant. Tithonus therefore marks a limit of punitive interpretation: a fulfilled desire can become destructive without becoming punishment²⁵.

²⁴ At *Op.* 82, *dōron edōrēsan* is syntactically ambiguous between the gods 'giving her a gift' and 'giving her as a gift'. West notes, however, that *dōron* is used of the woman in the following narrative (85-86), where Hermes brings the gift and Epimetheus accepts it despite Prometheus' warning. The argument here therefore rests on the explicit giving-and-receiving sequence at 85-89 rather than on a forced resolution of line 82. It also does not depend on the disputed interpretation of *elpis* in the subsequent *pithos* episode. Hesiod's object is a *pithos*, not a 'box', and the poem does not make curiosity or a prohibition on Pandora's opening it part of the sequence. See West (1978: ad *Op.* 82-105).

²⁵ Faulkner divides the Tithonus narrative into Eos' request (220-224), Tithonus' youth (225-227), the approach of old age (228-232), and extreme old age (233-238), and reads it as a counterexample to

Midas provides a second boundary case, but here the failure lies not in an omitted condition but in the unrestricted operation of what has been desired. Aristotle invokes the story in *Politics* 1.9 while distinguishing wealth that serves the necessities of life from acquisition pursued without limit. A person may possess abundant money and still lack what is required to live; Midas supplies the paradoxical extreme, since the «insatiable greed» of his prayer makes everything set before him turn to gold while he dies of hunger (*Pol.* 1257b10-17). In Aristotle's argument, the exemplum exposes wealth detached from the end that gives it use: possession can increase while ceasing to function as a means to life. Ovid's later narrative supplies a fuller causal sequence. After Midas returns Silenus to Bacchus, the god rewards him with the choice of a boon; Midas asks that whatever he touches become gold, and Bacchus grants the request while regretting the choice (*Met.* 11.85-105). The power succeeds exactly as requested until food and drink are transformed at his touch, making the production of gold incompatible with bodily need (11.106-145). Unlike Erysichthon, whose insatiability is divinely imposed as punishment, Midas is deprived by the successful operation of a benefit he chose. Tithonus suffers through an omitted condition; Midas through a desired capacity whose unrestricted success destroys its own use. Harm can therefore arise from the success of desire itself without becoming punitive²⁶.

Taken together, these cases limit any attempt to identify punishment by the character of suffering alone. Metamorphosis, deprivation, reversal, and destructive fulfilment can all produce severe harm, but none is intrinsically punitive. What distinguishes punishment within the present framework is a responsive relation: the harmful condition is organised as an answer to a prior disturbance and becomes intelligible through that relation. The medium of response can vary. In Actaeon,

Ganymede within the hymn's exploration of mortality and immortality. The *Homeric Hymn* itself does not transform Tithonus into a cicada; that motif belongs to later versions. The present argument therefore confines itself to the hymn's deathless ageing and loss of bodily capacity, without redescribing the episode as divine punishment. See Faulkner (2008: 270-276, ad *Aphr.* 218-238).

²⁶ Aristotle's Midas exemplum is deliberately compressed: *Pol.* 1257b10-17 mentions the insatiable prayer, the conversion of what is set before Midas into gold, and death by hunger, but supplies no divine grant or reward-scene. Saunders places the example within Aristotle's contrast between wealth limited by its use as a means to living and acquisition whose increase has become unlimited. Ovid later supplies the narrative of Silenus' return, Bacchus' reward, Midas' chosen boon, and its removal (*Met.* 11.85-145). The ass's-ears episode that follows (11.146 ff.) is a distinct punitive story and is not retrojected onto the golden-touch episode. See Saunders (1995: 92-93); Ov. (*Met.* 11.85-145).

altered embodiment reassigns the hunter within relations of agency, mastery, vulnerability, and recognition; in the Hesiodic first-woman narratives, the response operates through presentation and reception, making designed harm attractive and, in the *Works and days*, effective through giving and acceptance. Nor must the recipient of the harmful response coincide straightforwardly with the agent of the disturbance to which it answers: the Promethean sequence shows that retaliation can be displaced while remaining organised by an antecedent conflict. Tithonus and Midas establish the converse limit. Their destructive fulfilments answer no prior wrong, but arise respectively from omission and unrestricted success. Punitive form therefore names neither metamorphosis, gift, nor reversal as such. It names the mediation of a responsive relation through embodiment, presentation, or reception; where that relation is absent, destructive consequence remains harm, misfortune, or self-defeating fulfilment rather than punishment.

§ 7. Conclusion

The analyses above bring these different forms into a single result: the economy of punishment is an economy of disturbance and response. The narratives examined here begin from differentiated positions, shares, honours, obligations, or recognised claims whose disturbance demands some form of answer. Punishment is therefore not an isolated consequence appended to the wrong but one phase in the reorganisation of a relation already altered by disturbance. What holds these heterogeneous configurations together is neither a common penalty nor a single principle of equivalence, but the way response takes shape within and further transforms an existing field of claims, obligations, vulnerabilities, and limits.

This relational perspective also changes how retribution is understood. That a wrong calls for an answer does not imply that adequate redress consists in reproducing an equivalent quantity of suffering. The analyses above instead show that correspondence may be qualitative: punishment can answer the position, medium, role, capacity, or expectation implicated in the original disturbance. Salmoneus, for example, is answered through the divine medium he attempted to imitate, while Actaeon is reassigned from hunter to quarry through a transformation of bodily

position and vulnerability. Such cases show how inversion or mimetic correspondence can render a punitive response intelligible without reducing it to literal replication. Mimesis therefore describes one possible form of punitive fit, not the condition that makes a response punitive in the first place. Formal fit, moreover, does not by itself establish proportionality, legitimacy, or closure; those questions arise only once correspondence is distinguished from what can bring a punitive sequence to an end.

The deeper instability of punitive response lies in the possibility that an answer to disturbance may recreate the conditions for further response. Formal correspondence can render retaliation intelligible without determining where it should end. Achilles' pursuit of *poinē* shows how a claim to recompense can exceed the loss it answers, while Orestes' retaliatory matricide shows how an act claimed as *dikē* can generate fresh pollution and a renewed claim to redress. Punishment can thus answer a prior wrong while creating the basis of another claim. The problem of retribution is consequently also a problem of closure: how can a response acknowledge and answer a disturbance without authorising an indefinitely renewable sequence of counter-response? The *Eumenides* offers one answer by shifting the problem from equivalent retaliation to the adjudication and reorganisation of competing claims. The Sisyphus, Tantalus, and Erysichthon traditions reveal the inverse possibility: where non-completion is organised as punitive response, it is not a failure of punishment but its operative principle; suffering persists because action, desire, or consumption is prevented from reaching the point at which it would ordinarily cease. Punishment may therefore seek closure, fail to secure it, or make its withholding punitive.

These conclusions remain comparative rather than doctrinal. Homeric compensation, tragic vengeance, pollution, metamorphosis, divine retaliation, and later mythographic narratives retain distinct concepts, functions, and historical settings; their recurrence reveals related relational problems, not a timeless Greek system. The boundary cases make the framework's discriminatory power clearest. Tithonus and Midas suffer through fulfilled or self-defeating desires, yet neither condition answers an antecedent wrong. Their stories therefore confirm that severe, ironic, or destructive harm is insufficient for punishment. What distinguishes punitive suffering is not intensity or form but its place within a responsive relation to prior

disturbance. Comparison thus identifies recurring problems without collapsing their historically distinct articulations.

Seen from this perspective, punitive narratives reveal more than conceptions of what wrongdoers should suffer. They expose the relations that make disturbance and response intelligible in the first place: the positions that can be claimed, the limits attached to those claims, the obligations generated by recognition, and the point at which response ceases to repair and begins to reproduce disorder. Punishment therefore makes visible not only a conception of suffering but a conception of order—an order that is relational, vulnerable to disturbance, and dependent on limits that no response can exceed without altering the structure it seeks to restore. The responsive relational economy proposed here does not reduce these tensions to a single Greek theory of justice. It offers instead a way to understand why historically different punitive narratives repeatedly return to the same underlying problem: how a disturbed relation can be answered without the answer becoming another disturbance in turn.

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