HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Orestes 408 B.C.E.

Euripides.

Overview

The imagination of Euripides—or is it partly the chance of which plays survived?—seems heavily drawn to the events surrounding the Trojan War and its aftermath, an aftermath which brings woe, learning, and great drama to the work of the greatest fifth century tragedians. For Euripides the aftermath studies concentrate on Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Andromache, Hecuba, Iphigenia, Orestes, Helen and Menelaos, and in so doing enable the playwright to shuffle sequences of time and narration, and to reinvent a variety of angles onto the post war scenarios of the ancient houses. Behind all these options, and inexhaustibly available to the fifth century mind, is the work of Homer, which introduces, interprets, and activates all of the fixed characters mentioned above.

Characters

Electra. Sister of Orestes
Helen. Wife of Menelaus
Orestes. Son of Agamemnon
Menelaus. Brother of Agamemnon
Pylades. Companion of Orestes
Messenger Old retainer of Agamemnon's
Hermione. Daughter of Helen and Menelaus
Phrygian Eunuch. One of Helen's slaves
Apollo. God of light, prophecy, and purification
Tyndareus. Maternal grandfather of Orestes and Electra

Synopsis

At the outset we come on Electra, at the family palace In Argos, watching over her brother Orestes; it is six days since the murder of Clytemnestra, and Orestes is just barely surviving, among the intermittent attacks of the Furies, who are driving him mad. On this very day the elders of Argos are meeting, to determine the fate of Orestes, with the probability that they will vote for death by stoning. Orestes sees the only hope of survival to lie in the arrival of his uncle Menelaos, who is just returning from the Trojan War,and who is expected any moment in the palace. The play revolves around the fruitless efforts of Menelaus, to intercede for Orestes, and the last ditch efforts of Orestes (and his friend, Pylades) to go down fighting, in an effort to avoid being stoned to death. Those efforts involve the men's decision to kill Helen, who is holed up in the royal palace, and to burn down the palace itself. That these extreme actions are ultimately mitigated—Helen saved, Orestes married, the Furies calmed—is due to the intervention of the god Apollo, who restores 'status quo normalcy.'

Story

Electra. The play opens on Electra, who in keeping watch over the delirious Orestes, who is stricken still with madness, six days after the murder of his mother. In the midst of her lamentations she recounts the dreadful story of the House of Atreus, and her own entrapment in its penalties for crimes.

Orestes. Electra's brother awakes, in a fit of lucidity, and briefly takes stock of his situation. Sparring verbally with Menelaus, who continues to encourage him, Orestes determines to fight for his life, and starts to consider escape plots, in tandem with Pylades. Tyndareus, husband of Leda (mother of Helen)

enters the picture, reviling Orestes for the matricide, and exiting to speak against Orestes in the meeting of Argive elders.

Tyndareus. The maternal grandfather of Orestes and Electra, a severe man of the old school enters to berate the wretched Orestes for his matricide. This ideological set back drives Orestes to fight for his life, to defend himself against the forces eager to crush him; forces which are based on old fashioned clan values, rather than the idea of justice.

Pylades assists Orestes to rise, and take action toward escape; then he hits on the plan to kill Helen, and to assault the royal palace with fire.

Murder. Orestes and Pylades storm the bed chamber where Helen is hiding out. They drive away the servants and guards, bolt the chamber doors, and slaughter Helen, but in fact do not, for she has escaped. Apollo's intervention, to resolve the crisis, has begun.

Resolution. Apollo arrives in a *deus ex machina* device, high over the spectators. He explains that he has rescued Helen, and replaced her in the stars next to Castor and Pollux, in a position from which she can provide guidance to sailors. Orestes is directed to return to the Areopagus in Athens, where he will once again be tried, and conclusively acquitted. He is to marry Hermione, while Pylades will marry Electra.

Themes

Regression. The *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, written during the Persian War, culminated in a major trial of Orestes, for having killed his mother. He is driven out of Athens, haunted by the Furies, but the Areopagus court itself comes to an equitable adjudication of the crime, and the play is seen as of monumental importance, in introducing a rational justice system into a primitive system of revenge. The situation we find in *Orestes,* however, seemingly implies that law and exoneration are overcome by primitive systems of retribution and terrible punishment. Orestes has not been freed of his burden of guilt. Cultural regression iis the name of this development.

Gods. The gods, and especially Apollo, play determinant roles, in resolving the violent murder crisis on which the drama centers. The intervention of Apollo mitigates the violence Orestes is perpetrating, against Helen and the royal family in Argos.

Violence. The Furies' attack on Orestes is unrelenting, and the response of Orestes himself, to the punitive attitudes of Argos, is driven by rage and desperation. It is no wonder that Electra—remember her taste for matricide in Euripides' *Electra,* or her role as priestess of a death cult in Tauria—and Orestes think violently when it cmes to breaking out of the death trap which matricide has trapped them in. Apollo, god of radiance, is the only kind of force that can contravene this violence.

Degradation. To the Athenian the barbarian east connotes cultural downfall, and in the present play the Phrygian servants of the royal palace in Argos represent a riff on that Hellenic east-west theme. The gods and beliefs of the Phrygians were exotic to the Hellenes, and the Phrygian slave of Helen, who panics when he palace is attacked, represents (to Euripides) an effeminacy always amusing and objectionable to the Greeks.

Character Analysis

Orestes Orestes is the main character. We see him comatose, with his sister, then gradually waken after Helen has come from the palace to lay flowers on her sister's grave. At this point—it has been six days since the matricide-- Orestes begins to waken, to size up his situation again—the elders' assembly in Argos is about to condemn him to death—and to realize that he has no time to waste. (Orestes remains an emblematic figure, desperate and dangerous but monolithic, when it comes to character traits.) Orestes decides that he and Pylades must act to protect themselves and Electra, and from this mindset makes the horrific move to burn the palace of Argos and to kill Helen—the bitterest move to make,

against Menelaus (Orestes' uncle) who has proven indifferent to their requests for high level assistance. Desperate as he is, Orestes makes a cogent but calamitous plan to escape and take vengeance—a plan which includes a kidnapping of Hermone, Helen's daughter—and carries through, slaughtering (though only in illusion) the Helen who started the Trojan War in the first place. No rich character, subordinate to his sister in imagination, Orestes is a model of the beset and all risking victim of fate.

Dependent. Orestes is comatose at the start of the play, and only slowly comes to. He is totally dependent on Electra's attentions, though once he has formulated his desperate plan he is self-mobilizing.

Respectful. Orestes is respectful, for as long as he can bear it, to age. Hopeful at first, Orestes greets Menelaus as a respected elder, as he does Tyndareus, his maternal grandfather. In neither case, however, does he receive the respect he deserves, which is one reason for the desperate palace-burning plan he forms.

Litigious. When confronted by Tyndareus, who deeply hates Orestes' matricide, Orestes dons his lawyer hat, and argues back, that the real crime was committed by Clytemnestra, who killed Agamemnon, Orestes' father. The father being the generative power in intercourse—and here Orestes goes into the biology of the time—it is he who deserves more respect than his wife, the mother. Orestes insists on the justification for his matricide.

Suppliant. While still not realizing, that Menelaus will not go out of his way to be helpful—the same stodgy guy who lost Helen to Paris in the first place—Orestes initially clutches the knees of the old gent, and asks for support in rescuing himself from the Furies, and winning moral approval of the Elders of Argos. It doesn't work.

Vengeful. Orestes has no qualms about his desire to kill Helen out of pure vengeance: 'it's sweet, and costs nothing, to let desire find a voice.'

Parallels Homer's Odysseus is strongly motivated, throughout his battle time at Troy, by the desire to get back to his home on Ithaca, and to drive the suitors out of his house. (He has for twenty years heard reports of the devastation those local jockeys have been imposing on his household.) When he arrives, disguised and employing back road channels and contacts with his father and old friends, plus the tricky goddess Athena, he is fuming for combat, and disciplined enough to make a precise and deadly killing plan, which he shares with his partner, Penelope (who trusts his identity now). The killing of the suitors, with a bow too heavy for any of them to string, parallels the careful fury with which Orestes (and Pylades) drive away the guards and effeminate servants, from the bedchamber of Helen, and let their sword blades flash right and left.

Discussion questions.

Bring together, in mind, several of the Orestes images Euripides creates—say in *Electra, Iphigenia in Tauris, Orestes,* or *Iphigenia in Aulis* (where Orestes is a baby.) Can you trace a timeline along which Orestes changes (or matures?) Does Euripides have a unified character concept for Orestes, or does that 'hero' change with circumstances?

What do you think of the *deus ex machina* device, which Euripides uses in plays as different as *Medea* and *Orestes*? How does the use the playwright makes of the device differ in the two plays just mentioned? Is it an admission that the narrative doesn't have within it the seeds of its own resolution? What does Aristotle say, in the *Poetics*, about 'non-organic' endings, of the type we are considering? Historically speaking, where do you suppose this kind of device came from?

Does the chorus have a single view of Orestes' actions In the present play? What hopes have they for themselves? Can you see how the pattern of *strophe, antistrophe*, and *epode* contributes a careful sequence of dramatic pieces, and a constant interplay of different narrative perspectives?