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ORESTES, A EURIPIDEAN SEQUEL

Orestes was among Euripides' most popular tragedies in antiquity, but it has not been much admired in modern times.[1] Perhaps it is simply not very good (judged by some criterion or other): as Martin West has remarked, 'not many people, if asked to nominate the greatest Greek tragedy, would choose *Orestes*'.[2] Its plot structure has been judged poor or inconsequential.[3] It has been found incomprehensible: 'baffling', 'difficult', and 'puzzling' are descriptions used by the play's most recent editor.[4] Perhaps it is not even a tragedy, but something else: 'tragicomedy', 'melodrama', or similar.[5]

It is usual to account for the play's peculiar qualities (or faults) by reference to its status as a late work of its author. *Orestes* was produced in 408 B.C., a couple of years before its elderly author's death;[6] and so it falls into the recognizable category of 'late Euripides'. The image of the elderly poet, disillusioned not only with the state of the world but with the genre of tragedy itself, pervades modern studies of Euripides. 'Late Euripides' is normally thought to be characterized not only by content (its pessimistic political, theological, and philosophical stance) but also by form (its experimentation with the traditional generic limitations of tragedy). This type of view, which can be traced back to Nietzsche's powerful description of tragedy's *Todeskampf* at Euripides' hands,[7] is seen in much subsequent European scholarship.[8]

[1] For a full survey of the play's (ancient and modern) reception see J. R. Porter, *Studies in Euripides'* Orestes (Leiden, 1994), 1–44.

[2] M. L. West (ed.), *Euripides:* Orestes (Warminster, 1988), 28; though he does, admittedly, go on to award the play (qualified) praise. W. N. Bates, *Euripides* (Philadelphia, 1930), 167, is more negative: 'It is not a play that anyone can enjoy.'

[3] A. P. Burnett, *Catastrophe Survived: Euripides' Plays of Mixed Reversal* (Oxford, 1971), 184, finds the plot-structure 'curious'; D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* (Toronto, 1967), 213, refers to 'several stages of unrelated action'; cf. H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (London, 1961³), 332; K. Reinhardt, 'Die Sinneskrise bei Euripides', *Eranos* 26 (1957), 279–317; repr. in id., *Tradition und Geist* (Göttingen, 1960), 227–56.

[4] D. Kovacs (ed.), *Euripides* 5 (Loeb Library, Cambridge, MA, 2002), 405–8.

[5] The generic status of the play, or individual scenes, was questioned by scholars in antiquity (e.g. Σ *Or.* 1512, 1521, 1384; the Aristophanic *hypothesis*). Modern scholars have relabelled it (e.g.) 'melodrama' (P. Vellacott, *Ironic Drama: A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* [Cambridge, 1975], 56), 'tragicomedy' (F. M. Dunn, 'Comic and tragic license in Euripides' *Orestes*', *Cl. Ant.* 8 [1989], 238–51 at 249), even 'prosatyric' (C. W. Müller, *Zur Datierung des sophokleischen Ödipus* [Mainz, 1984], 66–9). Cf. B. Seidensticker, *Palintonos Harmonia: Studien zu komischen Elementen in der griechischen Tragödie* (Göttingen, 1982), 101–14, and B. M. W. Knox, *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* (Baltimore, 1979), 250–74.

[6] The date is securely attested (Σ *Or.* 371). Euripides died in 406 during his eighth decade, though there is some doubt about his exact age: *FGrH* 239 A 50, 63 (Parian Marble) = *TrGF* 1 DID D A 50, 63: cf. D. Kovacs, *Euripidea* (Leiden, 1994), Test. 6, 25, 67–9.

[7] F. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie, oder Griechenthum und Pessimismus* (Leipzig, 1872), §11; cf. M. S. Silk and J. P. Stern, *Nietzsche on Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1981), 296.

[8] For example, W. Kranz, *Stasimon* (Berlin, 1933), 232: 'Wir sind in der Zeit einer Umgestaltung der euripideischen Tragödie überhaupt. . . . Eine neue Tragik verkörpert sich; sie ist die Frucht eines neuen Lebensgefühls, das mehr zur Resignation neigt als zu heroischem Kampf und Widerstand.' Cf. G. Murray, *Euripides and his Age* (London, 1913); W. Schadewaldt, *Monolog und Selbstgespräch* (Berlin, 1926), 107–8; C. Wolff, 'Orestes', in E. Segal (ed.), *Euripides: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1968), 132–49. On the history of

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Reinhardt, in an influential article, argued that *Orestes* in particular represents the 'final stage' for tragedy, and compared Euripidean 'nihilism' to European existentialism.[9] More recent critics have taken a similar line, treating questions of form and content as interlinked. For instance, Euben interprets *Orestes* as being about corruption, decay, and disarray in public life: 'since tragedy is an Athenian institution, the disintegration the play portrays and imitates raises questions about the corruption of genre and practice'.[10] Hall, in a penetrating analysis of the play's political and philosophical outlook, writes that *Orestes* 'not only decomposes and disintegrates the Athenian democratic charter-myth enshrined in the *Oresteia*, but it threatens to dissolve the very genre, tragedy, which had always been the most patent example of Athenian democratic prestige'.[11] It is not always clear just what is meant by the 'corruption' or 'disillusion' of genre; but various critics have identified a number of supposedly 'untragic' features in the late plays. These include (for example): the hard-to-judge 'tone' of scenes or lines, an unusual attitude to myth, a self-conscious type of 'cleverness', instances of 'metatheatricality', and the presence of irony, especially where the gods are concerned.[12]

This type of assessment of late Euripidean art may or may not strike one as totally convincing. It would in fact be possible to take issue with it on a number of grounds; but this is not the place to engage in detail with such a complex intertwining of ideas.[13] The limited point that I want to make here is that preconceptions about what Euripides was trying to achieve in general can sometimes lead one to overlook specific features of individual plays. In particular, the standard view of 'late Euripides' just described does not altogether explain what is unusual about *Orestes*. I suggest that some of the difficulties of this play may be solved if we interpret it as a 'late' work in a slightly different sense: that is, *Orestes* seems to be conceived of as a *sequel*, in which Euripides revisits subjects and themes from his earlier work.

Most tragedies, of course, are designed as 'sequels' in a broad sense, in that they have to be read in the light of earlier works or, more broadly, in the light of the mythical tradition as a whole.[14] Any tragedy entitled *Orestes* will inevitably be a continuation of an earlier part of a predetermined narrative (that portion of the

Euripidean criticism, see A. N. Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition* (Madison, 1987), 3–51. E. Said, 'Thoughts on late style', *London Review of Books* 26.15 (5 Aug. 2004), 3–7, discusses 'late style' in a wider sense: he identifies 'an increasing sense of apartness, exile and anachronism' in the work of many elderly artists.

[9] Reinhardt (n. 3).

[10] J. P. Euben, 'Political corruption in Euripides' *Orestes*', in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986), 222–51 at 223.

[11] E. M. Hall, 'Political and cosmic turbulence in Euripides' *Orestes*', in A. H. Sommerstein et al. (edd.), *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis* (Bari, 1993), 263–85 at 277.

[12] A representative selection of views would include the following. *Tone:* Seidensticker (n. 5). *Attitude to myth*: C. F. Fuqua, 'Studies in the use of myth in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the *Orestes* of Euripides', *Traditio* 32 (1976), 29–95; id., 'The world of myth in Euripides' *Orestes*', *Traditio* 34 (1978), 1–28; S. L. Schein, 'Mythical illusion and historical reality in Euripides' *Orestes*', *WS* 9 (1975), 49–66. *'Cleverness':* R. P. Winnington-Ingram, 'Euripides: *poietes sophos*', *Arethusa* 2 (1969), 127–42. *Metatheatricality:* G. Dobrov, *Figures of Play: Greek Drama and Metafictional Poetics* (Oxford, 2001); F. M. Dunn, *Tragedy's End: Closure and Innovation in Euripidean Drama* (Oxford, 1996). *Irony*: H. Erbse, 'Zum *Orestes* des Euripides', *Hermes* 103 (1975), 434–59; Vellacott (n. 5); A. W. Verrall, *Essays on Four Plays of Euripides* (Cambridge, 1905).

[13] For reactions against the 'orthodox' view, see e.g. J. Gregory, 'Comic elements in Euripides', *ICS* 24–5 (1999–2000), 59–74; D. J. Mastronarde, 'Euripidean tragedy and genre: the terminology and its problems', *ICS* 24–5 (1999–2000), 23–39.

[14] F. Zeitlin, 'The closet of masks: role-playing and myth-making in Euripides' *Orestes*',

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Atreid myth which deals with the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra), just as a tragedy entitled *Agamemnon* would naturally be expected to pick up the thread of yet earlier events (such as the quarrel of Atreus and Thyestes or the sacrifice of Iphigenia). In addition, tragedians would always have been conscious of specific treatments of their myths by other tragedians, endeavouring to react to (or improve on) these earlier works in some sense—a process that has been called 'the anxiety of influence'.[15]

The most obvious model, or 'target', for Euripides when dealing with the Atreid myth is Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, a trilogy that attained quasi-canonical status relatively quickly, even in antiquity, and which (it seems) had already been revived in Athens before the end of the fifth century.[16] In his *Electra*, a few years before *Orestes* (if the conventional dating is correct), Euripides seems to be responding to the *Oresteia*, especially in the notorious recognition scene (518–44).[17] The majority of studies, unsurprisingly, have interpreted *Orestes* as (in various ways) another response to Aeschylus.[18] But Aeschylus is not the only relevant influence: allusions to various other tragedies have also been detected.[19]

Of course the *Oresteia* and these other plays are important; but there is another, less obvious, predecessor to *Orestes*: Euripides' own tragedy *Helen*. In fact, *Helen* is not simply one among numerous texts which furnish matter for incidental allusions here and there: rather, it can be seen as a principal and central influence, in a sense just as important as Aeschylus for understanding the play's meaning. I suggest that *Orestes*, as well as being an 'alternative version' of the *Oresteia*, is also a sequel to *Helen*.[20]

This (perhaps odd-seeming) claim may be thought to require a little justification. Obviously, *Orestes* is not a sequel to *Helen* in any straightforward narrative sense. Although its events do follow on in temporal sequence from the earlier play (in that it deals with Menelaus' recovery of his wife and return to Greece), it markedly does *not* pick up the story where *Helen* left off. While the plot of *Helen* was based on a bizarre 'alternative' myth involving a phantom Helen, the plot of *Orestes* (on the face of it, at least) follows the traditional myth. Nevertheless, as we shall see, *Orestes* does deliberately recall the events of *Helen*, in a rather unexpected way. But in any case I

Ramus 9 (1980), 51–77 at 53, calls *Or.* 'perhaps the first work of literature in which close sustained familiarity with other texts is imperative for genuine appreciation of its meaning and achievement', but this overstates the case, as if allusion and intertextuality had never existed before 408.

[15] H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York, 1973).

[16] It is likely (but not definite) that the *Oresteia* was revived in the 420s. Ar. *Clouds* 534–6 is often cited as evidence for this view. See H. J. Newiger, 'Elektra in Aristophanes' *Wolken*', *Hermes* 89 (1961), 422–30, and (more sceptical) D. M. Bain, '*Electra* 518–544', *BICS* 24 (1977), 104–16 at 110.

[17] See (most recently) M. Davies, 'Euripides' *Electra*: the recognition scene again', *CQ* 48 (1998), 389–403.

[18] For example, Burnett (n. 3), 205–22; P. Masqueray, *Euripide et ses idées* (Paris, 1908), 140; M. Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie* (Göttingen, 1954[2]), 417–8; E. Rawson, 'Aspects of Euripides' *Orestes*', *Arethusa* 5 (1972), 155–67 at 155–6. (By contrast, P. Décharme, *Euripide et l'esprit de son théâtre* [Paris, 1893], 350–3, thinks that *Orestes* has little specific relationship to Aeschylus.)

[19] Wolff (n. 8), 132, sees echoes of Soph. *El.* and Eur. *El.*; C. W. Willink (ed.), *Euripides:* Orestes (Oxford, 1986), p. lv, sees allusions also to Eur. *IT, Hel., Tro.,* and *Andr.* West (n. 2), 32 and n. 6, lists in addition Eur. *Her.* and Soph. *Phil.* Cf. Zeitlin (n. 14), discussed below, pp. 000–0.

[20] Willink (n. 19), pp. xxviii–xxxi hints at this idea, though he does not pursue it at length: it is the Helen myth in general, rather than the *Helen* in particular, that he sees as relevant to this play (cf. his notes on *Or.* 71, 129).

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want to show that there is another, more significant, sense in which *Orestes* is a 'sequel' to *Helen*: that is, not in a narrative but in a thematic and intellectual sense.

The 'sequel' explanation helps to account for (among other features) the play's supposed faults in plot construction, and indeed the oddity of Helen's appearing at all in a play called *Orestes*. It can seem almost as if the characters of Helen and Menelaus have wandered in from 'the wrong' tragedy—why are they so prominent here? It is because, surprisingly, Euripides is encouraging us to think about them just as much as about the house of Atreus. It has been noted before that the figure of Helen, and the Trojan War myths, are particular preoccupations of *Orestes* and other late Euripidean plays;[21] but there are several reasons for believing that it is the tragedy *Helen* in particular, as well as the myths in general, that the playwright (and his audience) had in mind.

The closeness in time between the two productions is important: it was only four years earlier that *Helen* had been performed (at the Dionysia of 412).[22] Aristophanes' elaborate parody of *Helen* in *Thesmophoriazusae*, produced the following year, suggests that the play enjoyed immense popularity—or notoriety.[23] In Aristophanes' play, Mnesilochus is captured by women and threatened with death. Comic 'logic' leads him to masquerade as a Euripidean heroine so that Euripides will arrive to rescue him (*Thesm.* 849–50):

> τῷ δῆτ' ἂν αὐτὸν προσαγαγοίμην δράματι;
> ἐγῷδα· τὴν καινὴν Ἑλένην μιμήσομαι.

What play can I use to summon him here?—I know! I'll act out his *new-style Helen*.

The description ἡ καινὴ Ἑλένη is important (though difficult to translate): it denotes that the Helen referred to is not just 'new' in the sense of 'recent' but also 'novel', 'strange', or 'revisionist'.[24] The Helen of 412 (unlike her phantom double) did not cause the Trojan War and did not elope with Paris, but instead resides quietly in Egypt, where she gives every appearance of being a faithful wife: thus both the plot and the characterization of Helen are *outré*. This version seems to be a combination of assorted elements found in earlier tellings of the myth, rather than a Euripidean invention,[25] but at any rate this 'new-style' Helen is radically different from her incarnation elsewhere in tragedy, where she is invariably portrayed as an evil adulteress.[26]

It seems likely that (as others have suggested) the phrase ἡ καινὴ Ἑλένη had become a 'slogan' by 411, reflecting the unusual impact of *Helen*.[27] Euripides' play, then, would have been in the minds of playwrights or audiences for several years afterwards, whenever Helen featured on stage. Surely enough, in the prologue of *Orestes* Helen does appear—a fact that in itself is striking. But there is one particular passage that unmistakably brings to mind the earlier play and the 'slogan'. Here, just

[21] Fuqua (n. 12), 11; Vellacott (n. 5), 127–52; Willink (n. 19), p. xxviii.

[22] The date is attested by Σ Ar. *Ran.* 53 (cf. Σ Ar. *Thesm.* 1012, 1040).

[23] Ar. *Thesm.* 849–1010. See P. Rau, *Paratragodia: Untersuchung einer komischen Form des Aristophanes* (Munich, 1967), 53–89.

[24] Σ *Thesm.* 850 detects only the literal meaning (ὑπόγυον δεδιδαγμένην); R. Kannicht (ed.), *Euripides:* Helena (2 vols.; Heidelberg, 1969), 1.21 is right to stress the other sense of καινότης (i.e. καινοτομία περὶ τοῦ μύθου).

[25] On Euripides' adaptation of the myth and literary sources, see Kannicht (n. 24), 1.21–48.

[26] For example, Aesch. *Ag.* 63, 680, 1051, 1213, 1455; Eur. *Andr.* 103, 248, 680; *Hec.* 441, 629, 943. (One could add further examples from almost every play.) Cf. M. Cropp (ed.), *Euripides:* Iphigenia in Tauris (Warminster, 2000), 199 on ψόγος Ἑλένης as a recurring motif in tragedy.

[27] Cf. Kannicht (n. 24), 1.21–2.

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after Helen has sent clippings from her hair as an offering to Clytemnestra's grave, Electra exclaims (126–31):

> ὦ φύσις, ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ὡς μέγ' εἶ κακόν
> [σωτήριόν τε τοῖς καλῶς κεκτημένοις].
> ἴδετε γὰρ ἄκρας ὡς ἀπέθρισεν τρίχας,
> σώζουσα κάλλος· ἔστι δ' ἡ πάλαι γυνή.
> θεοί σε μισήσειαν, ὥς μ' ἀπώλεσας
> καὶ τόνδε πᾶσάν θ' Ἑλλάδ'. ὦ τάλαιν' ἐγώ.

O nature, what a great evil you are to mankind [as well as a source of salvation to fortunate people]! For behold how she has preserved her beauty by cutting her hair only at the ends—yes, she is *the same woman as of old*. May the gods hate you for having destroyed me, and Orestes, and the whole of Greece! Alas, I am wretched!

'Same old Helen!' Although commentators have interpreted these lines as primarily marking a return to the 'traditional' Helen of Homer and tragedy,[28] we are bound to recall in particular that Euripides' Helen of four years ago, unlike this Helen of 408, *did* shear off all her hair.[29] Furthermore, it seems clear that the description ἡ πάλαι γυνή deliberately recalls (and playfully reverses) ἡ καινὴ Ἑλένη. Thus what we have here is a specific reference to *Helen*—and perhaps also, most unusually, a 'nod' to Aristophanes. For a tragic poet to respond implicitly to a comic poet's criticisms would be extraordinary—though not, perhaps, without parallel.[30] One could respond by saying that it is the 'slogan', and the popular conception of Euripides in general, rather than Aristophanes, to which Euripides is referring. Nevertheless, there may still be implications here for the tone or genre of *Orestes* if Euripides is seen to be engaging with comic techniques or inserting knowing 'in-jokes'.[31]

Whether this *is* in fact an 'in-joke' depends on the precise tone or nuance that one may detect in the scene. It has seemed that this passage (along with various others) exhibits a certain degree of self-consciousness—or, at least, is somehow different in tone from properly 'tragic' dialogue. But differences of tone are notoriously difficult to pin down: and this is where the problem lies. Is Electra's tone here funny, arch, amusing, or ironical? Is she somehow 'breaking the illusion', acting as a meta-theatrical commentator as well as a character within the drama?[32] Such explanations are commonly given to describe the tone of problematic passages, and they correspond to the general image of 'late' Euripides as the 'corrupter' of genre (since tragedy is not normally funny, metatheatrical, *vel sim.*). Of course, judgements of 'tone' are largely subjective, depending on the tastes of the individual reader or spectator. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the tone of Electra's words here, and of other comparable passages in *Orestes*, can be explained more precisely. In fact, it belongs to a particular type of 'self-consciousness', which I have elsewhere called

[28] Willink (n. 19), ad loc.; cf. Fuqua (n. 12), 21–2; Zeitlin (n. 14), 65–6.

[29] *Hel.* 1186–9. Note also that the same unusual verb is used in each case (ἀπέθρισεν, ἀπέθρισας).

[30] A similar effect can perhaps be seen, not in a tragedy, but in a Euripidean satyr-play: *Cyc.* 222 seems to recall, by parody, not only Eur. *Andr.* (fr. 125 Kannicht) but also Ar. *Thesm.* 1105–6, which parodies the same phrase. Milman Parry's view that Euripides 'was answering Aristophanes' mockery by mocking himself' ('Studies in the epic technique of oral verse-making I', *HSCP* 41 [1930], 73–147 at 140–2) is followed by R. Seaford (ed.), *Euripides:* Cyclops (Oxford, 1984), 49.

[31] Cf. Davies (n. 17) on the tone of some supposedly polemical or metadramatic passages in tragedy.

[32] The view of Dobrov (n. 12), 22–3.

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metamythology. This technique is unusually prominent in *Helen*, but not much found elsewhere in drama: so this is another way in which *Orestes* can be seen as referring back to the subject-matter and themes of the earlier tragedy.[33]

In fact this article is itself a 'sequel' to my study of *Helen* and the other 'escape-tragedies' (to which the reader is referred for fuller discussion).[34] There I defined 'metamythology' as a type of discourse which arises when mythical characters are made to talk about themselves and their own myths, or where myths are otherwise presented, in a deliberately self-conscious manner; it is a type of discourse that seems to emphasize the fictionality of myth, as well as to signify that the myth is being discussed *qua* myth (rather than *qua* real life, as the fictional context would normally lead one to assume). This type of discourse is related to 'metatheatricality', but there is an important difference, in that the genre and context are not important: one could encounter metamythology in a play, in a song, or in the pages of a book.[35] It is not the tragic genre, or theatricality as such, to which our attention is being drawn, but rather myth itself—in the sense of individual myths and the mythical tradition as a whole.

Nearly all the characters in *Helen* show an artificially enhanced awareness that people up and down Greece are talking about them and their myths: they are made to refer to their own lives and contemporary events in such a way as to suggest that they were already well known as myths in their own time. For example, Helen refers to the 'famous plain' and 'famous city' of Troy, and pointedly declares that the name of her birthplace is 'well known';[36] Menelaus describes himself as being 'famous the whole world over';[37] stories of Menelaus' perilous travels and Helen's infidelity are repeatedly said to be current all over the Greek world;[38] and so on.

Helen is also made to refer to incidents from her own life and family history as stories subject to the conditions of truth and falsehood normally associated with fiction, not reality. Supposedly 'autobiographical' details are frequently prefaced with such phrases as 'people say that . . .' (*φασίν*) or 'there is a story that . . .' (*ἔστιν δὲ δὴ λόγος ὡς*), or undermined by parenthetical comments such as 'so we hear' (*ὡς ἀκούομεν*) or 'if this story is correct' (*εἰ σαφὴς οὗτος λόγος*).[39] Rather than vouching for the authenticity of her own myth, Helen invites the audience to choose between either believing or disbelieving it. This detachment creates an odd, unsettling effect, and (once again) the tone is hard to describe—is it ironical, amusing, out of place, 'untragic'?[40]

'Metamythology' also includes 'provocative' presentation of myth in general: that

[33] Eur. *IT*, which also has strong affinities with *Helen* and may also have been produced along with it in 412, is also 'metamythological' (as are certain other Euripidean tragedies to a much lesser extent): see M. E. Wright, *Euripides' Escape-Tragedies: A Study of* Helen, Andromeda*, and* Iphigenia among the Taurians (Oxford, 2005).

[34] Wright (n. 33), esp. 133–57.

[35] Although (as I said) in tragedy this type of effect is unusual, Homeric epic also contains passages which might be called 'metamythological' (e.g. *Il.* 6.357–8, 20.306–8, *Od.* 9.1–6, where characters seem to be referring to themselves as the subject-matter of myth and poetry): I should have made more of this fact in my earlier discussion.

[36] *Hel.* 57–8 (*κλεινὸν . . . πέδον*); 105 (*κλεινὴν πόλιν*); 16 (*οὐκ ἀνώνυμος*).

[37] *Hel.* 504 (*οὐκ ἄγνωστος ἐν πάσῃ χθονί*).

[38] *Hel.* 132 (*κλῄζεται καθ' Ἑλλάδα*); cf. 81, 126, 223–8, 250, 926–8.

[39] For example, *Hel.* 17–18, 21, 99, 136, 256–61.

[40] Cf. T. C. W. Stinton, '"Si credere dignum est": some expressions of disbelief in Euripides and others', *PCPS* 22 (1976), 60–89; repr. in id., *Collected Papers on Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1985), 236–64. Stinton concludes that 'apparent phrases of disbelief' in Euripides are essentially a rhetorical device to add emphasis—a conclusion which, though largely convincing, does not altogether explain the nuances of every passage (including those under discussion here).

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is, references to myths which are loaded with scepticism, or which include bizarre, contradictory, or invented matter. The whole plot of *Helen*, with its inversion of the usual Trojan War myth, falls into this category; other 'provocative' myths there include the report of Leda's suicide, never attested elsewhere in myth,[41] and the constant ambiguity over whether or not Castor and Polydeuces are dead.[42]

Many other scholars, writing about Euripides' attitude to myth in general, have detected 'scepticism' of one sort or another.[43] Metamythology might perhaps be thought of as an extreme form of scepticism or disbelief, but it is also something more than this. In *Helen* (and *Orestes*), Euripides is not simply questioning particular myths (along with the values which they embody), but demonstrating that the very notion of 'myth', in all its senses—as 'history', as 'religion', and, most of all, as a source of 'knowledge' about ourselves and the world—is deeply problematic. *Helen* is unusual in that its presentation of myth forms part of an intense exploration of epistemological and ontological problems.[44] *Orestes* may not be quite as philosophically complex as the earlier play,[45] but it certainly employs metamythology to similar ends.

Let us begin at the beginning, with Electra's scene-setting prologue speech. Along with other portions of *Orestes*, this scene has been considered 'superfluous to the plot movement'.[46] Nevertheless, Euripidean prologues are usually programmatic and to the point; and in fact this one, if read as a continuation of *Helen* and its metamythological strategy, starts to make more sense. Electra starts by introducing Tantalus as a paradigm of human suffering (4–8):

> ὁ γὰρ μακάριος (κοὐκ ὀνειδίζω τύχας)
> Διὸς πεφυκώς, ὡς λέγουσι, Τάνταλος
> κορυφῆς ὑπερτέλλοντα δειμαίνων πέτρον
> ἀέρι ποτᾶται· καὶ τίνει ταύτην δίκην,
> ὡς μὲν λέγουσιν, ὅτι . . .
>
> The well-born Tantalus (no, I do not criticize him for his good fortune), son of Zeus—*so they say*—is now suspended in mid-air, dreading a rock which overhangs his head; he is being punished in this way—*so they say*, at least—because . . .

The parenthetic phrase ὡς λέγουσι might not in itself invariably imply scepticism,[47] but the context will often indicate more exactly the intended effect. Here the recurrence of the same phrase within three lines gives it an inescapable emphasis, and the position of μέν makes the ironical or sceptical tone explicit.[48] Furthermore, the

[41] *Hel.* 136.

[42] For example, *Hel.* 138 (τεθνᾶσι καὶ οὐ τεθνᾶσι· δύο δ' ἐστὸν λόγω).

[43] For example, (on *Hel.* and *Or.*) Burnett (n. 3); Erbse (n. 12); Euben (n. 10); Fuqua (n. 12); N. A. Greenberg, 'Euripides' *Orestes*: an interpretation', *HSCP* 66 (1962), 157–92; Schein (n. 12).

[44] See C. Segal, 'The Two Worlds of Euripides' *Helen*', *TAPA* 102 (1971), 553–614; Wright (n. 33), 226–337.

[45] Clearly *Orestes*, like *Helen*, is an 'intellectual' tragedy in some sense: the comic poet Strattis described it as Euripides' 'cleverest' play (δρᾶμα δεξιώτατον, fr. 1 KA). A few scholars have seen epistemological depth in *Orestes*: e.g. Reinhardt (n. 3); Zeitlin (n. 14). Nevertheless, most tend to interpret Euripides' 'cleverness' here and elsewhere in terms of a superficial flirtation with contemporary ideas: e.g. West (n. 2); Willink (n. 19); Winnington-Ingram (n. 12).

[46] Burnett (n. 3), 195.

[47] Cf. West (n. 2), Willink (n. 19), ad loc. (comparing Aesch. *Eum.* 4, Soph. *Ant.* 823, Eur. *Her.* 26, etc.).

[48] See J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (Oxford, 1950[2]), 381 (noted by Willink [n. 19] ad loc.).

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scepticism seems to have no particular point in itself: that is, the reference to Tantalus is largely incidental,[49] and there is no reason to doubt Tantalus' parentage or the reason for his punishment. In other words, it is the attitude towards myth, rather than the details of the myth itself, that strikes one as unusual. However, Euripides has provocatively altered another, minor detail, depicting Tantalus, oddly, as suspended in mid-air.[50]

Further instances of metamythology are seen as Electra's speech continues. Clytemnestra's marriage to Agamemnon is described as 'well-known throughout Greece' (*ἐπίσημον εἰς Ἕλληνας*, 20), just a few lines after Agamemnon himself has been referred to as 'the famous man—if indeed he *is* famous' (*ὁ κλεινός, εἰ δὴ κλεινός*, 17). The report of the matricide, an act 'not glorious in the eyes of everybody' (*πρὸς οὐχ ἅπαντας εὔκλειαν φέρον*, 30), also refers self-consciously to the fact that the Atreid family myths are already well known as a subject for debate. In addition to this awareness of her own family's mythical fame, Electra goes on to draw attention to myth (and the conventions of the prologue speech) in a slightly different way. When she comes to narrate the grim goings-on of recent family history, Electra shows a seeming reluctance to supply all the details. This reluctance is seen in the jerky, hesitant, over-parenthetic style which pervades her speech[51] as well as in what she actually says. Just as she is about to describe the notorious feast of Thyestes, she breaks off to ask herself, or as it might be the audience, why she should go over the awful affair again (*τί τἄρρητ' ἀναμετρήσασθαί με δεῖ;* 14), and a line or two later she confirms that she will 'pass over' intervening events (*τὰς γὰρ ἐν μέσῳ σιγῶ τύχας*, 16). Perhaps we could interpret this technique in terms of a comment on theatrical conventions: Electra is refusing to deliver a straightforwardly expository prologue-speech of the usual kind.[52] However, it is also a comment on myth itself: Electra is acknowledging that there is no need to recount these tales to an audience who knew them—and their inconsistencies—well enough already.

As for the reason why Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon, Electra refuses to specify, saying instead that she leaves it to the public to decide (*ἐὼ τοῦτ' ἀσαφὲς ἐν κοινῷ σκοπεῖν*, 27)! Clytemnestra's motives are left obscure in other treatments of the myth (notably, the *Oresteia*), but again it is the *manner* of presentation here that is important. This outrageous line combines several important metamythological strands: an implicit admission that different accounts of Clytemnestra's motivation *were* current in the mythical tradition; a seeming indifference to events which are supposed to constitute Electra's own experience (as well as the moral centre of the plot); an explicit awareness of public opinion; and a deliberate ambiguity, or arbitrariness, with regard to the actual truth (if any), equivalent in tone to: 'Believe whatever you like!'

The tone of the prologue and its intellectual outlook, then, would have seemed

[49] But not, of course, unimportant: see M. J. O'Brien, 'Tantalus in Euripides' *Orestes*', *Rh. M.* 131 (1988), 30–45.

[50] V. J. Rosivach, 'Euripides, *Orestes* 5–7', *Maia* 29–30 (1977–8), 77–9, finds *ἀέρι ποτᾶται* unacceptable for this reason, and emends the line; but see Willink's (n. 19, ad loc.) defence of the manuscripts' reading (arguing that Euripides wanted to give his lines a 'cosmologized' flavour). See also R. Scodel, 'Tantalus and Anaxagoras', *HSCP* 88 (1984), 13–24, for a discussion of the cosmology of the passage as a whole.

[51] The syntax is marked by abrupt changes of direction, rhetorical questions, *praeteritio*, and frequent use of parenthesis: e.g. 1, 4, 5, 8, 14, 16, 17, 28, 37.

[52] Euripidean narrative prologues were seen as conventional in antiquity (e.g. Ar. *Ran.* 1119ff.). On narratological aspects of prologue speeches see, most recently, B. Goward, *Telling Tragedy: Narrative Technique in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides* (London, 1999).

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familiar to anyone who had seen or read *Helen*. Mythical characters are talking openly about myths, mythical 'history' is being treated as fiction—and thus we are prompted to question the value of the mythical tradition as a source of knowledge. All of this happens early in the play, even before the appearance of Helen as a character. This entry comes as a surprise, not only because Electra has been talking about Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Orestes (and so Helen is the last person whom one would expect to see), but because the entry of a quite different character has been anticipated. Electra peers down the road, hoping to see Menelaus (67–8), but instead Helen enters, unannounced (71).[53] Furthermore, it is immediately clear that this Helen *did*, after all, go to Troy: she even reveals the cause of her doing so (*πρὸς Ἴλιον / ἔπλευσ' ὅπως ἔπλευσα θεομανεῖ πότμῳ*, 78–9), as well as expressing regret about her evil reputation (98–104).

So it now seems that the 'new-style' Helen of 412 was a mirage, and the traditional, guilty Helen was the genuine one after all. Or does it? One often-noted effect of *Helen* was to make one wonder whether *anything* is really as it seems. By continually contrasting reality with appearances, not only in its metamythological attitude but also in other ways, *Helen* urged its audience to doubt the evidence of their eyes and ears, as well as what they thought they knew. Now, in the 'sequel', it is being made to seem as if the play *Helen* itself was yet another illusion! Indeed, throughout *Orestes*, as in *Helen*, there is a continual dichotomy, often expressed through sophistic wordplay, between seeming and being, truth and illusion, words and deeds, names and their referents.[54] Euripides (in common with certain sophists and Presocratics) seems to be undermining our knowledge of reality—or even reality itself.[55]

Wordplay aside, in both plays the theme of reality and illusion is embodied principally in the character of Helen herself. If a mythical figure so 'well known' as Helen can be presented in ways that are both perfectly plausible *and* radically divergent, then one is led to ask not only which version is real, but (more disturbingly) on what grounds one could ever reliably discern truth from falsehood. Euripides offers no solution to this problem. The 'Helen' of the *Orestes*, like the others, is presented as genuine—that is to say, she presents *herself* as genuine, through her own, potentially deceptive, words and outward appearance—but it is difficult to accept her at face value after sitting through *Helen* and the first hundred lines of *Orestes*.

All of this means that Electra's denunciation of Helen, and her view that nature will out (126–31, quoted above, p. 37), will also strike the audience as problematic in the extreme. What *is* Helen's *φύσις*, if it can be said to exist at all? Does she have a

[53] In some later productions, actors made this entrance even more surprising, by interpolating lines in which Helen was made to enter along with spoils from Troy (Σ *Or.* 57; cf. D. L. Page, *Actors' Interpolations in Greek Tragedy* [Oxford, 1934], 41).

[54] For example, 252 (*μὴ μόνον λέγ' ἀλλὰ καὶ φρόνει τάδε*); 259 (*ὁρᾷς γὰρ οὐδὲν ὧν δοκεῖς σάφ' εἰδέναι*); 286 (*τοῖς μὲν λόγοις ηὔφρανε, τοῖς δ' ἔργοισιν οὔ*); 314 (*κἂν μὴ νοσῇ γάρ, ἀλλὰ δοξάζῃ νοσεῖν*); 379 (*οὐκ ἂν αὐτὸν γνωρίσαιμ' ἂν εἰσιδών*); 390 (*τὸ σῶμα φρουδον· τὸ δ' ὄνομ' οὐ λέλοιπέ με*); 454 (*ὄνομα γάρ, ἔργον δ' οὐκ ἔχουσιν οἱ φίλοι*) (a full list would fill pages). Although a 'sophistic' flavour has been detected in *Orestes* (by e.g. Greenberg [n. 43]; H. P. Parry, 'Euripides' *Orestes*: the quest for salvation', *TAPA* 100 [1969], 337–53; Willink [n. 19]), the exact tone here, and the similarity to *Helen*, has not been fully appreciated. Note also that, although Euripides was famous for exploiting the discrepancy between reality and appearances (Ar. *Ach.* 440–1; cf. Eur. *Telephus* fr. 698 Nauck, *Alc.* 339, *IA* 338, *Med.* 601–2, *Phoen.* 389), *Orestes* is the only extant play in which the frequency and concentration of wordplay on this topic approach that of *Helen*.

[55] This (perhaps ambitious-seeming) claim is explored at greater length in my book (n. 33), 260–337.

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single, perceptible nature, or is she just a collection of irreconcilably plural, contradictory attributes? And is she after all guilty or innocent of moral crime? Again, Euripides offers no easy answer. Despite the revelation that (as we always 'knew') this Helen *did* cause the Trojan War, her presentation in *Orestes* scarcely seems to justify the hatred which is felt for her by the other characters here and elsewhere in tragedy. Although this Helen is repeatedly said to be morally culpable or even evil, to many interpreters she has seemed an agreeable and harmless character, whose good nature contrasts sharply with the reprehensible motives of those who plot against her.[56] In the prologue alone, she regrets her voyage to Troy (78–9), she shows pity and concern for Orestes (90), she feels ashamed to show herself before the Greeks (98, 102), she is concerned about the good reputation of her unmarried daughter (108), and she is careful to observe the correct religious rites (110–25). But the other characters still treat her as the Helen of myth—*ἡ πάλαι γυνή*—none the less.

Electra goes on to curse Helen, in words that closely recall those of Teucer in *Helen*.[57] Orestes too denounces Helen when he realizes that Menelaus has recovered her (247–50):

> *Ορ.* *εἰ μόνος ἐσώθη, μᾶλλον ἂν ζηλωτὸς ἦν·*
> *εἰ δ' ἄλοχον ἄγεται, κακὸν ἔχων ἥκει μέγα.*
>
> *Ηλ.* *ἐπίσημον ἔτεκε Τυνδάρεως †εἰς τὸν ψόγον†*
> *γένος θυγατέρων δυσκλεές τ' ἀν' Ἑλλάδα.*

Orestes. He would have been more enviable if he alone had survived, but if he is bringing his wife, he is bringing a great evil.

Electra. Infamous were the daughters whom Tyndareus fathered, ill-famed up and down Greece.

The wish that Helen had died instead of returning to Greece, expressed in various forms elsewhere in tragedy,[58] is another sign of the contempt in which she is held. And once again, strikingly, the tone here seems to be metamythological, since Menelaus is alluding to the fact that Tyndareus and his troublesome offspring are famous—as a myth—throughout the Greek world.[59]

Menelaus' behaviour as well as Helen's comes under scrutiny. Was he right to wage war for the sake of a woman? The simple answer, given by Pylades, is based on the standard assessment of Helen's character: no, it was not worth fighting over such a *terrible* woman (737 *κακῆς γυναικός*; cf. 741 *κακίστην*). But even if Helen is not so terrible, or if the myth about her phantom double was true, or if in any case we can never be sure what the truth is, the answer will be the same: not only the Trojan War

[56] For example, Willink (n. 19), 94: 'It is important that we should *like* Helen, whatever view we take of her calamitous career, that we may be the more shocked by the murderous violence surrounding and directed against her'; cf. Erbse (n. 12), 446, and Zeitlin (n. 14), 75–6, for similar views. Verrall (n. 12), 211–19, however, sees Helen as conventionally awful and lacking in remorse.

[57] *Or.* 130–1 (quoted above, p. 37); cf. *Hel.* 74–5 (*θεοί σ', ὅσον μίμημ' ἔχεις / Ἑλένης, ἀποπτύσειαν*): this echo is seen also by Willink (n. 19), ad loc. Teucer's words at *Hel.* 73–4 are also echoed by Pylades at *Or.* 743.

[58] For example, Eur. *Hec.* 944–51; *IT* 354–8, 439–46; *Tro.* 1100–17.

[59] Σ Eur. *Or.* 294 = Hesiod fr. 176 MW reports that in Stesichorus Aphrodite made all Tyndareus' daughters *λιπεσάνορες*. This myth is referred to in two other passages from *Or.* (540–1, 750), but in the present passage the 'metamythological' tone is particularly prominent because of the self-conscious repetition of words meaning 'famous' (*ἐπίσημον, δυσκλεές τ' ἀν' Ἑλλάδα*).

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but all wars are unjustifiable. That is, if we can never really know what we are seeing and hearing, it is impossible to justify our actions. Everybody 'knows' that Menelaus' love for Helen made him behave as he did; but what sort of person was he in love with, and what did this love mean? As Orestes says, all of Greece *thinks* that Menelaus loves Helen (φιλεῖν δάμαρτα πᾶσιν Ἕλλησιν δοκεῖς, 669); but the marked use of δοκεῖν here, as in many passages elsewhere in *Helen* and *Orestes*, undermines this statement. (Is it true or not? Who knows?) The reason why the Greeks *think* that Menelaus loves Helen is that the myth said so—but the myth, we are now led to think, may be an illusion. Once again, it is the *myth* of Helen and Menelaus (as such) that is under the magnifying-glass: this is made doubly clear by the metamythological reference, in πᾶσιν Ἕλλησιν, to a large audience—tellers of myths, audiences of tragedy, or the whole of posterity.

As the play continues, although Orestes' predicament ostensibly remains at the centre of the plot, references to Helen, Menelaus, the Trojan War, and deceptive appearances proliferate. At 1100ff. Orestes and Pylades decide to murder Helen. This plot development has sometimes seemed excessively sudden and lacking in motivation, or its moral significance (if any) has been seen in the fact that it recalls Orestes' killing of Clytemnestra;[60] but it is more naturally seen as the culmination of the play's ongoing preoccupation with Helen herself. The reasons that the plotters give for murdering Helen are important, because they demonstrate that even in the midst of Orestes' immediate troubles he remains obsessed by the past suffering at Troy.[61] Orestes and Pylades wish to cause Menelaus pain (1105), but they clearly think that Helen's guilt and wickedness provide a better justification for killing her (1132–9):

εἰ μὲν γὰρ ἐς γυναῖκα σωφρονεστέραν
ξίφος μεθεῖμεν, δυσκλεὴς ἂν ἦν φόνος·
νῦν δ' ὑπὲρ ἁπάσης Ἑλλάδος δώσει δίκην,
ὧν πατέρας ἔκτειν', ὧν δ' ἀπώλεσεν τέκνα,
νύμφας τ' ἔθηκεν ὀρφανὰς ξυναόρων·
ὀλολυγμὸς ἔσται, πῦρ τ' ἀνάψουσιν θεοῖς,
σοὶ πολλὰ κἀμοὶ κέδν' ἀρώμενοι τυχεῖν,
κακῆς γυναικὸς οὕνεχ' αἷμ' ἐπράξαμεν.

If we were to stab a more virtuous woman, it would be an inglorious killing; but as it is, she will be paying the penalty on account of all Greece, those whose fathers she killed, whose children she destroyed and the brides she robbed of their husbands. A cry of triumph will arise, and they will light fires for the gods, praying for many blessings to fall upon you and me for killing an evil woman.

Pylades defends his plan by presenting Helen herself as a murderer. This image of Helen is of course extremely common;[62] but when Pylades assures Menelaus that he will henceforth be known as the killer of 'Helen the mass-murderer' (Ἑλένης λεγόμενος τῆς πολυκτόνου φονεύς, 1142), his words precisely echo Helen's ironical description of herself at *Helen* 198 (δι' ἐμὲ τὰν πολυκτόνον). Even if our knowledge of the Trojan myth had not been so seriously challenged, we might well reflect that this description, here as elsewhere, is rhetorically exaggerated: unlike Orestes, Helen

[60] Greenberg (n. 43), 160–3 ('Helen is a doublet for Clytemnestra'); cf. F. J. Nisetich, 'The silencing of Pylades', *AJP* 107 (1986), 46–54 at 52; G. Perrotta, 'Studi euripidei II e III', *SIFC* 6 (1928), 89–138 at 102; Rawson (n. 18), 155–6.

[61] Cf. Fuqua (n. 14), 11–13 (who shows also that Orestes' behaviour here recalls, and contrasts with, Trojan 'heroism').

[62] Cf. *Or.* 56, 102, 743, 1305–7.

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never personally stabbed anyone with a sword. But in the light of *Helen*, we can no longer be sure that the killing will be glorious: it may be that an innocent woman is about to be murdered without provocation. Perhaps nothing is as it seems: in the course of the intrigue scene, we are reminded again of Helen's ability to pretend to be what she is not (1122), and the passing reference to Helen's collection of mirrors (1112; cf. *Tro.* 1107) may be another hint at her shifting, double personality.

Eventually the murder which has so many times been hoped for takes place—or does it? This time the audience as well as the characters are fooled, by a clever piece of stagecraft which exploits the now familiar theme of illusion and reality.[63] From inside the house Helen is heard to shout twice that she is being killed (*ἰὼ Πελασγὸν Ἄργος, ὄλλυμαι κακῶς*, 1296; *Μενέλαε, θνῄσκω· σὺ δὲ παρών μ' οὐκ ὠφελεῖς*, 1301): these sound exactly like conventional death-cries.[64] The chorus confirms that Helen is crying out—or so it *seems*, to judge by the sound (*ὡς ἀπεικάσαι*, 1299)—and they sing a short ode (1303–10) in which they encourage the killers and allude to Helen's (supposedly) duplicitous and murderous nature. At the moment of Helen's death, the memory of Troy is once again evoked, in words which once again recall *Helen* as well as Homer,[65] and in a further song this death is said to be a fitting retribution from the gods for what has happened (*θεῶν / νέμεσις*, 1361–2).

It really seems, then, that Helen is dead. Since everyone 'knew' that Helen returned to Sparta with Menelaus (e.g. *Od.* 4), this would be an outrageous reversal of the myth—and precisely the same sort of technique that Euripides had used in the plot of *Helen*, with its denial that Helen ever went to Troy. But in fact Helen's death may have been another illusion. The possibility that we have been deceived by what we heard is suggested indirectly by the words of the chorus (1357–9), who hope that no one will come to Helen's aid

> *πρὶν ἐτύμως ἴδω τὸν Ἑλένας φόνον*
> *καθαιμακτὸν ἐν δόμοις κείμενον,*
> *ἢ καὶ λόγον του προσπόλων πυθώμεθα.*

before I see for certain the blood-stained corpse lying in the palace, or else hear some report from one of the servants.

These lines raise the issue of proof: how do we *know* that Helen is dead? A blood-stained corpse (an 'atechnic' proof, as one might say) would, clearly, be more convincing than the mere report of Helen's death. But no corpse appears, and it is never entirely made clear whether or not Helen was killed. After a tantalizingly long description of the 'murder' by the Phrygian slave (1395ff.), in which it is strongly implied that Helen fell down dead,[66] we learn that at the crucial moment Helen somehow 'vanished' (*ἁ δ' / ἐγένετο διαπρὸ δωμάτων ἄφαντος*, 1494–5; cf. 1557 *ἄφαντος*) and that Orestes was cheated of his victim (1579–80). Yet again the situation and the wording recall *Helen*: not only does the semi-supernatural

[63] On questions of staging see W. G. Arnott, 'Tension, frustration and surprise: a study of theatrical techniques in some scenes of Euripides' *Orestes*', *Arethusa* 17 (1983), 13–28.

[64] For example, Aesch. *Ag.* 1343–5, *Cho.* 869; Soph. *El.* 1404–16.

[65] *Or.* 1305–10 (*ἃ πλείστους / ἔκανεν Ἑλλάνων . . . ἀμφὶ τὰς Σκαμάνδρου δίνας*); cf. *Hel.* 52–3 (*ψυχαὶ δὲ πολλαὶ δι' ἔμ' ἐπὶ Σκαμανδρίοις / ῥοαῖσιν ἔθανον*), Hom. *Il.* 1.4–5 (*πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν / ἡρώων*).

[66] The wording of *Or.* 1491 (*ἐπὶ φόνῳ χαμαιπετεῖ ματρὸς*, 'upon the falling-to-the-ground murder of [Helen]') is deliberately ambiguous ('an ingenious *suggestio falsi*', Willink [n. 19] ad loc.).

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vanishing-act here resemble the disappearance of the phantom Helen (*βέβηκεν ἄλοχος σὴ πρὸς αἰθέρος πτυχὰς / ἀρθεῖσ' ἄφαντος*, *Hel.* 605–6), but the Phrygian's realization that Menelaus' recovery of Helen was in vain (*Or.* 1500–3) also echoes the sentiments of the Greek servant in the same situation (*Hel.* 603).[67]

The final portion of the play, which includes the epiphany of Apollo, has often been criticized on account of its cluttered stage action, its theological outlook, or its perceived failure to impose genuine resolution on the preceding events.[68] Indeed, if we were hoping for a satisfactory outcome to Orestes' situation, we are likely to be baffled or disappointed by the play's ending. However, as so often before, our interest is directed more towards Helen and the Trojan War than towards Orestes and the matricide. In the speech of Apollo, Helen's fate is dealt with first and most prominently (1629–43), and Orestes' seems almost to be an afterthought. Then the very last lines of the play (1673–93) are entirely concerned with Helen, and Orestes is forgotten altogether. But this is not a fault in design. Helen's prominence at both the beginning and the end of the play is entirely deliberate; it is she, not Orestes, who 'frames' the action; she is of central, not peripheral, importance. If *Orestes* is a sequel, then Helen's final destiny is highly significant, since it brings closure not just to this play but also to *Helen*.

But it is still difficult to be satisfied by this 'happy' ending, for uncertainties and ambiguities persist just as before. We learn the cause of the Trojan War—Zeus and the gods were responsible, and Helen was just thei.r instrument—but we are denied any moral justification of their actions; they simply wanted to make the earth lighter (1639–42). This crude account is identical to that offered in *Helen*:[69] in both plays it is a woefully inadequate explanation of the human suffering and death at Troy. We learn too that Helen is to be deified and worshipped along with her brothers, the Dioscuri (1636–7, 1686–90): this again repeats and amplifies information found in the *exodos* of *Helen* (1666–9). However, it is never satisfactorily explained *why* things have turned out in this way. In addition, it might seem ironic or disturbing that sailors should pray to one who was responsible for the destruction of so many ships, and some have even doubted whether the aetiology is in fact genuine.[70] More troubling still is that at the end we are no closer to understanding the nature of Helen. Even if this is, as Electra says, 'the same old Helen', we have not really learnt anything new about her.[71] Is the Helen of *Orestes* more or less real than the Helen of *Helen*? Is she good or evil? Did

[67] One notes, also, the incongruity of the Phrygian's remark within its immediate dramatic context: as West (n. 2), 283, notes, 'The Phrygian has no real reason for supposing that she is gone for ever, but Euripides has confided in him.' In other words, the point is that the Phrygian's words refer to the Helen myth in general, rather than what has just happened in the world of the play.

[68] Verrall (n. 12), 256–7, described the finale as 'transparently perfunctory and ironical . . . of all the like scenes in Euripides it is perhaps the most prodigiously absurd, unreal, meaningless, impossible'. He even suggested, implausibly, that Euripides intended the play to end at line 1624 before Apollo's entry (ibid.262). Cf. Reinhardt (n. 3), 46 (who found the ending 'absurd'); V. Di Benedetto (ed.), *Euripidis Orestes* (Florence, 1965), ad 1624–93 (who perceives a complete lack of dramatic tension towards the end of the play); Parry (n. 54), 339 ('the play has no real *τέλος* according to orthodox expectations').

[69] *Hel.* 38–41; cf. *El.* 1281–2, *Cypria* fr. 1 Davies.

[70] West (n. 2), 291 notes that although Helen was associated with the Dioscuri there is no evidence that she received *theoxenia* along with them. Both West and S. Scullion, 'Tradition and innovation in Euripidean aitiology', *ICS* 24–5 (1999–2000), 217–33 at 220–1, suspect an *ad hoc* invention by Euripides.

[71] It is interesting to note that the phrase *ἡ πάλαι γυνή*, like Aristophanes' *ἡ καινὴ Ἑλένη*, seems to have become a 'slogan', denoting someone who is not to be taken at face value: Plutarch uses it of Alcibiades (*Alc.* 26.3).

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she deserve to die? Euripides does not answer these questions. Instead he makes it clear, as he did in *Helen*, that the truth is impossible to pin down at all.

These problems of guilt, responsibility, and knowledge have far-reaching moral consequences, not only for Helen but also for the 'main' plot of *Orestes*. Although the characters believe that Helen's killing is justifiable, they have, clearly, been misled by deceptive appearances, faulty 'knowledge', and unreliable myths. So it is, by implication, with Orestes' matricide: that is, if no one can ever say whether Helen is guilty or not, how can one make a similar judgement about Clytemnestra or Orestes? Thus the figure of Helen is used obliquely to add a new perspective to Orestes' dilemma. In both these Helen-tragedies, Euripides is problematizing not only the central moral questions themselves but the very nature of truth and our knowledge of it.

Orestes appears in a rather different light, then, if one approaches it with *Helen* in mind. And, as I hinted earlier, this approach may have broader implications about the sort of playwright Euripides was, as well as the sort of work *Orestes* is. We do not need to resort to 'late Euripides'—that problematic and decadent figure described above—in order to explain such features as the play's unusual plot, attitude to myth, and relationship to earlier tragedies.[72] This view of 'late Euripides' is difficult to swallow because it is an anachronism: his supposed 'genre-bending', corruption, and metatheatricality make him seem to some an excessively modern, even postmodern, figure. But rather than trying to read nineteenth-, twentieth-, or twenty-first-century concerns into Euripides' text, we can understand *Orestes* purely in its own intellectual context of the fifth century B.C.

Froma Zeitlin's influential article 'The closet of masks' illustrates the ahistorical type of approach which I want to avoid. She explicitly labels Euripides 'postmodern', drawing comparisons between his work and that of Jorge Luis Borges. On her reading, *Orestes* emerges as a complex, labyrinthine mass of intertextual references which act as a metatheatrical commentary on a genre in decline.[73] Like many of the scholars mentioned above, Zeitlin sees the play's form as mirroring its content: it is a 'turbulent' text, a 'Dionysiac chaos of forms', which is being used to advance a turbulent and chaotic view of the world.[74] But we should not be too quick to equate form with content. No one would deny that in terms of its *content*—its political, social, and epistemological message—*Orestes* is full of pessimism and disillusionment. But in terms of its outward *form* the play behaves just like other fifth-century tragedies; it does nothing which affects its generic status as a tragedy. Certainly *Orestes* is complex; but complexity is not the same thing as chaos. After all, intertextuality, allusion, and self-consciousness are not in themselves unusual, un-tragic, or postmodern, but perfectly normal features of tragic drama. Zeitlin and others believe that it is the particular *type* of self-consciousness seen in *Orestes* that threatens or subverts its tragic status. But as I have tried to show, this self-consciousness is *not* 'metatheatrical' but 'metamythological', following in the footsteps of *Helen*. Euripides' target is myths rather than texts or genres. His attempts to undermine knowledge and language have nothing to do with the criticism or 'destruction' of tragedy, but rather are linked to the epistemological problems first raised in *Helen*.

To conclude: *Orestes* makes perfect sense as a Euripidean sequel, in a thematic and

[72] Such odd-seeming features have been thought to affect the quality or generic status of *Helen* too: see Wright (n. 33), 6–43.

[73] Zeitlin (n. 14), 51–2.

[74] Ibid. 57–8.

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intellectual sense. Although the play can be read on its own, it can also clearly be seen as continuing and supplementing the subject-matter, themes, and outlook of the earlier tragedy; so a significant extra level of meaning and enjoyment would have been available to audience members who were familiar with *Helen*. This may not be the most immediately obvious way to read *Orestes*, still less the only way of approaching it, but it does at least offer a new perspective on the drama, as well as an opportunity to re-examine certain bigger questions about the playwright. Of course, all this may not lead us to *like* the play any better—but everybody knows that sequels are always worse than the originals.[75]

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