

EURIPIDES HEAUTONTIMOROU MENOS

PIETRO PUCCI

Cornell University

The earliest known recognition scenes in Greek literature, those found in Homer, already appear highly stylized and conventional: they are built on very improbable situations, and the recognition takes place on the basis of the very tenuous evidence of a scar, a common secret, and so on. To look for a realistic situation and for realistic evidence in such scenes is vain and naïve: however changed a man may be, he does not lose his more distinctive and personal characteristics in the eyes of his mother and his wife, even after twenty years. That a scar on a knee may be more telling than the eyes, the voice, the smile, the way of talking, etc. is already part of the convention. This poses the problem of the significance of the recognition, of the artistic function of this convention, rather than its realistic plausibility.¹ These remarks are intended as preliminary to an analysis of the recognition scene in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* (164 ff.) and the supposed criticism of it by Euripides in *Electra* 508 ff.

I shall here try to show, following the analysis made by some recent scholars, that the usual criticism of the improbability of Aeschylus' recognition devices is out of place, if only because the material evidence of the similarity of hair and footprint is not the exclusive evidence, nor the most important. Secondly I shall try to show that Euripides' criticism, while apparently only a criticism of Aeschylus, is in truth a serious comment on his contemporary reality.

Two recent papers have analysed anew the scene of the *Libation Bearers*, and both, to a different degree, have shown the importance of elements other than the material evidence of the recognition. Thus Solmsen pays attention to the religious atmosphere which encompasses

¹ Probably every author who uses the topos, with its extremely tense development, exploits it to a different purpose.

the recognition: "... the lock is the answer of the gods to the prayer in which Electra asked for Orestes' return."² Electra's faith in the gods' answer to her prayer makes it indeed easier for her to recognize the lock as Orestes', but Solmsen fails to pay attention to the religious significance of the lock on the tomb. A. D. Fitton Brown too neglects this point, but in analysing the scene, he recognizes that "the real reason, here as in Sophocles' *Electra*, for supposing that the lock of hair is Orestes' is the fact that no one else could have left it on the tomb."³

But this conclusion will not be surprising if one bears in mind the religious significance of the offering of the lock. As L. Gernet pointed out,⁴ the situation dictates that Orestes alone could have been the offerer of the lock:

In fact there is in this very situation a kind of premise which is common to all three tragedians: only Orestes can have come to his father's tomb. In fact he alone was qualified to climb to the top of the mound and to accomplish the ritual of offering a lock, which, in this case, establishes a religious tie between the male heir and the father.⁵

This conclusion seems to me safe: as concerns the text itself it can be added that *τομαῖον τόνδε βόστρυχον τάφῳ* (167) might possibly mean "this lock cut in honor of the tomb"; and that the chorus' query as to whether the lock is of a man or a woman (169) receives only an evasive and perhaps ironical answer by Electra (170, 172), since in the circumstances the lock must be that of a man and yet be similar to that of a girl. Electra seems to guess immediately from the first lines, 164 ff., who is the owner of that lock, as Solmsen has very well seen; and the chorus too reaches the conclusion that the lock must belong to a friend

² F. Solmsen, "Electra and Orestes: Three Recognitions in Greek Tragedy," *Mededelingen der K. Nederl. Akad. van Wetensch.* 30, no. 2 (1967) p. 4.

³ A. D. Fitton Brown, "The Recognition Scene in Choephoroi," *REG* 74 (1961) 365. See *Choeph.* 171-72, 189-91. Fitton Brown also quotes *Choeph.* 187-88 and Aristotle, *Poetics* 16 1455A4-6, in support of his conclusion; but neither passage is as unequivocal as he seems to imply.

⁴ L. Gernet, "Droit et prédroit dans la Grèce ancienne," *L'Année Sociologique* ser. 3, 1949, p. 77.

⁵ The significance of the lock offering is also stressed by S. Eitrem, *Opferritus und Voropfer der Griechen und Römer* (Kristiania 1915) 350 and 414-15, and by M. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*² 1 (Munich 1955) 181. For anthropological evidence cf. E. R. Leach, "Magical Hair," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 88 (1958) 147-64. Hair seems to be a universal symbol of soul, fertility, personal power, or sex.

(173), before any similarity to Electra's hair has been shown. The possibility that an enemy might have left the lock on the tomb, rejected at 173, is accepted by Electra at 198: she is probably thinking of the possibility of sacrilegious mockery by an enemy with the purpose of embarrassing and taunting her and the dead, of something similar to the sacrilegious parody of Aegisthus in Euripides' *Electra*, 326-31.

The recognition of the hair as Orestes' hair is therefore only subsidiary evidence and is supported by absolute evidence, the offering of the lock on the tomb and the religious significance of this act.

But, as Electra and the chorus are convinced of this point, so they are puzzled by the idea of Orestes' return, 179-82. Here the improbability of Orestes' coming back to Argos is stated emphatically by the chorus (181-82), and Electra must share this fear: *καῶμοι*, 183. Therefore Electra is tortured by the following problem: "If Orestes has not come, who put this lock on Agamemnon's tomb?" 183-204, a problem for which she cannot find any real solution, since the only possible one—that it must have been sent by Orestes—has been already proposed (180), but was ignored by the chorus. That it has been put by an enemy has been refuted at 173 and now is proposed again without conviction (198).

The problem is made more puzzling by the discovery of the footprints which reveal that someone accompanied by another has come and put the lock on the tomb. Here the name of Orestes is not uttered: the similarity between the size of the footprints and her own feet leaves Electra still confused, but fortunately at this point the young man himself appears.

Summarizing these points, the recognition in Aeschylus is supported by Electra's awareness that a serious offering of a lock of hair—by which the offerer enters into contact with the dead—may be made only by a friend; and consequently—after the prayers, and the intense religious climax of 124-63—only by Orestes. The recognition is confirmed by the similarity of the hair; whereas, apart from revealing the presence of an offerer, no firm conclusion can be drawn from the footprints, despite the similarity of size.

The material proofs therefore play their part within the presence of a strong religious belief that supports their otherwise weak plausibility.

This belief stems from a vision of the world in which the dead still exert power and can be aroused to help, in which a relative enters into communication with the dead by means of special rites and offerings, and in which the sacredness of the γένος is expected to be a matter of concern for the daemonic powers of Heaven and Earth—and therefore an avenging son can become suddenly a grown plant (204) in protection of his father's house and rights, even if he is a young man and alone. The real improbability of this recognition—for a person like Electra and, possibly, for Aeschylus' audience—did not lie so much in the evidence as in what contradicted that evidence: the danger Orestes would run in coming back and the improbability that he would assume the task of the avenger.⁶

If now we turn to Euripides' criticism of this scene, we shall see that he is aware that the material pieces of evidence used by Aeschylus are supported by a general premise. In Euripides' *Electra*, too, there is a situation which underlies the interpretation of the pieces of evidence; in this case it is Electra's idea which she has just revealed of how Orestes will appear—as an idealized noble hero, a brave semi-divine savior. When the old man tells Electra that Orestes has come back in secret, the first reaction of Electra is to reject that possibility (524–26):

What you say is unworthy of a wise man! Do you believe that my own brother, who is a brave man, would come in stealth to our land for fear of Aegisthus?

And only then she adds (527), "Besides, how could a lock of his hair correspond to mine?" Here follows Electra's criticism of the cogency of the evidence provided by the similarity of hair and footprints, and by a child's woven garment; and in this, Euripides is indeed making fun of the notion that by such evidence one may safely recognize a brother. He does this essentially by suppressing the religious significance which underlies the interpretation of the evidence in Aeschylus. But, to repeat, his Electra first indicates her real reason for disbelieving in

⁶ Electra was very far from thinking of Orestes as an avenger, if the chorus has to mention him to her in line 115—a striking surprise: but the young woman did not know Apollo's command to Orestes. That the chorus may be free to advise Electra to subvert Clytemnestra's order and to call for an avenger is striking too. Probably the slaves, as "marginal" characters, are more sensitive to the problem of justice and quicker to think of subversion.

Orestes' presence—that Orestes is too noble to come in stealth—and only after expressing this conviction does she seek to strengthen her position by attacking the reliability of the material evidence.

This point leads us to see that the rationalistic examination of the pieces of evidence is in both cases subsidiary to a faith, to a deep belief; and that therefore what is significant is not the evidence *per se*, but the faith it supports. In Aeschylus, acceptance of the evidence depends on the religious faith that Orestes alone would make such an offering; in Euripides, rejection of the evidence depends on Electra's belief in the nobility of her brother.

But the most striking fact is that Euripides, by making fun of the Aeschylean evidence, is in reality commenting on his own Electra, since her rationalistic examination of the evidence leads her to error and misjudgment. Orestes is in fact present, and, as the audience has seen, he made the offering of his hair on the tomb and has already spoken with his sister for a long time. Electra is therefore shown to be wrong just when she is making the soundest critical examination of the evidence. It is difficult to imagine a more radical way of mocking the pretensions of human reasoning! Euripides is here dealing with a problem which could not interest Aeschylus but which was very important in his own time, the relationship between evidence and truth.⁷ His answer is negative: Electra's sound reasoning is baffled. She is right by any standard of rational analysis of evidence, and yet she is wrong. Euripides here repeats his familiar theme of the powerlessness of human reasoning.

It follows that, whereas in Aeschylus religious faith needs only some poor bits of evidence to lead man toward the truth, in Euripides rationalistic reasoning may lead to error. It is a privileged point of view which guarantees the soundness of the evidence, not the reverse. Now, even if Euripides is aware that the offering of the lock and the ascent of the mound have religious significance (otherwise he would not relate as a scandal the sacrilegious parody of Orestes' ritual played by Aegisthus

⁷ Cf. F. Solmsen, *Die Entwicklung der aristotelischen Logik und Rhetorik* (Berlin 1929) 136–37, and *Antiphonstudien* (Berlin 1931) 50–58; also J. de Romilly, *Raison et histoire chez Thucydide* (Paris 1956). At any rate, Euripides himself explicitly makes the point that it is impossible to know the truth, because things are without *tekmerion*, “sign or mark.” “God is many-sided and hard to interpret” (*Hel.* 711–15).

on Agamemnon's tomb, 326-31),⁸ the staging of his play shows clearly the secularisation of the myth. Electra's desire for Orestes' return is not connected with the religion of the γένος, with the sense of the γένος as a community protected by the gods,⁹ but is a private desire for vengeance, an empirical emotion. Consequently, as we have seen, Electra's faith in Orestes' nobility and courage is the fruit of her dream. Her distance from reality is emphasized by her incapability of recognizing Orestes throughout the first part of the play. The recognition is finally imposed by the old man who recognizes a scar on Orestes' face. Electra's blindness in regard to evidence could not be more forcibly stressed.¹⁰ And yet Electra relies on external evidence. Orestes, on the contrary, knows very well that nothing can be learned about men from such evidence: when he is confronted with the farmer, he discovers (366-67) that "there is no precise evidence for recognizing men"; and against the apparent indications of what has sometimes been called evidence—birth, riches, etc.—he rightly recognizes as a noble man the farmer, who has none of those marks. Whereas Electra, using the soundest analysis of evidence, cannot recognize her own brother and his nobility, Orestes is able to recognize the nobility of a farmer, in terms surely contradictory to the opinion of most Athenians. The play throughout unfolds situations contrary to the evidence given and the expectations aroused. Aegisthus and Clytemnestra appear very different from Electra's description of them.¹¹ The play is full of reversals of commonplace elements of the myth. Through Electra it becomes somehow an "allusive" play, i.e. a play of a play. Under the skilled hand of Euripides, the Electra of the myth becomes a neurotic character, since her feelings of love for her brother and of hatred for her mother, deprived of any transcendental light, turn out to be monomaniac and obsessive, therefore not conducive to truth. Thus, in this

⁸ Cf. Gernet (above, note 4) 77-78.

⁹ Critics have shown how Electra refers vaguely to the favor and justice of the gods. She indeed speaks of justice in lines 57-58, 671-84 (with the distribution of the lines given by the mss.), 771, and 955. However, (1) there is a remarkable passage (400 ff.) in which Electra pays no attention to Apollo's oracle, and (2) it is obvious that her personal feeling of hatred and jealousy for Clytemnestra prevails over the pious sense of justice.

¹⁰ Note that Orestes got that scar on a day when he was chasing a deer *with Electra*.

¹¹ Aegisthus, described by Electra as a sacrilegious mocker of Agamemnon's tomb (326-31), will act in a kind and pious way and will be shown performing a religious celebration.

scene where Electra rejects the evidence of Orestes' presence, the allusion to the Aeschylean scene makes clear that the Euripidean character is a masked variant of the old Electra, and that the new one has a new faith, a faith in her monomaniac hopes and dreams, and in the empirical facts of life. Typical, in this connection, are her refusal to go to the god's festival because of her worn out clothes (184-89), and her rebuke to the farmer who has invited the noble young man into his poor hovel (408-19).

The significance of the recognition scene in the two dramatists involves the problem of how to encounter truth. In both cases, faith dominates the use of evidence: for the older tragedian, religious faith provides a privileged point of view which makes truth reachable; for Euripides, Electra's faith is an empirical personal belief, and therefore truth is pursued in vain.¹²

This interpretation of Euripides' recognition scene, with its pessimistic overtones—the self-deceptive nature of human hopes and aims—helps our understanding of the amused and amusing reference to Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*. This reference is far from being a "lack of reverence," or "a procedure petty, tasteless and undignified" (as scholars often feel, cf. Solmsen [above, note 2] 16); it is not even a criticism, but a joke.¹³ It is in fact intended paradoxically in so far as it censures the weak use of evidence in Aeschylus' scene of recognition, and at the same time shows in the *Electra* the impossibility of arriving at the truth in real life by means of evidence. This paradoxical form of criticism is a deliberate trick—hence the humorous side of this reference. This interpretation is in accordance with the structure of ideas in the play as a whole. For the drama plays cleverly on the Aeschylean characters of Orestes and Electra: not to show problematic aspects of justice, but rather to show the ambiguity of justice in terms of the self-indulgence and the self-deception of men. It is in emphasizing such self-deception that the allusion to Aeschylus becomes significant: the criticism of Aeschylus' naïve examination of pieces of evidence is really a criticism of the contemporary naïve belief in the existence of self-supporting evidence, i.e. in the existence of self-evident rational steps towards truth.

¹² Solmsen (above, note 2) 13 rightly calls the recognition scene in Euripides a "comedy of errors."

¹³ Gernet (above, note 4) 77: "Cette parodie n'est qu'humour."