EURIPIDES' *ORESTES:* THE QUEST FOR SALVATION

HUGH PARRY
York University

The *Orestes* is an unusual play. It has long enjoyed close scrutiny from the critics, disappointing some, delighting many more.[1] There is general consensus that the degree of its unheroic treatment of the human condition isolates it from the mainstream of more or less orthodox Greek tragedy. There is considerable difference of opinion, however, about the significance of the play's somewhat unusual structure. In particular, the meaning of Apollo's appearance and dispositions

[1] Few have agreed with W. N. Bates that the *Orestes* is "not a play that anybody can enjoy" (*Euripides* [Pennsylvania 1930] 167); he adds: "apart from the scenic effects and the exciting situations the play can hardly be said to stir the interest of the spectator" (173). Other studies consulted for this essay, hereafter referred to by the author's name alone: N. **Wedd**, *The Orestes of Euripides* (Cambridge 1895) Introd., ix–xxxvii; A. W. **Verall**, *Four Plays of Euripides* (Cambridge 1905) 199–264; P. **Decharme**, *Euripides and the Spirit of His Dramas* (New York 1906) 241–43, 253–54; A. **Lesky** "Zum Orestes des Euripides," *WS* (1935) 37–47, and *Greek Tragedy* (London 1965) 189–93; H. G. **Mullens**, "The Meaning of Euripides' *Orestes*," *CQ* (1940) 153–58; G. M. A. **Grube**, *The Drama of Euripides* (London 1941) 374–97; E. **Blaiklock**, *The Male Characters of Euripides* (Wellington 1952) 180–90; H. D. F. **Kitto**, *Greek Tragedy* (New York 1954) 366–71; H. **Strohm**, "Euripides: Interpretationen zur dramatischen Form," *Zetemata* 15 (München 1957) 39–43, 121–27, and *passim*; W. **Arrowsmith**, Introd. to his translation of the *Orestes*, in *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Euripides IV* Chicago 1960) 186–91, and "A Greek Theatre of Ideas," *Arion* 2.3 (1963) 32–56; A. P. **Burnett**, Review of the Budé *Oreste*, in *CP* 56 (1961) 47–49; D. **Lanza**," Unità e significato dell'Oreste euripideo," *Dioniso* 35.1 (1961) 58–72; P. N. **Boulter**, "The Theme of *ΑΓΡΙΑ* in Euripides' *Orestes*," *Phoenix* 16 (1962) 102–6; A. **Garyza**, *Pensiero e tecnica drammatica in Euripide* (Naples 1962) 109–18, and *passim*; N. A. **Greenberg**, "Euripides' *Orestes*: An Interpretation," *HSCP* 66 (1962) 157–92; Werner **Biehl**, *Euripides Orestes* (Berlin 1965); D. J. **Conacher**, *Euripidean Drama* (Toronto 1967) 213–24. The recent study by Christian Wolff, "Orestes," in *Euripides* ("Twentieth Century Views," Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1968) 132–49, came to my attention after my own article had been submitted. Despite differences of approach, Wolff and I clearly agree on several key points of interpretation.

at the close is disputed. Do we have to deal with a straightforward *deus ex machina* whose job is to retrieve an impossible situation? Or is the divine epiphany ironic, forcing us to rethink the implications of the entire play? There is a basic problem of criticism here which should engage our attention. It is hinted at by many of the commentators, but not brought into sharp focus. This is the problem of the relationship of form to meaning when we conceive of form as both *super*structure, or logical, rational shape, and as (to retain the hackneyed but useful metaphor of height and depth) *sub*structure, related to non-logical, non-rational shape. The difference is something like the difference between art as idea or as experience. There are schools of criticism which tend to exclude one or the other of these two cohesive structural principles from their frames of critical analysis. Yet I believe that both are present to some degree in all literature,[2] and that for a play like the *Orestes* an understanding of their interdependence is of particular importance.

[2] Gilbert Murray saw in plays like the *Agamemnon* and *Hamlet* "an undercurrent of desires and fears and passions, long slumbering, yet eternally familiar, which have for thousands of years lain at the root of our most intimate emotions and been wrought into the fabric of our most magical dreams" (*The Classical Tradition in Poetry* [New York 1957] 210). To a more radical critic like Nietzsche art is based on, or even *is*, such undercurrents of subconscious wish and desire, opposed to the world of logical and rational control, and therefore mad. For a recent defence of "art as madness" see Eli Mandel, *Criticism: The Silent-Speaking Words* (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Toronto 1966): "Between the abstractions of mind and the perception of imagination there is and always will be an unholy gap" (54–55). Mandel rallies Longinus (11), Blake (17), Nietzsche (12), James (35), Orwell (59), and even McLuhan (34) to support his position. But I would prefer "holy tension" to "unholy gap." The madness of, for example, *Alice in Wonderland* is a tension between logic and non-logic, reason and madness. Verbal art, at least, cannot, without becoming anarchic, dispense with logical meaning. Conacher throws some light on our problem of structure and communication as it affects Euripides, saying of the *Bacchae* for example: "It is the *latent* theme [my italics] which provides the tensions and the new meanings" (59); and of the *Herakles*: "We need . . . an explanation which will account for the play's peculiar dramaturgy by showing what significant relation replaces and renders irrelevant the causal relation between the play's events" (82). I see the "significant relation," the real harmony of the *Orestes*, as the harmony of controlled dissonance. Also apposite is Wesley D. Smith's discussion of the two structures of the *Alcestis*—the melodramatic structure and the ironic structure of themes, imagery, and a kind of plot—the "testing of Admetus" (Wesley D. Smith, "The Ironic Structure in *Alcestis*," *Phoenix* 14 [1960] 127–45). However, irony seems less a structure in itself than a tension between structures (in the *Alcestis* the order imposed by myth and art, which is fantasy, and the "order" of discontinuous reality).

The *Orestes* has an Aristotelean beginning and middle (i.e. it moves toward a climactic resolution), but it has no real end according to orthodox expectation (i.e. no final resolution in terms of its own apparent frame of reference).[3] The epiphany of Apollo is discontinuous with the previous action and solves nothing. It does, however, compel us to see how the surface-form and sub-form of the play, pivoting around the theme of salvation, clash at the end to produce a shattering tension.

We begin with our play's melodramatic superstructure. The *Orestes* is a quest for salvation. Yet the salvation which Apollo brings in the end is no holy grail, but a cracked replica. The seekers after salvation are Orestes, Electra, and Pylades, united by human friendship, *philia*. This *philia* is of obvious thematic importance here and elsewhere in Euripides and has been the object of much scrutiny. None of the principal characters is a consistent villain; yet the hero's physical and emotional plight is such that those who are not for him are against him, since only unremitting support can help him now, and his introspective desperation will not allow him to judge people on other than selfish grounds. Yet it is his friends who precipitate and complete the hero's moral deterioration and collapse.[4] Friendship is a theme emphasized many times in this play, and appears often in the context of the pivotal theme (to be taken up shortly), Orestes' frantic search for salvation (*sôtêria*). His persistent appeals to the friendship of Menelaus, which attempt to engage the latter's feelings of duty and guilt, fail. In marked contrast his trust in the *philia* of Electra and Pylades is well grounded, with lamentable consequences. Ultimately

[3] We expect plays to move sequentially from tension to resolution: as Choubert says of traditional plays in Ionesco's *Victims of Duty*, they are detective stories, problems to be solved in the last act. But such resolution is largely an artistic trick. The subject matter of a piece of literature is necessarily imperfect, incomplete, artificially isolated from the continuum of existence. Against its centrifugal pull, the *formal* pull of a poem or play is inwards, seeking tightness, visible and aural shape, resolution through coherence.

[4] Greenberg (*passim*) discusses *philia* and *sophia* as polar themes in this play. Blaiklock comments (26): "Euripides is suggesting that crimes . . . can be motivated by the love and friendship he has portrayed so feelingly." What is lacking is *sôphrosynê*, and its ordered expression in human law. But *how* to recover—or recreate—and retain *sôphrosynê* remains the baffling problem. Arrowsmith (1963), with reference to Euripidean drama, sees as the only solution a new concept of *sôphrosynê* based on democratic rather than aristocratic postulates (51).

these beleaguered friends are driven to utter dependence on their ties of affection. More and more alienated from the world outside their small circle, they are pushed closer together to the point where their interdependence becomes the all-inclusive and, when danger threatens, potentially violent self-protection of a jungle family. The sub-civilized state to which they are reduced is underlined by the specific animal symbolism which, particularly toward the close of the play, heightens the crescendo of the final, chaotic scenes.[5] The self-protection of the trio obscures all other considerations for them. Friendship, which elsewhere in Euripides emerges as perhaps the one redeeming grace to which men can cling in almost utter despair, is so divorced here from reason and wider humanistic considerations that it, too, loses its intrinsic value and redeeming power. Turned in on itself, it can lash out violently in times of crisis to engulf without discrimination even the innocent, like Hermione.

This imagery of man's bestial nature belies Electra's assertion, uttered more perhaps in hope than belief, at the very opening of the play (1–3):

> There is nothing, in a word, so terrible,
> No suffering, no disaster sent from heaven,
> Whose burden can't be borne by human nature (*physis*).

What follows in the play will prove her optimism quite ill-founded. She deals at once with the case-history of her sad house, beginning with Tantalus. He, the son of Zeus, raises aloft a physical burden, as punishment for his presuming to share the gods' table, and for his unbridled tongue. Such moral weakness was his *disease* (*nosos*, 10); and it is the moral infirmities of each generation which extend unbroken the chain of disease. In the subsequent *tête à tête* between Helen and Electra, it is made quite clear that Orestes is the heir to Tantalus when Electra says to her brother, "I do not complain (*oneidizô*, 85) of his troubles," echoing what she had said earlier to Tantalus, "I do not complain (*oneidizô*, 4) of his fortunes." The sickness of Tantalus was a moral infirmity, and Euripides intends us to suspect from the beginning that Orestes' *nosos*, too, is more than physical. The problem of *nosos* is inseparable from the problem of *physis*. What *is* human

[5] Cf. particularly 1272, 1401–2, 1406, 1424, 1459, 1496, 1554–55. On the bestial imagery of the *Orestes* see Boulter, *passim*.

nature? Stung by Helen's exasperating vanity, Electra cries out: "O nature (*physis*), how great an evil you are among men, yet a source of salvation for those who are lucky with you" (125–26). Despite outward appearances Helen has not changed—she is the same old Helen (129). Again, throughout the play we note that the sickness of Orestes manifests itself as an inability to distinguish appearance from reality; yet this is not just the problem of the exceptional sickness, but of human nature, *physis* as such. The gulf between fact and appearance which Electra marks in Helen is the first statement of many on this important theme in this play (we shall return to it later). At the end, Electra herself has joined her brother in the sickness of delusion—of which Tantulus too was a victim, and which ultimately engulfs everyone in its cloud of nightmarish confusion.

It is little wonder that the road to salvation out of the dark forest of moral and ethical uncertainty is not easily found. Yet because they are human, tantalized always by one more hope of achieving the impossible, the characters of this play refuse to abandon the fragile hope of salvation to which they have clung against the most unpromising odds. Frequently the thematic framework of a Euripidean play is constructed of hope followed by despair followed in turn by attempted solution to the desperate crisis.[6] Toward the close new hope is born. This final hope may be justified in the "comedies," but elsewhere it leads to disaster or at least to the most dubious of resolutions, since neither the solution essayed, not the hope which it kindles, are rooted in reality.

In the *Orestes*, the decisive pattern of hope renewed then crushed is as follows. At first, Electra, encouraged by the imminent appearance of Menelaus, hopes simply that she and her brother can avoid death. There is initially no question of due process of law. Without this soldier's assistance, she and Orestes are quite helpless, and their house remains a thing beyond redemption (*aporon chrêma*, 70). Meanwhile, Orestes lies sunk in sleep, the one form of anaesthetic (the *epikouron*

[6] Time and again we find Euripides resorting to strikingly similar phraseology to describe the critical impasse in his plays: cf. *El.* 599–624; *Hel.* 813–15; *Herakl.* 484–534; *Hipp.* 715–23; *Or.* 634–35, 722–24; *Phoen.* 740–48, 890–900; *Rhes.* 580–94 (see Strohm 52, note 2; 64–65; 87; 122). Garyza includes a useful introduction to the use of *sôtêria* in Euripides, but a much larger exploration of its underlying idea has still to be made.

nosou, 211) which can deaden the harsh pains of the real, waking world. He is a squalid sight, sick within and unkempt without. As he himself remarks, "Helplessness (*aporia*) makes sick men hard to please" (232). This idea of helplessness, which crops up with nagging persistence in Euripides, here involves mental and moral, as well as physical, incapacity.[7] Sleep and forgetfulness are only temporary emollients, and to wake is to face once more the agony of confronting despair, and to force oneself to renewed hope of salvation. As usual, the initial solutions advanced indicate that the sufferers still retain their hold on their more human and humane selves. For the moment, they have only their mutual assistance (*epikouriai*, 300) between friends to sustain them in their distress.

The burden of their hopes rests on Menelaus. But it is soon clear that he cannot or will not help them. The theme of hope confronted by false friendship is succeeded by the theme of hope kindled anew by true friendship—with disastrous results. For a typical Euripidean twist occurs. We are shown that true friendship may be as baneful as enmity, depending upon the essential *physis* of those involved in the relationship. Pylades enters (725), and is hailed by Orestes as a true friend. Nowhere in the play is this basic assumption questioned or questionable. A true, but uncritical and less than bright friend, Pylades bolsters Orestes' feelings of self-righteousness and paves Orestes' path to hell with his own good intentions. He suggests that Orestes go to address in person the council of the Argives, and the results, perhaps forseeably, are disastrous. Failure here drives the three friends entirely on each others' company, and their ties with the outside world are snapped for good. This is a decisive break, since they turn to antisocial activity. Pylades, answering the call of friendship and corresponsibility within their new microscopic society, urges that they kill Helen as a final act of revenge. Orestes interprets his plan immediately as fostering an unexpected hope of salvation. Electra goes further, and suggests that they seize Hermione as hostage, to provide them with a bulwark of safety.

[7] On a deeper level its symbol may be *death*. Grube (381, note 1) notes the emphasis in the *Orestes* on the hero's deathly appearance (cf. *Or.* 83–84, 200, 385). He says later (391) that Pylades' plan of vengeance literally gives new life to the conspirators. Yet this "new life" is the most ghastly form of living death.

Electra's brutalization is underlined by the savage screams with which she spurs on Orestes in his attempted assassination of Helen: "Slaughter, slay, kill . . ." (1302–3). And she gives thanks to Zeus when Helen's cries are heard. Hermione, enticed before Electra, is greeted with a pregnant plea for aid: "For you alone can assure our safety" (1343). The unsuspecting girl seems willing to help. But Orestes, tearing down one veil of illusion only to raise another before his own eyes, assures her from within that she has come as a source of safety for *them*, not for herself. The Phrygian slave, who enters to announce Orestes' attack on Helen, reveals in the imagery which he employs how close to bestiality the conspirators have come. Orestes dismisses the wretched fellow and returns to the palace. Soon the chorus see smoke billowing above the palace roof.

Menelaus enters to see Orestes and Pylades on the roof, the former holding a sword to Hermione's throat and ordering the city to be fired. Orestes' readiness to murder two women (one completely innocent, the other a convenient scapegoat) is a sign how thoroughly his inner universe has been perverted: now physical salvation outweighs all other considerations in his diseased mind, and for such salvation he, together with Electra and Pylades, will sacrifice every moral scruple which might conceivably remain. Suddenly Apollo appears, and allots happy futures with a generous hand. It seems that all will live happily ever more, untroubled hereafter by the hell of their individual and collective experience. Well might Menelaus, in one last farewell to reality, congratulate Helen on her imminent accession to a place in heaven among the carefree gods (1674).

This, in outline, is the play's basic pattern of sickness, despair, and hope of salvation. It works well enough at the level of melodrama. But the sub-form has been pushing through the surface at every turn. Though harder to define, we can point to some of its manifestations in the polysemous ironies and ambiguities which undermine, or even negate, the simpler surface meaning of the play. Apollo's dispositions, for example, have a superficial order about them, yet there is no transmutation here of human stink into divine incense. In a world where every trace of reason and every vestige of human decency are vanished, Apollo can only return us to the fantasies of myth. Mullens saw in the epiphany the "might-have-been" which turns the whole

of the preceding action into a nightmare of unreality.[8] But the boundary between the waking and sleeping world, between fact and fantasy, is ill-defined. Even identity seems frighteningly fluid, a point pressed home, as we shall see, by the focus on Orestes' madness —for in the state of insanity identity is least secure. Reality becomes indistinguishable from nightmare. "I tell you we weren't here yesterday. Another of your nightmares," Estragon says to Vladimir, as Helen might have said to Orestes when the play was over. Despite continuous commotion, very little actually happens in the *Orestes*. The palace does not burn. The judgment of the Argive assembly is nullified. The characters merely experience a brief and futile sojourn in the real world until Apollo returns them to their mythical destinies.

Let us return to the key theme, *sôtêria* or salvation, like most key themes highly complex. Salvation may be melodramatic: a temporary, usually physical release from external danger. Or it may be religious (or psychological), and involve the conversion of the disorder of sin (or psychic imbalance) into the order of moral and spiritual harmony. The result here may be a therapeutic release from fear, anxiety, or guilt and a discovery of self-identity in a new state of freedom. The *Orestes* seems to combine the quest for melodramatic salvation with a parody of, for example, the psychic restoration of Aeschylus' Orestes in the *Eumenides*, or the new self-awareness salvaged from the wreck of their lives by Sophocles' Oedipus, Creon, and Philoctetes. In the *Orestes* a number of basic terms cluster around the central idea of salvation, or safety. *Elpis*, hope or expectation, is often conjoined with *sôtêria*, since it is this hope or expectation of safety which motivates action, and serves as foil for ultimate disappointment. Safety frequently is conceived as flight (*phygê*, 900, 1646), or refuge (*kataphygê*, 224, 448) from dilemma. In a moment of darkest despair, when he is baffled of his considerable hope in Menelaus, Orestes cries (722–24):

> I am betrayed, and all my *hope* is gone
> That somehow I might *flee* a vote of death:
> *Refuge* and *safety* lay in him alone.

[8] Mullens, 157. Other commentators have seen the play as a gradual switch from reality to nightmare (e.g. Kitto, 367). On the "unreality" of the ending see Verrall, 246–47; Grube, 396; Arrowsmith (1960) 190–91. Kurt von Fritz sees the ending as violent and deliberate *dissonanz*, in *Antike und Moderne Tragödie* (Berlin 1962) 312–16.

Nautical imagery plays a small but significant part in the *Orestes*. Orestes' return to sanity is the blessedness of calm after rough seas (279); yet later, in his sanity, he must be guided by Pylades as rudder (794). In a more elaborate passage, the chorus liken the impermanence of wealth in the disastrous history of the house of Tantalus, continued now in Orestes' plight, to a sailing ship battered by stormy seas (341–44). The significance of such images is underscored when we recall that the initial disaster which activated the "curse" of the Tantalids was the death of Myrtilus, who was hurled into the sea from Pelops' chariot (989–96). The play's sea (and salvation) imagery is climaxed by Apollo's promise that Helen, of all unlikely people, will become a star in the heavens, a source of safety to sailors (1636–37).

Other images of safety relate more to the central theme of sickness, and are expressed by words denoting cure or remedy (cf. *ἐπικουρία* and *ἐπίκουρος* at 300, 306, 766, 1226, 1300; *ἀλγέων παραψυχήν*, 62; *ἰάσιμος*, 399; *ἀναφορὰ τῆς συμφορᾶς*, 414; *φάρμακον*, 1190). As the last slim hopes of salvation recede, Orestes and his companions search for more desperate ways out of their impasse, and their schemes become increasingly irrational. Each attempted cure or solution only solidifies the impasse.

Orestes is the play's hero (however we define "hero" in Euripides), and his *aporia*, or dilemma, is the dynamic hub of the play. The underlying irrationality of his nature is brought out by a marvellous touch. We have learned from the plays of Beckett and others how the distortion of conventional vocabulary and syntax may make a dramatic point. Hence, perhaps, our fascination with the Phrygian slave. He is the embodiment of cowardly, irrational, incoherent man. Yet, it is clear that Orestes sees reflected in this pathetic creature an image of himself.[9] The Phrygian is the primitive, essential wish for survival, that uncompromising longing for life which Orestes sees within himself in a moment of sudden and startling self-recognition (1522–24):

OR. Are you then slave enough to fear death
Which could put an end to your troubles?
PH. *Every* man, slave or no, wants to live.
OR. Yes! Your sense has saved your life. Now go.

[9] Verrall (252) sees in Orestes and Pylades together "humanity in the utmost extreme of moral and physical degradation." Mandel (above, note 2), following Leslie Fiedler,

Our hero is trapped on at least two levels. As so often in Euripides, the impasse is described in terms of helplessness, powerlessness to act. Orestes is, first of all, trapped physically in prison; and then he is incapacitated by his *nosos*, and talks of the crippling *aporia* of those who are sick (232). On this second level, Orestes is unable to act efficiently to help himself. As the play develops, his moral deterioration becomes more pronounced. The link between physical and mental incarceration is the striking imagery of the besieged city (cf. 358–59, 444, 762). It appears finally toward the close of the play. When Menelaus first sees the flames of the burning palace, and Orestes pressing his sword against Hermione's neck, he describes the scene again in terms of a beleaguered city (1574). Here the earlier images of the play coalesce in this ultimate externalization of the flames of Orestes' madness.

The *Orestes* is about something which does not lend itself easily to tragic treatment, madness; and it is about the hope of remedy and salvation from madness and its consequences. Orestes sleeps as the play opens; but on awakening he has a nightmarish vision of the Furies, one of the many delusions in this twilight world where touchstones of reality are hard to find.[10] His universe seems a Kafkaesque hell, a demonic enemy set on destroying him. And the apparent moment of salvation, the epiphany of Apollo, flies in the face of sane reality. On one level it affronts our intelligence. Yet on another it underscores the nothingness which for Orestes lies on the other side of despair. As so often in Euripides, fear burns steadily at the threshold of consciousness, or sputters fitfully for reasons which we partly understand, partly do not.[11] Orestes himself is a hero-victim, buffeted by frightening forces both within and without. One might compare in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* the harrowing assaults made against the crumbling

discusses the "Id" figure in drama—the savage, the clown, the fool . . . the image of all that is irrational in the human being: revelry and misrule, gluttony and mischief, folly and trickery, cunning and simplemindedness . . . which the civilized and cultivated man is not prepared to admit into his life . . ." (p. 70).

[10] Cf. 129, 236, 259, 314–15, 407, 636, 788. The magical disappearance of Helen may be another example of the theme of illusion (cf. also the unlikely visitation of Glaucus to Menelaus, reported at 363–64).

[11] See, for example, M. J. O'Brien, "Orestes and the Gorgon: Euripides' *Electra*," *AJP* 85 (1964) 39, on the undercurrent of equalizing fear in the *Electra*.

defences of Stanley's insanity by those demonic characters, Goldberg and McCann; or the nightmarish figures which torment Woyzeck in Brüchner's *Woyzeck*. While it would be an exaggeration to read the *Orestes* as a monodrama, there is a sense in which the conspirators (and the Phrygian slave, as discussed above) are, or reflect, various spokes in the dizzily spinning wheel of Orestes' character. The Furies are both within him and without,[12] and Orestes, most lucid when most conventionally insane, was right to identify Electra—reduced at the last to the type of cruel, vindictive devil woman—as one of his Furies (264–65).

The *Orestes* emphasizes its hero's isolation—for isolation is the breeding ground of Orestes' insanity. It also urges the irremediable character of his condition, and consequently the futility of all effort to achieve salvation—despite the lure of hope, dangling like the carrot before Lucky's nose. In the *Orestes* all acts of rejection point up the hero's isolation. And there is no salvation. Each attempt to extricate himself from the labyrinthine hell of his dilemma only drags him closer to the central point of complete moral annihilation, living death. We might here make a comparison with Philoctetes, Sophocles' most untypical hero. Knox[13] comments: "Philoctetes' stubbornness condemns him to inaction, to ineffective suffering; he clings to the mood of vengeful self-pity which has been his comfort for ten lonely years, and plays the role of victim rather than hero." Yet the *Philoctetes*, produced in 409 B.C., only a year before the *Orestes*, "avoids 'the incurable' . . ."; and when at the close Herakles reminds Philoctetes that the bow which he has bequeathed to him is for heroic glory, "Philoctetes at last consents to come back from the dead, to life, to a life of activity and glory, of heroic action . . .". Such a return to heroic action is still possible for Sophocles, but not for the younger-minded Euripides. Orestes cannot rise from his slough of sickness and isolation. There is nothing which can reforge him, like Philoctetes, into an integrated and positive personality. What character he possesses at the start of the drama is a flimsy social covering borrowed from mythology, soon to be stripped away to expose the underlying

[12] "Orestes' bitter sense of guilt is a fact and the Furies are the dramatic representation of the fact" (Grube, 375, note 1).

[13] B. M. W. Knox, *The Heroic Temper* (Berkeley 1964) 140–41.

chaos—which from the start his matricide should have led us to expect.

It is not surprising that in a world where sin is equated with sickness values become increasingly muddied and the boundaries of moral responsibility recede almost out of sight. The classic cry of psychological and absurdist drama in the face of evil, "Get a doctor," is really the underlying cry of the *Orestes*. The classic alternative, "Change society," can be the rallying cry only of a theatre based on optimistic hopes of social progress[14] (evident, for example, in Aeschylus). By the time that the *Orestes* was produced many Athenians had long since stopped trying to cope seriously with the moral problems of developing and maintaining what was, in effect, a tyrannical empire. Sophistic relativism about the nature of law and society jibed with the intelligent and sensitive Athenian's growing awareness of the paradox of maintaining freedom by checking or destroying the freedom of others, and such relativism could slip easily into a despairing scepticism about all human and divine values. Sophistic thought tended to despair of a just society, and to the minds of an Antiphon or a Thrasymachus even democracy offered little hope of justice.

Cosmos has become chaos in the *Orestes*, and crime and suffering look less to justice or atonement than to remedy or salvation. But, where in Sophocles' more optimistic world punishment and atonement are effective and restorative, able to heal the fracture in an ordered cosmos, remedy and salvation for Euripides (at least in his blacker moods) are beyond achievement.

The basic question of the *Orestes* is, to what kinds of hope of illusory salvation will a man cling before reason is annihilated and despair becomes total? If there is a sub-question, to what extent is Orestes responsible for his fate, that question does not loom large in the play, and it is not answered. Salvation from the consequences of crime could be tackled through justice; but when crime shades into madness, justice must become cure. Yet cure presupposes a norm of sanity, and no such norm seems possible in a world gone largely mad. On the one hand Orestes blames Apollo for everything; and in one sense he is right. But even if Apollo (whoever he is) gave direction and lent authority to Orestes' matricide, it is difficult to see why Orestes

[14] On the sociopolitical concepts of the *Orestes* see Lanza, 67; Arrowsmith, *passim*.

should have collapsed into madness after the deed. And even if we accept divine interference, Orestes was Apollo's willing accomplice. The chorus, like ourselves, are perplexed by the moral dilemma, which they express in the language of paradox (823–24):

> *τὸ δ' εὖ κακουργεῖν ἀσέβεια ποικίλα*[15]
> *κακοφρόνων τ' ἀνδρῶν παράνοια.*

"To do evil for good reasons is a complex sort of impiety, and the madness of ill-minded men." The chorus here react emotionally to Orestes' matricide, the culminating sickness of a house plagued so long by insane acts. All attempts in the play to prove Orestes guilty or innocent are simplistic. Tyndareus insists that Orestes was a voluntary agent, who knew the law, and who should have taken the case to court. In his view, Orestes' fits of madness are the price he pays for what he did willingly and autonomously. However, Tyndareus himself, despite his air of impartiality, is no unbiased witness, since the victim was his own daughter. In fact, in this Kafkaesque situation there is *no* impartial voice which can fairly adjudicate Orestes' case. Even Apollo himself is in no position to pronounce unbiased judgment.[16] He assures Orestes that he will be acquitted eventually, but says nothing—how could he?—as to the rightness of this acquittal.

Before the reversals of the epilogue, Orestes' fate is in the hands of the Argive mob, a mob modeled on Athens' own. Here is vested ultimate political and judicial power. Yet the democratic mob is at the mercy of the persuasive voices of those who address it. If these voices are not wise, wisdom cannot flourish and justice cannot be done. Even for the most straightforward decisions, the best that could be hoped for (but rarely attained) would be dispassionate, impartial, and statesmanlike advice. How, then, could those who counseled the Argive people on the intricate problem of Orestes' guilt or innocence—Tyndareus, Diomedes, Orestes himself, the stalwart farmer who alone supported the defendant's case—hope to touch fairly and impartially

[15] Reading *ποικίλα*, exactly right in this context, rather than the weak emendation *μαινόλις* (Hermann).

[16] "Apollo's justification is eventually of superior *force*, not superior morality" (Wedd, xxxii). Or, in Arrowsmith's barbed comment (1963, 46): "Orestes and Apollo mutually create, mutually deserve, each other."

the core of the problem?[17] Like K. in *The Trial*, Orestes' judges (the mob) seem to him inherently hostile, with a world view totally alien to his own, the remote and deadly arbiters of his fate. They are one more facet of the demonic universe in which Orestes is both trapped and lost.

In the last analysis, Euripidean drama provides no real solutions to the central problem of existence. True, he sees in contemporary life a dangerous division between *nomos* and *physis*,[18] between *logos* and *ergon*, between *sophia* and *amathia*—but what kinds of suture are possible? A simple return to the integrity of Athens' past is an idle wish, since the integration of the past was a loose unity preserved (especially after Marathon) by the accidental support of good fortune. Moments of practical success, and long runs of good luck, make it easier for a man to think that he knows himself and that what he sees is good and healthy. "Know yourself" was still a Greek ideal; yet self-knowledge was becoming progressively a more difficult and forbidding quest when men lost confidence in the essential goodness of human nature. Thucydides remarks of the civil strife at Corcyra (3.84.2):

> Human nature (*anthrôpeia physis*), now superior to the laws, and accustomed to injustice even despite the laws, was only too pleased to show that its passions were beyond control (*akratês*).

Euripides shows us the widening rift between appearance and reality, but probably was as perplexed as most about the cure. The constructive ideas which do emerge from his plays (generally as by-products) are often very simple: an end to war and injustice, repudiation of monstrous superstition, exaltation of honor and integrity, both personal and social. But these were—and are—elusive ideals. Essentially Euripides challenges the Socratic position that rational knowledge is

[17] On the play's political allusions to debased justice and democracy see Lesky (1965) 191 (behind the death sentence is "envy and political intrigue"); Wedd, xxxiii–vii; Greenberg, 172; Arrowsmith (1963) 45.

[18] On this see, above all, Arrowsmith (1963) *passim*. Burnett (48) sees the small farmer of *Or.* 917 as speaking for "raw nature untouched by civilization (he is ἀκέραιος, 922) . . . He speaks for earth itself (920)"; in contrast Tyndareus is pure *nomos*. Note particularly Tyndareus' words at 523–25: "I defend through the law (*tôi nomôi*), to stop this polluted bestiality (*to thêriôdes*)." The character of Tyndareus, frighteningly stern legalist, is well analyzed by Lanza, 62.

enough:[19] "We know what we should do, but do not act accordingly," says Phaedra (*Hipp.* 375–81; cf. *Med.* 1078–80), pinpointing the recurrent human predicament. To our day, reason and logic have yet to become the main generators of individual and social action. Even Euripides' highest value, friendship, may trigger dangerous fanaticism.

What, then, is the attraction, or even point, of a play like the *Orestes*, with its clash between rational and non-rational experience? Perhaps we may draw a tentative but useful comparison with modern theatre of the absurd.[20] We note Camus' point that absurdity is incoherence, and that to express it is, paradoxically, to introduce a measure of coherence.[21] In artistic exposure of dark chaos there is a sort of therapeutic value. "Desolation does begin to make a better life," says Cleopatra at her lowest ebb (*Antony and Cleopatra*). To recognize the truth of the world in which one lives and of the dark side of human nature is the first step toward liberation from illusion. In pre-Euripidean tragedy, man's heroic, if unavailing, stand against Necessity had a certain restorative and cathartic power. Whatever happened to him was seen as an integral part of the cosmic process, of the wholeness of existence. Euripidean heroes like Orestes move in a fractured cosmos. Moments like the sudden, unmotivated madness of Herakles,

[19] This is a common and well-based assumption: see E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Boston 1957) 186–87, and 199, note 47.

[20] I am told that a successful version of the *Orestes* as an absurdist drama was recently given at Berkeley. One must beware of ignoring or underestimating the rational side of Euripidean drama; but we can understand why Ionesco, somewhat vaingloriously perhaps, sees himself as belonging to a tradition which includes Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare, since they are "authors concerned with the human condition in all its brutal absurdity" (cited by Martin Esslin, in *The Theatre of the Absurd* [New York 1961] 139). John Russell Brown, in an enlightening article, talks in general of the kinds of insight into the sub-structures of traditional drama which an understanding of Pinter's dramatic method can give us ("Mr. Pinter's Shakespeare," *Essays in the Modern Drama*, ed. Morris Freedman [Boston 1964] 352–66). In terms of dramatic form, at least, and methods of communication, the Theatre of the Absurd stands at the other end of the dramatic spectrum from plays which are intended to, or do, adhere more faithfully to the Aristotelian concept of form. "Spectrum" may be an apt metaphor here. All forms of communication of the human condition reflect all the colors. In each case it is a matter of emphasis and degree. In Euripides we have a dramatist whose chosen dramaturgical tools, which he plies with relish, are unorthodox to say the least. And of all Greek plays the *Orestes* seems to lie nearest the absurd end of the dramatic spectrum.

[21] Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York 1956) 8. Cf. Esslin (above, note 20) 316.

or the disruptive epiphanies in the mad worlds of the *Electra* and the *Orestes*, are shocking, but they are also shock therapy.

The *Orestes*, then, is the dark night of the Greek soul. Here, of all extant Athenian tragedies, the clash between surface-form and sub-form is most violent. What seems to me to happen in the *Orestes* is that the subworld breaks through suface form to impose its own dynamic form and mode of dramatic communication. For this reason, the *Orestes* may appear to have more to do with irrationality than even the *Bacchae*. In the *Bacchae*, the sub-form pulls *with* the superstructure form. Its appeals to heart and mind complement each other (which is rare in Euripides), and lend a sense of classic, almost Sophoclean perfection to the structure of the play. The reason for this "harmony" lies, perhaps, in the play's manifest subject—the revelation of the truth of Dionysus, the god of the sub-conscious. The epiphany of Dionysus at the close is the "logical" outcome of an illogical theme. The *Orestes* is quite different. Here the ostensible structure is melodramatic, and the ostensible theme a rational exposition of the search for actual, possible salvation. But the sub-world is one of illusion and madness, where reality is indistinguishable from nightmare. There is a divorce in the *Orestes* between what our minds, apparently confirmed by the play's rational structure, tell us we have experienced and what, in a total way, we *have* experienced. For this reason the appearance of Apollo, unlike that of Dionysus in the *Bacchae*, has such a jarring effect, a kind of jolting, black humor. Both the *Bacchae* and the *Orestes* are examples of poetic madness. But madness appears as harmony in the *Bacchae*, dissonance in the *Orestes*.[22]

Just as the humanists' belief in rational man has today been shaken

[22] The increasing popularity of the *Orestes* may derive in part from its "modernity" (we are well used to anti-heroes in rags on the modern stage), and its resemblances to such plays as *Waiting for Godot*, *The Caretaker*, and *The Chairs*, in seeing as the reality of any age the futility (yet necessity) of hope and the illusion of salvation. Davies thinks that salvation will be his if he can just get to Sidcup. Vladimir and Estragon believe that "when Godot comes we shall be saved." (On this theme in *Godot* see above all Richard N. Coe, *Beckett* [London 1964] 89.) In Ionesco's *The Chairs* the Old Man and the Old Woman wait for the Orator to come, who by his eloquence will testify to the worth and meaning of their lives; but when he at last makes his entrance, he is deaf and dumb, and can only mumble unintelligibly. Orestes, if we do not press the analogy too far, waits for Apollo.

by the assaults on rationality made by Hobbes, Nietzsche, and Freud, with profound consequences for modern drama, so the Greeks' belief in the supremacy of man's reason was undermined by the theories, grounded in experience, of Protagoras, Gorgias ("nothing exists, is knowable, or communicable"[23]), Thrasymachus, Thucydides, and Euripides—with some devastating artistic consequences, as the *Orestes* demonstrates so impressively.

[23] In the *Orestes*, at least, Euripides may be uncomfortably close to Gorgias' thought. Mario Unstersteiner, in *The Sophists* (Oxford 1954) 142, comments perceptively: "*Helen* and *Palamedes* reveal to us that Gorgias felt the infinite sorrow of man, who never finds himself confronted by a single way. In order to live, it is therefore necessary, even when one believes oneself to possess the actual truth, to choose a way by means of an irrational process of reasoning or an action equally irrational." Would these words not suit Orestes' dilemma?