Healing speech, wandering names, contests of words : ideas about language in Euripides

Caspers, C.L.

IV   Ideas about language in Euripides' *Orestes*

0. Introduction

Orestes is among the last plays that Euripides produced during his lifetime.[1] Matthew Wright has recently characterised the play as a "sequel", not just in the obvious sense to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, but also, in a more adventurous way, to the poet's own *Helen* of 412.[2] While Wright's suggestion that *Orestes* is to be read or viewed with the earlier drama in mind has its difficulties as well as its attractions,[3] I would be happy to see *Orestes* as a 'sequel' to *Helen*, if only in the sense that the 408 play (after an intervening production featuring *Phoenician Women*) once again puts problems related to man's use of language at centre stage.[4] Indeed, *Orestes* addresses such problems on a rather larger canvas than *Helen*, or arguably any other extant Euripidean play since *Hippolytus* of 428, does; and – as I show in section **5** below – with a different result. For while *Helen* makes much of its human characters' understanding of the world in which they are situated in terms of 'names' and 'things' (see ch. **II**), what *Orestes* puts at stake right from the start is mankind's use of speech *tout court*.

In this final chapter, I present a survey of the play's handling of ideas about language. Proceeding where we left off in the preceding chapter, I begin with a discussion of *Orestes*' perspective on the idea of the ἀγών, focusing on Orestes' exploits in the formal '*agon*' scene; and proceed with a reading of the play's central event: the

---

[1] Σ E. *Or.* 371 states that *Or.* was among the plays Euripides produced at the 408 Dionysia, and claims that this was the poet's last production 'before he left Athens'; accordingly, one recent commentator has discussed *Or.* under the heading "Abschied vom Athen" (Holzhausen, *Euripides Politikos* 200-4). It may well be that Euripides' migration to Macedonia (see *test.* 112-20 *TrGF*) was a biographical fiction (so Lefkowitz, *Lives* 103; and, conclusively in my view, Scullion, 'Silence of the Frogs'), but we may still conclude from the scholiast's testimony that the διδασκαλίαι recorded no further Euripidean submissions before the posthumous production of *Ba.* and *IA*.

[2] Wright, 'Euripidean Sequel' *passim*, acknowledging that his line of approach is already suggested by Willink on *Or.* p. xxviii-xxxi.

[3] Thus, Wright makes insufficient allowance for the fact that he expects the 408 audience to approach *Or.* from the perspective not just of *Hel.* (which is already something of a stretch: see next n.), but of *a particular reading* of *Hel.* – viz., Wright's own, briefly mentioned above (ch. **II** n.150). On the other hand, the kind of intertextuality discerned by Wright in *Or.*'s allusions to *Hel.* – notably the window allusion of *Or.* 129 ἔστι δ' ἡ πάλαι γυνή (referring back, via Ar. *Thesmo.* 850 τὴν καινὴν Ἑλένην μιμήσομαι, to E. *Hel.*: cf. above, ch. **II.2.1.1**) – offers a welcome new perspective on the issue of *Or.*'s transgressions of tragedy's generic rules and bounds: see esp. Wright, 'Euripidean Sequel' 33-4 and 46.

[4] Although Wright makes much of the "closeness in time" of *Or.* and *Hel.*, he has nothing to say about the intervening production, which must have taken place between 411 and 409 (cf. n.101 below).

meeting of the Argive Assembly reported in the Messenger Scene. From there on, I take a broader view of the play, pointing out a number of themes that Euripides broached in earlier dramas and revisits here; and I conclude that *Orestes* resembles not just *Helen*, but also – and perhaps more fundamentally – *Phoenician Women*, in depicting a community that is dangerously divided over two contrary impulses: an exaggerated confidence in the power of the spoken word on the one hand, and a marked hostility to excessive speech on the other. Finally, by way of an epilogue, I shall try to situate *Orestes* and *Phoenician Women* both in their historical context and in the context of Euripides' theatrical production.

1. Euripides' καινὸς Ὀρέστης

For a proper understanding of the attitudes and preconceptions that are played out in *Orestes'* 'agon' scene and in the Messenger's report of the Assembly-meeting, it is helpful to determine the extent to which this play revises earlier versions of the matricide myth. Accordingly, I begin with a brief appraisal of Euripides' distinctive characterisation of the play's eponymous hero.

Orestes dramatises an otherwise unattested episode that comes between the matricide (the subject of Aeschylus' *Choephori*) and Orestes' trial in Athens (the subject of *Eumenides*). The drama is situated in the uncertain situation immediately following upon the murder of Clytaemestra: the deranged Orestes and his caring sister Electra are confined to the palace and its environs, waiting for the Argive Assembly to decide whether they should be executed, and hoping to enlist the support of their uncle Menelaus, recently arrived from Troy. The setting and action of Euripides' play create a space between Aeschylus' two consecutive dramas, and the poet constantly marks departures from his predecessor's canonical version.[5] This is especially apparent in the first half of the drama, where Orestes seeks to come to terms with the complicated ethical and religious consequences of the matricide. For one thing, unlike his counterpart in *Eumenides*, Euripides' Orestes has not yet deemed it necessary to ensure his purification in Delphi, prior to burying his mother and facing his trial;[6] he has

---

[5] Canonical: Aeschylus was the only tragedian whose plays continued to be produced after his death (cf. *Vit. Aesch.* 12 with Dover on Ar. *Ran.* p.23); the indirect evidence for 5th-cent. revivals of his *Oresteia* is collected by Newiger, 'Elektra' 427-30.

[6] Orestes has lingered in Argos for six days after dispatching his mother (*Or.* 39-40); his not having been cleansed does not prevent him from taking his mother's obsequies into his own hands (402-6, with the discussion of Kovacs, 'Naive & Malign' 282-3). By contrast, Delphi is where Orestes had to go straightaway in A. *Cho.* 1059-60 (for the text cf. Garvie *ad loc.* [p. 348-9]; *Eum.* 282-3 has Orestes cleansed of polution in Delphi, prior to his coming to Athens: see Sommerstein on *Eum.* 237 [p. 124-5, and cf. *Eum.* 276-85, 443-52]); and Delphi is where he says he went, with the Erinyes in pursuit, in E. *IT* (942-3: ἠλαυνόμεσθα φυγάδες ἔνθεν μοι πόδα | ἐς τὰς Ἀθήνας † δή γ' † ἔπεμψε Λοξίας – 'I was driven as a fugitive to the place whence Loxias ... sent me to Athens'. ἔνθεν μοι in 942 is obelised by Diggle and Cropp, and various conjectures would have him gone straight to Athens instead, as he is di-

no confidence in the support of Apollo;[7] and, again unlike Aeschylus' Orestes, he freely blames the god, not only for his negligence of the matricides after the deed is done, but also for ordering the 'most unhallowed murder' in the first place,[8] at one point going so far as to characterise the matricide as an act that 'not even [his] father would have foisted upon [him]'.[9] Finally, where the Orestes of *Eumenides* defers the ultimate judgement on his deed to Athena, his Euripidean counterpart roundly condemns himself.[10] Such departures from Aeschylus make *Orestes*' Orestes a typically Euripidean hero: one who, like the poet's Heracles or Pentheus, combines a rational adherence to human values with the traits of a θεομάχος.

This distinctive profile emerges most strikingly, perhaps, when Orestes denies the reality of the Erinyes, claiming – as Menelaus inquires after the 'apparitions' (φαντάσματα) that plague him – to have 'seen them in [his] imagination', three maid-

---

rected to do by the Dioscuri at E. *El.* 1254-5; but at *IT* 972 Orestes claims that, after standing trial in Athens, he *re*-visited Delphi (ἐς ἁγνὸν ἦλθον <u>αὖ</u> Φοίβου πέδον). Cropp *ad loc.* (p.232) suggests that the hero means he revisited the place "where Apollo had ordered him to kill his mother", but it would be more economical to see αὖ in 972 as a reference to 942 as transmitted (though *cruces* should probably be placed around μοι πόδα as well as around the obviously corrupt δή γ' in 943).

[7] When the Aeschylean Orestes briefly despairs of the divine support that he feels entitled to (ἄναξ Ἄπολλον, οἶσθα μὲν τὸ μὴ ἀδικεῖν· | ἐπεὶ δ' ἐπίσται, καὶ τὸ μὴ ἀμελεῖν μάθε [*Eum.* 85-6: 'Lord Apollo, you know how to be without injustice; but knowing that, you must also learn not to be negli-gent']), he is immediately and at length reassured by the god himself (for the now commonly accepted transposition of *Eum.* 85-7 to follow 63, see Sommerstein *ad loc.* [p. 93-4]).

[8] E.g. *Or.* 285-7: Λοξίαι δὲ μέμφομαι, | ὅστις μ' ἐπάρας ἔργον ἀνοσιώτατον, | τοῖς μὲν λόγοις ηὔφρανε, τοῖς δ' ἔργοισιν οὔ ([Orestes:] 'It is Loxias I blame, who provoked a most unhallowed deed, and accommodated me with words, but not in deeds'). Nor is Orestes the only one to do so: Electra, who in her prologue speech permits herself only a *praeteritio* (*Or.* 28: Φοίβου δ' ἀδικίαν μὲν τί δεῖ κατηγορεῖν; ['Why should I charge Phoebus with injustice?']), lets loose in the *parodos*: ἄδικος ἄδικα τότ' ἄρ' ἔλακεν ἔλακεν, ἀπό|φονον ὅτ' ἐπὶ τρίποδι Θέμιδος ἄρ' ἐδίκασε | φόνον ὁ Λοξίας ἐμᾶς ματέρος (*Or.* 163-5: 'Wrong was Loxias, and wrong the command, when on the throne of Themis he ordered, he ordered the despicable murder of my mother!').

[9] *Or.* 288-91: οἶμαι δὲ πατέρα τὸν ἐμόν, εἰ κατ' ὄμματα | ἐξιστόρουν νιν μητέρ' εἰ κτεῖναί με χρή, | πολλὰς γενείου τοῦδ' ἂν ἐκεῖναι λιτὰς | μήποτε τεκούσης ἐς σφαγὰς ὦσαι ξίφος ('I think that if I had looked my father in the eye and asked him whether to kill my mother, he would have touched my chin and begged me never to plunge my sword in her gore').

[10] Cf. *Eum.* 224: δίκας δὲ Παλλὰς τῶνδ' ἐποπτεύσει θεά ([Apollo to the Erinyes:] 'The goddess Pallas shall see to the justice of these matters'); 468: σὺ δ' εἰ δικαίως εἴτε μὴ κρῖνον δίκην ([Orestes to Athena:] 'It is up to you to judge whether I did right or not'); and 609-13 (Orestes calls upon Apollo to testify 'whether he killed her σὺν δίκηι' or not). Conversely, as *Orestes*' Menelaus enters upon the action in search of the author of the 'ἀνόσιος φόνος upon Tyndareus' daughter' (374), Orestes readily acknowledges his uncle's description: ὅδ' εἴμ' Ὀρέστης... ὃν ἱστορεῖς (380: 'I am that Orestes you are looking for'); and a few lines further on, he repeats himself by claiming: ὅδ' εἰμί, μητρὸς τῆς ταλαιπώρου φονεύς (392: 'I am what I am: the killer of my lamentable mother').

ens who look like Night:[11] an echo of an earlier scene, where Electra tried to convince her brother that the Erinyes he thinks he is seeing are illusory.[12] Now, the reality of the Erinyes would not have been a matter of absolute certainty for every theatre-goer: unlike the Eumenides / Σέμναι θεαί with whom they are merged at the end of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, these deities were known primarily from epic, receiving no cultic observance in Attica or anywhere else that we know of; so even for an audience watching *Eumenides*, it must have been possible to think of the Erinyes as imaginary phenomena given temporary flesh by the playwright, and so to minimise the visceral horror that (as one famous anecdote has it) caused women in the audience to give birth prematurely;[13] and while in Euripides' *Electra*, Castor claims to see the dread goddesses, the Erinyes of his *Iphigenia in Tauris* appear to be imaginary, seen by Orestes but not by the herdsmen who watch him have his spell of madness.[14] *Orestes*, however, is the only extant dramatisation of the matricide where the principal characters have express reservations about their reality.[15] In one passage, Orestes hints at a psychological interpretation of his affliction, when prior to mentioning his 'imaginary' Erinyes, he comes up with the following diagnosis:

Men.   ... τίς σ᾽ ἀπόλλυσιν νόσος;   395
Or.   ἡ σύνεσις· ὅτι σύνοιδα δείν᾽ ἐργασμένος.
Men.   πῶς φήις; σοφόν τοι τὸ σαφές, οὐ τὸ μὴ σαφές.

– 'What malady is killing you?'   – 'Understanding: that is, I know that I have done a dreadful thing.'   – 'What do you mean? It is wise to be clear, not to be unclear.'

---

[11] *Or.* 407-8: – φαντασμάτων δὲ τάδε νοσεῖς ποίων ὕπο; – <u>ἔδοξ᾽ ἰδεῖν</u> τρεῖς Νυκτὶ προσφερεῖς κόρας: the slightly, but justifiably, over-translated rendition 'I saw them in my imagination' is Kovacs's.

[12] *Or.* 259: ὁρᾶις γὰρ οὐδὲν ὧν δοκεῖς σάφ᾽ εἰδέναι ('You don't actually see what you believe you recognise'): cf. the discussion of Kovacs, 'Naive & Malign' 281-2.

[13] For the cultic reality (or otherwise) of the Erinyes, cf. Brown, 'Eumenides' 264-5; Sommerstein on *Eum.* p.10; Henrichs, 'Anonymity & Polarity' 37-8; Clinton, 'New *Lex Sacra*' 166-8; and Sewell-Rutter, *Guilt by Descent* 80-2.

[14] *El.* 1342: κύνας <u>τάσδ(ε)</u>, with Denniston *ad loc.* (p. 211) and the discussion of Sewell-Rutter, *Guilt by Descent* 102-3. *IT* 291-2: παρῆν δ᾽ ὁρᾶν | οὐ ταῦτα μορφῆς σχήματα ([after reporting Orestes' anguish:]'Yet to our vision there were no such figures'). They are, of course, 'real' in Orestes' report of his Athenian trial (*IT* 961ff.), but the effect is still quite different from that of *Eum.* and E. *El.*: cf. Cropp on *IT* 281-300 (p. 194: "[the] narrative allows [the Erinyes] to be understood equally as real or as the product of Orestes' guilt-racked imagination: they seem real enough in Orestes' later account... but that does not cancel the suggestion of their imaginariness here").

[15] In S. *El.*, the Furies have no physical presence, and Clytaemestra observes that she 'fears no Erinys' (276); but this is not tantamount to saying that there *are* no Erinyes (Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles* 231-46 argues that in this play, Electra herself assumes the role of avenging Fury; see *ibid.* 205-16 for a survey of Sophoclean references to the Erinyes).

The extensive scholarly literature on *Or.* 396 is primarily concerned with establishing whether σύνεσις here already connotes, like the later coinage συνείδησις, 'conscience', or whether it refers to 'self-knowledge'.[16] However, the most striking aspect of Orestes' choice of words – and probably the thing that prompts Menelaus' puzzled response in 397 – is the fact that in later-5th-cent. diction, the word σύνεσις normally carries only positive overtones.[17] Euripides seems to be intentionally stretching his vocabulary here: Thucydides, for one, uses σύνεσις preferentially to designate especially able political actors;[18] and later in the play, the accolade is accorded to one of the speakers in the Argive Assembly (*Or.* 921: see section **3** below), as well as by Orestes to his sister,[19] and – ironically – to a slave whom he has converted at knifepoint to his own point of view.[20] Elsewhere, 'σύνεσις' is frequently associated with the human accomplishments celebrated by 5th-cent. intellectuals,[21] for instance in the quasi-sophistic *Kulturentstehungslehre* proffered by the Theseus of Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, who praises 'the one who fashioned our modes of live for us, and was

---

[16] 'Conscience': e.g. Pohlenz, *Griechische Tragödie* 444-9; Tange, 'Σύνεσις & φιλία' 60-9. 'Self-knowledge': e.g. Fuqua, 'World of Myth' 14; Rodgers, 'Expression of Conscience' 250. Garzya, 'Σύνεσις come mallattia' 506 argues that σύνεσις could here have a medical/pathological sense ('mental derangement'), but cf. below n.17 and Assael, 'Σύνεσις' 50-1. The debate is summarised by Medda on *Or.* p.18-21 (see esp. *ibid.* p. 19: "Euripide sembra puntare non tanto a sostituire il tradizionale tema dello sconvoglimento mentale indotto dalle Erinni con una più moderna interpretazione della pazzia come conseguenza del rimorso, quanto ad affiancare ad esso una nuova e più profonda dimensione cosciente della sofferenza, che rende problematico il rapportarsi di Oreste con se stesso e con chi gli sta intorno").

[17] Cf. esp. Smith, 'Disease' 297, who points out that in the Hippocratic writings, σύνεσις is regularly used as an antonym of 'mania' or 'disease'; also Assael, 'Σύνεσις' 48.

[18] Thuc. 6.39.1: ... βουλεῦσαι δ᾽ ἂν βέλτιστα τοὺς ξυνετούς, κρῖναι δ᾽ ἂν ἀκούσαντας ἄριστα τοὺς πολλούς ('the ξυνετοί are best at offering political counsel, the masses at listening and judging the best course'); also e.g. 3.82.5 ἐπιβουλεύσας δέ τις τυχὼν ξυνετὸς καὶ ὑπονοήσας ἔτι δεινότερος ('... a man who is ξυνετός at counselling and even more δεινός in foresight'); 1.74.1 (of Themistocles); 8.68.4 (of the leaders of the 411 *coup*). When, at 3.37.5, Thucydides' anti-hero Cleon speaks disparagingly of ξυνέσεως ἀγῶνες 'contests in cleverness', the word's normally positive overtones are clearly dominant.

[19] *Or.* 1180: τὸ συνετόν γ᾽ οἶδα σῆι ψυχῆι παρόν ('If there's one thing I know, it is that you have τὸ συνετόν in your mental make-up').

[20] *Or.* 1524: εὖ λέγεις· σώιζει σε σύνεσις ('*Now* you're talking: your σύνεσις is your salvation').

[21] E.g. [Hipp.] *De Arte* §1: τὸ μέν τι τῶν μὴ εὑρημένων ἐξευρίσκειν ξυνέσιος ἐπιθυμία τε καὶ ἔργον ('To invent things that have not yet been invented, that is the desire and the business of σύνεσις'); Democr. *fr.* 181 συνέσει καὶ ἐπιστήμῃ ὀρθοπραγέων τις ἀνδρεῖος ἅμα καὶ εὐθύγνωμος γίγνεται ('He who acts with σύνεσις and knowledge becomes at once manly and rightminded'); also *Tro.* 672 (τὸ θηρῶδες ἄφθογγόν τ᾽ ἔφυ | ξυνέσει τ᾽ ἄχρηστον ['animals have no speech and do not use σύνεσις']), Ar. *Ran.* 1482-3 (μακάριός γ᾽ ἀνὴρ, ἔχων | ξύνεσιν ἠκριβωμένην [Chorus: 'blessed is the man who disposes of a well-trained σύνεσις']). *Her.* 655-6 (εἰ δὲ θεοῖς ἦν ξύνεσις | καὶ σοφία κατ᾽ ἄνδρας... 'If only the gods had a human share of understanding and wisdom...') is pointedly ambivalent, cf. Bond *ad loc.* (p.233).

the first to instill σύνεσις';[22] and this sophistic resonance of the word is clearly in force in the passage from Aristophanes' *Frogs*, already alluded to in the Introduction, where 'Euripides' is made to say a prayer to a bizarre constellation of new-fangled 'deities':

> Αἰθὴρ ἐμὸν βόσκημα καὶ Γλώττης Στρόφιγξ
> καὶ Ξύνεσι καὶ Μυκτῆρες ὀσφραντήριοι   (Ar. *Ran.* 892-3)

> 'Aether my nourishment, and Tongue's Hinge, and Ξύνεσις, and discerning Nostrils...'

By embracing 'ἡ σύνεσις' as the core notion that defines his present condition,[23] Orestes can be seen to characterise himself by association (if not necessarily by implication) with such 5th-cent. ξυνετοί who pride themselves on their self-sufficience rather than observe the gods' dictates, and who would typically rely on their 'tongue' to assert their influence upon the world they live in.

In the passage cited above, the association between σύνεσις and speech – an association made explicit in the *Frogs* prayer[24] – and the general discursive context of the 'νόσος' that is 'killing' Orestes, all recall the play's programmatic opening lines, in which Electra alludes to the divine punishment inflicted upon the matricides' mythical ancestor Tantalus:

>   ... καὶ τίνει ταύτην δίκην,
> ὡς μὲν λέγουσιν, ὅτι θεοῖς ἄνθρωπος ὢν
> κοινῆς τραπέζης ἀξίωμ' ἔχων ἴσον,
> ἀκόλαστον ἔσχε γλῶσσαν, αἰσχίστην νόσον.   (*Or.* 7-10)

> 'He pays this penalty, so they say, because while, though human, he
> enjoyed equal rank with the gods at their shared table, he had an un-
> bridled tongue – a shameful disease.'

---

[22] *Suppl.* 201-3: αἰνῶ δ' ὃς ἡμῖν βίοτον... | ... διεσταθμήσατο, | πρῶτον μὲν ἐνθεὶς σύνεσιν. For the terms in which Theseus is characterised in *Suppl.*, cf. the literature cited at ch. **III** n.72 (and note that ξύνεσις is ascribed to Theseus himself by Thuc. 2.15.2).

[23] As Willink notes on *Or.* 386 (p. 151), "the article has almost the effect of giving 'Awareness' a capital letter".

[24] A personification of Tongue also features among the 'deities' called upon by 'Socrates' in Ar. *Nub.* 424. In the earlier play, Ξύνεσις is absent (Socrates prays to Ἀήρ and Αἰθήρ at *Nub.* 264; to Chaos, Clouds and τὰν Γλῶτταν at *Nub.* 424; and to Breath, Chaos and Ἀήρ at *Nub.* 672), but in the popular appreciation targeted by Aristophanes in 405, Ξύνεσις and Γλῶττα were apparently firmly associated with one another, and it is not much of a stretch to assume that three years earlier, things were already much the same.

In other archaic and classical tellings of his tale, Tantalus is credited with a variety of offences, varying from the testing of the gods' omniscience by serving them human flesh for dinner to distributing the gods' nectar and ambrosia among mortals (Pi. *Ol.* 1.58ff.).[25] Electra's description less specifically subsumes these crimes into a general characterisation, highlighting one particular aspect: Tantalus' ἀκόλαστος γλῶσσα. On this inclusive interpretation of his *faux pas*, Tantalus can be seen as something like a culture hero – someone, perhaps, like Prometheus, of whom, in the Aeschylean play bearing his name, Hephaestus says:

> τοιαῦτ' ἐπηύρου τοῦ φιλανθρώπου τρόπου·
> θεὸς θεῶν γὰρ οὐχ ὑποπτήσσων χόλον
> βροτοῖσι τιμὰς ὤπασας πέρα δίκης.　　　　　　　　(*PB* 28-30)

> 'This punishment you earned for your kindness to the human race: a
> god who would not bow to the gods' anger, you gave privileges to
> mankind beyond what was right';

and who, in the same play, is credited with a 'tongue' that is ἄγαν ὑψήγορος ('overly haughty') and μάταιος ('unruly').[26] I am not suggesting, of course, that the opening lines of *Orestes* allude in any sense of the word to the Aeschylean Prometheus plays; rather, Euripides and the poet of *PB* can be seen to exploit a common pool of mythical ideas and images in constructing a similar kind of figure to dominate their respective dramatic creations – the figure of the 'culture hero', who goes against the will of the gods to bestow upon mankind sundry gifts and benefits, and in doing so sets for them an example of self-reliance and independence from the divine.[27]

2. Orestes ἀγωνιστής

We shall return to Tantalus' crime and its resonance throughout Euripides' play in section **4** below: for the moment, it will suffice to point out that *Orestes*' opening scenes present the audience with an Orestes who has a wholly different perspective

---

[25] The poet of the *Odyssey* chose to leave it to his audience's discretion to supply the reasons for the punishment: cf. Heubeck on *Od.* 582-92 (p.112-3). Full references to the various accounts of Tantalus' crime can be found in Rosscher s.v. 'Tantalos'; cf. also O'Brien, 'Tantalus' 32-3. Willink, 'Tantalos Paradigm' 32n.44 lists Hellenistic and Roman references to Tantalus' *garrula lingua*, and argues that they all go back to the "Euripidean *locus classicus*".

[26] *PV* 318-9: τοιαῦτα μέντοι τῆς ἄγαν ὑψηγόρου | γλώσσης, Προμηθεῦ, τἀπίχειρα γίγνεται ('That is what comes, Prometheus, of having an overly haughty tongue'); and 328-9: ἢ οὐκ οἶσθ'... ὅτι | γλώσσηι ματαίαι ζημία προστρίβεται; ('Or don't you know that an unruly tongue incurs punishment?').

[27] Willink, 'Tantalos Paradigm' suggests that in the later 5th cent., 'Tantalus' was a popular appellation applied to contemporary intellectuals, notably perhaps to the polymath (and alleged atheist) Prodicus, and that this topical resonance may affect the audience's understanding of the lines under discussion; but the evidence that underpins this suggestion is tenuous: cf. West on *Or.* 1-3 (p. 180); O'Brien, 'Tantalus' 31-2; Egli, *Zeitgenössische Strömungen* 42-3.

upon the murder of his mother and its religious/moral implications from that of his Aeschylean counterpart. Euripides' Orestes has no faith in his traditional divine supporter Apollo, and questions the justice of the matricide; he has not sought the required cleansing of his blood-guilt; he does not, when sane, recognise the Erinyes as an external threat; and he is associated, in his general condition, with his culture-hero-come-to-grief, proto-sophist ancestor Tantalus. It is with such a characterisation, established in a prologue and *parodos* dominated by Electra and in Orestes' successive encounters with his sister and his uncle, that the matricide eventually confronts his grandfather Tyndareus, in the play's formal '*agon*' scene.

Unlike its counterpart in *Phoenician Women*, the '*agon*' scene of *Orestes* begins on a decidedly inauspicious note. As we have seen (ch. **III.5.1**), the debate between Polynices and Eteocles is elaborately staged by its *arbiter* Iocasta, who does her utmost to ensure a profitable exchange between the two 'contestants'. *Orestes*' '*agon*' scene, by contrast, proceeds under the negative scope of an official prohibition, referred to early on in the drama, for any person to shelter or speak with the matricides, pending their trial.[28] Upon entering the stage, Tyndareus alludes to this prohibition, when he addresses Menelaus rather than his grandson:

Μενέλαε, προσφθέγγηι νιν ἀνόσιον κάρα;   (481)

'Menelaus, are you talking to this godless person?';

Subsequently, when Menelaus declares his allegiance to his nephew, Tyndareus berates him for 'wanting to be above the law' (487 τῶν νόμων πρότερον εἶναι θελεῖν); and Menelaus pointedly replies that 'the intelligent' (οἱ σοφοί) regard acting upon compulsion as 'slavish' (πᾶν τοὐξ ἀνάγκης δοῦλόν ἐστι 488), and decides that Tyndareus' old age and temper exclude him from intelligent society (490 ...οὐ σοφόν). Thus, even before Orestes and his grandfather have exchanged a word, there is already a division, not just over the issue at hand, but also over the merits of debating this issue, Tyndareus insisting on the impropriety of even conversing with Orestes, and Menelaus excluding the old man's point of view from serious consideration.

One may be reminded, here, of a much earlier encounter involving Menelaus. *Andromache*'s third formal '*agon*' scene is a debate between a Menelaus, who is on the point of engineering the death of Andromache, and an aged Peleus who has assumed temporary authority over the royal household in the absence of his grandson Neoptolemus. The older man's first and last impulse is to rely on physical violence rather than on argument against his Spartan opponent;[29] while, as in *Orestes*, the

---

[28] The prohibition is first mentioned at *Or.* 46-8 (ἔδοξε δ' Ἄργει τῶιδε μήθ' ἡμᾶς στέγαις | μὴ πυρὶ δέχεσθαι, μηδὲ προσφωνεῖν τινα | μητροκτονοῦντας – 'Argos here decrees that no one may harbour us under their roofs or at their hearths, nor may any one address the matricides'); it is referred to at several points in the subsequent drama – cf. below, section **4**.

[29] Note e.g. *Andr.* 588 σκήπτρωι δὲ τῶιδε σὸν καθαιμάξω κάρα; ([before the debate is even started:] 'Shall I bloody your head with my σκῆπτρον?'); Peleus's insistence on the Spartan Menelaus' physical

younger man questions his aged interlocutor's σοφία and concomitant right to speak, and dismisses his words as a manifestation of γλωσσαλγία.[30] Whereas the likelihood that *Orestes'* audience would relate these two scenes is particularly small – not only are the plays about 15 years apart, but we also happen to know that *Andromache* was never staged in Athens – the approximate correspondence between them is still instructive, as it shows the poet's consistent interest in exploring how such categories as age (and, in *Andromache*, ethnicity) are deployed in the negotiation of discursive power. Both the earlier and the later play juxtapose older men who reject deliberation, with younger men that decide who is 'σοφός' and who isn't.

We may recall from the preceding chapter that in the '*agon*' scene of *Phoenician Women*, one of the ἀγωνισταί, Polynices, breaks down this opposition between σοφοί and ἄσοφοι by claiming that what he has to say is 'just, καὶ σοφοῖς καὶ τοῖσι φαυλοῖς'.[31] In *Orestes*, the aged Tyndareus does the same by observing that 'being σοφός or not' is hardly the issue here:

> † πρὸς τόνδ᾽ ἀγών τις σοφίας ἥκει πέρι †
> εἰ τὰ καλὰ πᾶσι φανερὰ καὶ τὰ μὴ καλά,
> τούτου τίς ἀνδρῶν ἐγένετ᾽ ἀσυνετώτερον;　　　　　(491-3)

> '[Are we going to have an ἀγών concerning σοφία about this man?][32]
> Given that what is good and what is not good are manifest to every-
> one, what man has proved himself to be less συνετός than he?'

Like Polynices in *Phoenician Women* – and, we may add, like the Theban Herald in the much earlier *Suppliant Women*, who claimed that 'even if there are two λόγοι' about a given issue, 'everyone knows which one is best, and what is good and what is bad'[33] – the Tyndareus of Euripides' *Orestes* invokes a universal standard of morality,

---

cowardice; and, once the debate is concluded, his rather pathetic assertions of his own ability (*Andr.* 764-5: πολλῶν νέων γὰρ κἂν γέρων εὔψυχος ἦ κρείσσων). For the prominence of anti-Spartan sentiment in *Andr.*, see my brief discussion at ch. **III.1.1** (esp. n.12).

[30] Questioning: *Andr.* 645-6 τί δῆτ᾽ ἂν εἴποις τοὺς γέροντας, ὡς σοφοί, | καὶ τοὺς φρονεῖν δοκοῦντας Ἕλλησιν; ('Why ever is it that the Greeks think that the aged, being thought of as 'σοφοί', are also the ones who have sense?'). Γλωσσαλγία: *Andr.* 689; the same word, otherwise absent from classical-period diction, occurs in a similar context as Jason denigrates Medea's contribution to the '*agon*' scene of *Med.* (525: τὴν σὴν στόμαργον, ὦ γύναι, γλωσσαλγίαν, aptly rendered by Mastronarde *ad loc.* [p. 259] as 'uncontrolled incessant tongue-blather').

[31] *Pho.* 495-6, discussed above, ch. **III.5.1**.

[32] The transmitted text of *Or.* 491 is defective both in metre and in sense, with the MSS diverging on various details, and various restorations having been proposed (see Willink *ad loc.* [p. 167] and Holzhausen, *Euripides Politikos* 49n.89). With Porson and others, I feel that a skeptical question to precede the one in 492-3 would be in place (see Diggle's apparatus; otherwise Fraenkel *ap.* Di Benedetto *ad loc.*), and translate accordingly; but the Greek text remains elusive.

[33] *Suppl.* 486-7, as discussed above, ch.**III.3.3**.

so as to do away with the necessity (or even desirability) of deliberating about the is-
sue at all. The subsequent lines have Tyndareus – unlike Polynices or the Theban
Herald, but like Thucydides' Cleon – invoking 'the common law of the Greeks' as the
yardstick against which Orestes' crime is to be measured; and halfway through his
speech, the old man claims that he 'will stand up for ὁ νόμος with all his power'.[34]

Scholars have been sharply divided over the question whether or not Tyn-
dareus has a point, when he acknowledges, on the one hand, that Clytaemestra's mur-
der of Agamemnon was an αἴσχιστον ἔργον (498) and her own death a just desert
(ἔνδικα 538), while suggesting on the other that Orestes would have done better to
'charge' his mother with the murder 'by prosecuting her according to the requisite
procedure' and expel her from his house.[35] But while we cannot be sure how to take
the old man's vision of what Orestes ought to have done (and may surmise that, for a
contemporary audience, this matter was similarly ambivalent), no such uncertainty
pertains to Tyndareus' reluctance to consider accounts of the matricide that compete
with his own: more than anything, it is this reluctance that sets him at loggerheads
with his nephew, who – as we have already seen – is quite ready to admit that he has
committed a 'crime'. The first thing that Tyndareus has done after emerging on the
stage is enforce the official ban on addressing Orestes; and when his grandson has had
the temerity to speak up nonetheless, he is reproached for 'brazening it out rather than
curbing his speech' (ἐπεὶ θρασύνηι κοὐκ ὑποστέλληι λόγωι... *Or.* 606): an offence
that makes Tyndareus all the more determined to pursue the death sentence (607-14).

Faced with so much hostility, Orestes nevertheless attempts to build up a
competing case; and just as Tyndareus is outspoken about his discursive position, so
Orestes plainly states what he thinks he is doing. Acknowledging his nervousness
about speaking out (544 ἐγώ τοι πρὸς σὲ δειμαίνω λέγειν), he proceeds rightaway – if
the transmitted *ordo versuum* is sound – with the programmatic observation that he is
'ἀνόσιος for having killed [his] mother, but ὅσιος by a different ὄνομα, as his father's

---

[34] *Or.* 494-5: ὅστις τὸ μὲν δίκαιον οὐκ ἐσκέψατο | οὐδ᾽ ἦλθεν ἐπὶ τὸν κοινὸν Ἑλλήνων νόμον ('He did
not observe the right procedure and consult the common law of the Greeks'); and *Or.* 523: ἀμυνῶ δ᾽
ὅσονπερ δυνατός εἰμι τῶι νόμωι. For the Thucydidean Cleon's appeals to νόμος, see my discussion at
ch. **III.2**.

[35] *Or.* 500-2: χρῆν αὐτὸν ἐπιθεῖναι μὲν αἵματος δίκην | ὁσίαν διώκοντ᾽, ἐκβαλεῖν τε δωμάτων | μητέρα
– acting in this way, Orestes would have 'stuck to the law and been εὐσεβής' (503). Burnett, *Catastro-
phe Reversed* 206 describes Tyndareus as "a sensible old aristocrat, the Argive equivalent of a good
Athenian dicast"; cf. e.g. Blaiklock, *Male Characters* 184-5; Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* 219; and
most forcefully Holzhausen, *Euripides Politikos* 49-65, who demonstrates that Tyndareus' appeals to ὁ
νόμος are consistent with 6th- (if not with 5th-) cent. Athenian homicide legislation, and argues that
accordingly, Tyndareus' case must be considered as sound. Against this interpretation, cf. e.g. Erbse,
'Zum Orest' 441-2; Zeitlin, 'Closet of Masks' 65; Eucken, 'Rechtsproblem' 158-9; O'Brien, 'Charac-
ter' 196-7; and Porter, *Studies* passim (e.g. 111, 162), who all regard Tyndareus as bending legal dis-
course to his own factious purposes.

avenger'.[36] This couplet has been much moved about by Euripides' modern editors, who feel that it disturbs the integrity of Orestes' *captatio benevolentiae*;[37] but to do so may well be precisely the point of these striking lines. The point that Orestes makes can be seen as a complement to the reply that *Phoenician Women*'s Eteocles gave to his brother Polynices: for Eteocles, contiguous values like καλόν and σοφόν need not share more with one another than the ὁμοιότης or the ἰσότης of the 'names' that we use for them – while 'in fact', they can be regarded in isolation from one another;[38] for Orestes, conversely, patently *antonymous* terms may be regarded as ὀνόματα for one and the same ἔργον or πρᾶγμα, regarded under different aspects. Just like Eteocles' analytical argument is set to collide head-on with Polynices' adherence to a monolithical conception of 'justice' – to the effect of reducing the ἀγών in which the brothers are engaging to a futile exercise – so Orestes' implications that the assignation of the predicates ὅσιος and ἀνόσιος is a mere matter of choosing the correct 'name' makes for a major collision with Tyndareus' stated conviction that 'what is good and what is not good is manifest to everybody'.

As Orestes proceeds by asking his grandfather to do what the latter is particularly ill disposed to do – viz., to 'put one set of considerations against another' (δύο γὰρ ἀντίθες δυοῖν, 551) – it becomes ever clearer that the debate in *Orestes* is as much about the feasibility of debating, as it is about the issue at hand. The two contestants basically agree about most points: Tyndareus acknowledges that Clytaemestra deserved to die, and Orestes acknowledges (in a remarkable departure from the Aeschylean account) that killing Clytaemestra was a crime that made him ἀνόσιος. But as the ἀγών inevitably breaks down, and the contestants go their separate ways, they continue to differ over the question whether the matricides' fate is yet negotiable.

3. What happened in the Argive Assembly

In the preceding chapter I have distinguished provisionally between those tragic ἀγῶνες that are situated so that they can make a difference to the course of the dramatic action, and those in e.g. *Alcestis, Medea* and *Hippolytus* that don't; and we have seen that, within the former category, there are the ἀγῶνες in e.g. *Children of Heracles* and *Hecabe*, which succeed in making a difference, and those in e.g. *Suppliant Women, Trojan Women* and *Phoenician Women* that, in spite of more or less auspi-

---

[36] *Or.* 546-7: ἐγὼ δ' ἀνόσιός εἰμι μητέρα κτανών, | ὅσιος δέ γ' ἕτερον ὄνομα, τιμωρῶν πατρί. Willink *ad loc.* (p. 174) and Kovacs accept Hermann's ἐγῶιδ' for the transmitted ἐγὼ δ', which would make Orestes' claim all the more bold.

[37] Hartung and Kirchhoff put them after 550 (so also West), Diggle after 556 (which he deletes, along with 554-5).

[38] *Pho.*501-2: νῦν δ' οὔθ' ὅμοιον οὐδὲν οὔτ' ἴσον βροτοῖς | πλὴν ὀνομάσαι· τὸ δ' ἔργον οὐκ ἔστιν τόδε: see my discussion at ch. **III.5.2**.

cious beginnings, fail to do so.[39] *Orestes'* ἀγὼν λόγων between Tyndareus and Orestes clearly belongs with the latter (sub-)category – the category that most acutely raises the question, 'What went wrong?'. What went wrong, in this case, is that, just as in *Phoenician Women*'s '*agon*' scene, the two contestants enter the ἀγών on fundamentally incompatible premises: the one introducing into the procedure a degree of relativism that is unacceptable to his interlocutor, the other adhering to a monolithical conception of right and wrong that is bound to be rejected.

Once the ἀγὼν λόγων of *Phoenician Women* has come to an inconclusive end, physical violence is set to ensue: 'this contest is no longer one of words', concludes a wry Eteocles.[40] In *Orestes*, by contrast, there is one more step to be taken before it all ends in mayhem: as Electra announced in her prologue speech (and Tyndareus reminded us), there is yet to take place a meeting of the Argive Assembly.[41] So far, the focus of the play has mostly been on Orestes, who faces his troubles (as we have seen in section **1** above) without relying on the certainties that offer comfort and succour to his Aeschylean counterpart, and who freely exercises that faculty that he shares with his mythical ancestor Tantalus: his γλῶσσα. After his failure to win Tyndareus and Menelaus over to his cause, the Assembly offers him a final opportunity to negotiate his own and his sister's impunity.[42] This event can thus be seen to take the place of the Athenian trial-scene in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*; and as with other aspects of the drama, Euripides pointedly departs from the Aeschylean version.

After what has gone before, it comes as no surprise that there is no divine intervention in Orestes' Argive trial: there are no Erinyes to prosecute him, nor is there an Apollo to speak in his defence; and there is no Athena to resolve a tie by casting the decisive vote – there are only Orestes' Argive fellow-citizens, some of whom are on his side, others against him. Doing without the strong divine presence of the Aeschylean version, Euripides focuses on the trial's human dynamics. The first contributor to the debate is Talthybius, the herald known from the *Iliad* and numerous tragic dramas, whose speech is non-committal (ἔλεξε... | διχόμυθα), the speaker being too eager to please his peers to make a decisive case for or against (887-97); and he is followed by the Iliadic hero Diomedes, who speaks out against the death sentence and in favour of exile (898-900). Then comes a pair of anonymi: the first, a man who has 'no check upon his tongue' (ἀνήρ τις ἀθυρόγλωσσος) and is 'forcefully audacious' (ἰσχύων θράσει, 903), 'reliant on the crowd's cheering and on an uninformed freedom of

---

[39] Cf, above, ch. **III.1.1** and **III.6**. As I have noted in the latter place, other Euripidean '*agon*' scenes may be added to this categorisation: my argument does not require a complete conspectus.

[40] *Or.* 588: οὐ λόγων ἔθ' ἄγων, as discussed above, ch. **III.5.3** with n.167.

[41] Electra: *Or.* 48-50 κυρία δ' ἥδ' ἡμέρα | ἐν ἧι διοίσει ψῆφον Ἀργείων πόλις | εἰ χρὴ θανεῖν ('This is the appointed day on which the Argives' city will decide by vote whether we must die'). Tyndareus: *Or.* 612-4 μολὼν γὰρ εἰς ἔκκλητον Ἀργείων ὄχλον | ἑκοῦσαν οὐκ ἄκουσαν ἐπισείσω πόλιν | σοὶ σῆι τ' ἀδελφῆι ('I shall go the Argive Assemby and incite the city to attack you and your sister at their will').

[42] Orestes comes to his decision to attend the Assembly meeting in conversation with Pylades at *Or.* 775-87.

speech',[43] in succesfully arguing for the death penalty; the second a 'brave man' (ἀνδρεῖος ἀνήρ, 917), who argues that the matricides be acquitted and, indeed, rewarded for their deed.

Where Aeschylus uses the trial to juxtapose prominently and carefully the different arguments *pro* and *contra* the matricide, the younger tragedian confines himself to a schematic report of what was said, construing standard contrasts between between one man's ἀνδρεία and the other's θρασύτης,[44] and between allegedly 'free' and 'unfree' speakers: while the indecisive Talthybius is a professional herald and, as such, only too likely to be currying favour with the supporters of Aegisthus (889; 894-5), and the bold, victorious advocate of the death sentence is allegedly suborned by Tyndareus,[45] 'lord' Diomedes speaks on his own behalf, and of the final speaker it is said that he is an αὐτουργός (920).[46] Moreover, it is notable that the *apologia* delivered by Orestes himself – the only contribution that is, purportedly, quoted verbatim (931-42) – is confined to the briefest and bluntest statement of the claim that the matricide is a boon to the city as well as to the dead Agamemnon:[47] an acceptable line of defence,[48] but one that falls short of the complexity and subtlety of Orestes' own conception of his crime, as displayed in the preceding episodes.

Whereas, then, the Aeschylean trial presents an idealised instance of Athenian-style judicial procedure (though not necssarily one that is unproblematical by itself), Euripides prefers to confront his audience with the gritty dynamics of everyday poli-

---

[43] *Or.* 905: θορύβωι τε πίσυνος κἀμαθεῖ παρρησίαι. Willink, Diggle and Kovacs delete a large portion of the text here (904-13): I would prefer to retain (with West) 904-5, but otherwise agree that the extended description of the ἀθυρόγλωσσος becomes less and less reconcilable with the general direction of the reporter's thoughts.

[44] θρασύτης: cf. *IT* 275 τις μάταιος, ἀνομίαι θρασύς ([of the victorious speaker in a debate:] 'someone senseless and bold in his disregard of the laws'). For the contrast, cf. most conveniently Pl. *Lach.* 197b: ταῦτ' οὖν ἃ σὺ καλεῖς ἀνδρεῖα καὶ οἱ πόλλοι, ἐγὼ θρασέα καλῶ ('That which you and the many call courageous, that I would call bold'); *Prot.* 349b-51b &c.; and for a discussion of 'civic' ἀνδρεία in 4th-cent. oratory, cf. e.g. Roisman, 'Rhetoric of Courage' 136-41.

[45] *Or.* 915: ὑπὸ δ' ἔτεινε Τυνδάρεως λόγους ('It was Tyndareus that had provided the arguments').

[46] Oakly, '*Orestes* 895-7' argues that, given that Talthybius is clearly off duty, a reference to his Homeric profession would be out of place, and accordingly deletes the generic criticism of κήρυκες in *Or.* 895-7. This is not felicitous: the poet presents his speaker as a representative of a servile class, contrasting both with Διομήδης <u>ἄναξ</u> (898) and the αὐτουργός.

[47] On Orestes' view, the matricide benefits the city by demonstrating that it is not ὅσιος for women to kill their menfolk (935-6). Wecklein's deletion of *Or.* 938-42 (which restate the same thought more elaborately) is accepted by Diggle and Kovacs; Willink on *Or.* 932-42 (p.236-7) deletes the entire *oratio recta* report of Orestes' contribution, so that "we no longer have to wonder at the sheer inadequacy of Orestes' apologia at his trial": but to wonder about that inadequacy may be precisely what the poet wants us to do.

[48] For a similar line of defence, see e.g. Lys. 1.47-50, where the speaker argues that killing the μοῖχος of his wife was practically a civic duty, rather than a crime.

tics, in which the speakers' covert allegiances, and the impression they make upon οἱ πολλοί, appear to matter at least as much as the strength of their arguments.[49] A further difference between Orestes' respective trials is the obvious fact that while the one in *Eumenides* is presented in dramatic form, *Orestes*' trial scene is narrated by an Old Man, a former servant of Agamemnon's, who happened to attend this particular session of the Assembly, and comes to report its outcome to his dead master's daughter. Depriving the audience of the chance to form their own opinion about what happened, this mode of presentation substitutes the account of an outsider – a rustic, fiercely loyal to Orestes' cause, who appears not to be a regular attender of Assembly debates:[50] it is solely on the authority of this reporter that the spectators are given to understand that the trial is a failure. The only 'decent' speaker – a man, much like the Messenger himself, 'who rarely has anything to do with the city and the ἀγορά' (919), 'of the sort who alone keep the land from destruction' (οἵπερ καὶ μόνοι σῷζουσι γῆν, 920) – fails to carry the day; while the ἀθυρόγλωσσος who argued for the death sentence, 'that base man', was victorious in the counting of hands (νικᾶι δ' ἐκεῖνος ὁ κακὸς ἐν πλήθει χερῶν, 944).

What are we to make of this emphatic focalisation? Are we to accept on the Old Man's words that Orestes and Electra are unfairly or unjustly condemned? Not necessarily: no one would argue that Euripidean Messengers are as authoritative in the expression of their opinions as they must be thought to be reliable in their relaying of the facts.[51] The point of the Messenger Speech is not to tell the spectators that the Assembly made the wrong decision, but to show them that this decision was attained in the slapdash way they know so well from their own attendance of Assembly meetings, rather than in the august fashion of *Eumenides*'s Areopagus trial; and to convey this message, the cranky Old Man is the ideal medium. Like its Aeschylean counterpart, the Argive Assembly-meeting should have been the *locus* where an authoritative resolution of the fraught issue of the Argive matricide was attained; but what the audience

---

[49] Many scholars have seen a more or less straightforward relationship between what happens in the Argive Assembly and what was going on in Athens' deliberative institutions at the time of the production: most outspokenly, Di Benedetto assumes that the whole scene articulates the poet's disillusionment with the functioning of the Athenian deliberative institutions (on *Or.* 852-956 [p. 171]); and Willink diagnoses "a polarization of extremist views analogous to that which was currently militating against politics of the centre" (on *Or.* 844-956 [p. 224-5]). Among the five participants in the Argive debate, various topical allusions have been detected: Talthybius might recall Theramenes (cf. e.g. Hall 'Cosmic Turbulence' 268), and ancient scholarship already equated the ἀθυρόγλωσσος with Cleophon (Σ *Or.* 910; cf. Romilly, 'Assemblée du peuple' 248). See also n.103 below.

[50] *Or.* 866-7: ἐτύγχανον μὲν ἀγρόθεν πυλῶν ἔσω | βαίνων... ('I happened to be making my way from the country to the citadel...'). The stock character of the 'man who abstains from politics' is familiar to us from forensic oratory (see Lateiner, 'Man'), as well as from the posthumous portrayal of Socrates by Xenophon and Plato.

[51] Cf. above, ch. **III.4.1** (p. 118-20), where it is argued that the Chorus's scathing presentation of the Greek Army's debate about the fate of Polyxena in *Hec.*'s *parodos* should not be taken at face value.

take away from the report is that the institutionalised juxtaposition of contrary voices has failed to result in a dramatically satisfying conclusion; and accordingly, the Assembly scene comes to function as the impetus for further violence, rather than as an ending in itself.

4. Tantalus' crime: hostility towards the spoken word *in Orestes*

In the preceding sections, I have focused on *Orestes*' handling of the theme featured in my third chapter: the idea of the ἀγών. I have tried to show that Euripides' revisionist perspective on the matricide's moral implications, and his distinctive characterisation of Orestes as one who must rely on his own wits and resources in facing his misfortunes, goes hand in hand with a sombre outlook on the feasibility of the ἀγὼν λόγων: both the debate with Tyndareus and the Argive Assembly fail to deliver an answer to the play's key question, 'what should be done with the matricides?'. As far as *Orestes*' 'agon' scene is concerned, the reason for this failure lies – as it did in *Phoenician Women*'s ἀγών – in the collision of the two contestants' incompatible discursive attitudes; and the Messenger Speech compounds this fatal disharmony by presenting the Assembly's deliberation through the weary eyes of an Argive who has little sympathy to spare for the institution on which he is reporting. At this point, I propose to widen the scope of my examination, and show how the play's depiction of a community torn between reliance on, and distrust of the spoken word incorporates some of the other themes that we encountered in this dissertation.

I have already commented on the official prohibition, mentioned early in the play by Electra, for the matricides 'to be sheltered or spoken to'. A similar prohibition is issued by Sophocles' Oedipus with regard to the as yet unidentified killer of Laius;[52] and in the Sophoclean play, this prohibition is the source of some poignant irony, brought to the surface by the omniscient Tiresias, as the ban's unwitting target implicates himself ever deeper in his own misfortune, precisely by failing to isolate himself from the addresses of others: if only the king had obeyed his own decree![53] At Electra's first mention of the similar prohibition in *Orestes*, commentator C.W. Willink observes that while the ban "may have been obeyed hitherto, ... henceforth it is almost completely ignored" (on *Or.* 47 [p. 90-1]); but, while this is factually correct, it misrepresents the prohibition's dramatic function. Fleetingly opening up the prospect of an Orestes play without any on-stage interaction between the matricides and the other *dramatis personae*, it presently confounds this expectation by having first Helen, then Menelaus and finally Tyndareus, consciously transgressing the ban,

---

[52] S. *OT* 238:... μήτ' ἐσδέχεσθαι μήτε προσφωνεῖν τινα...

[53] Cf. most notably S. *OT.* 350-2: ἐννέπω σὲ τῶι κηρύγματι | ὧιπερ προεῖπας ἐμμένειν, κἀφ' ἡμέρας | τῆς νῦν προσαυδᾶν μήτε τούσδε μήτ' ἐμέ ([Tiresias to Oedipus:] 'I say that you should abide by the decree you issued earlier, and from this day converse neither with these folks nor with me').

and reflecting upon their reasons for doing so.[54] As in Sophocles' *Oedipus*, though in a completely different way, *Orestes*' prohibition ensures that every act of communication between the main characters and those who surround them can be seen as a frail opportunity recovered upon an imposed total silence.

Thus begins a significant patterning of speech and silence, comparable to the pattern identified by B.M.W. Knox as a key dramatic device in Euripides' *Hippolytus*.[55] This is well recognised by Francis Dunn, who interprets the speech *vs* silence pattern in *Orestes* in the light of the play's complex mingling of "tragic" and "comic" features (Dunn, *Tragedy's End* 163-7); but Dunn's discussion can be complemented with a number of passages where the drama is crucially informed by the need to check the proliferation of speech, or, by contrast, to encourage it. The very opening lines of the play – lines that reputedly prompted Socrates to stand up and call for a repeat during its performance in the 408 Dionysia – appear to incorporate in their complex and perhaps not wholly recoverable thought a reflection on the limits of language, as Electra says:[56]

> οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲν δεινὸν ὧδ' εἰπεῖν ἔπος
> οὐδὲ πάθος οὐδὲ ξυμφορὰ θεήλατος
> ἧς οὐκ ἂν ἄραιτ' ἄχος ἀνθρώπου φύσις.   (1-3)

2 ξυμφορὰ θεήλατος plerique: -ὰν θεήλατον v.l. et Σ

'There is nothing that is so momentous that words can express, no experience or god-send misfortune, whose burden human nature cannot bear.'

Even apart from the textual uncertainty,[57] it is difficult to establish an unequivocal translation of these lines, as Euripides appears to combine two distinct 'οὐκ ἔστιν

---

[54] Helen: *Or.* 72-6 προσφθέγμασιν γὰρ οὐ μιαίνομαι σέθεν, | ἐς Φοῖβον ἀναφέρουσα τὴν ἁμαρτίαν ('<O yes, I *am* addressing you,> for I do not bring pollution upon me with my addresses, since I transfer the blame upon Phoebus'). Menelaus and Tyndareus: *Or.* 481 and 607 (both cited above, section **2**). Orestes' acknowledgement that, when he goes to argue his case in the Assembly, 'he will not be gladly received' (777 ... μὴ οὐ λάβωσί σ' ἄσμενοι) constitutes one more allusion to the prohibition.

[55] Ch. **I.2.2** p. 36-7.

[56] The Socrates anecdote is preserved at Cic. *Tusc.* 4.29.

[57] The manuscripts are divided about the grammatical case of ξυμφορά(ν) – and thus, by implication, about that of ἔπος and πάθος, some witnesses construing them as nominatives, others as accusatives depending on εἰπεῖν: the tentative translation given above is based on the former option. Willink on *Or.* 1-3 (p. 78) opts for accusatives and translates: "no tongue can tell of a malady or god-imposed affliction too dire for the nature of man to shoulder" (but cf. on *Or.* 1-2 [p. 78-9], where a different rendition is given). One of the alternatives offered by Σ is to take ὧδε εἰπεῖν ἔπος as an adverbial group (= ὡς or ὥστε εἰπεῖν ἔπος ['so to speak']): although there are no parallells, this solution is defended by Holzhausen, 'Textprobleme' 271-3 and Kovacs, *Euripidea tertia* 73-6 (who translates: "there is *virtually*

οὐδέν'-constructions: one that would negate *x* in absolute terms ('there is no such thing as *x*'),[58] and one that introduces a comparative scale, here expressed by the correlative pronoun ὧδε.[59] The resulting complex construction seems to conjoin the ideas that there is nothing so δεινός that human nature cannot bear, *and* that some things are too δεινός to be expressed in words.

A further complication pertains to the ambiguity of the adjective δεινός, which can have the positive sense 'wonderful', as well as the negative sense 'shocking' or 'dreadful'. Sophocles famously plays on this ambiguity in the first *stasimon* of his *Antigone*, where the Chorus claims that πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κοὐδὲν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει ('Many are the world's wonders, and none more wonderful than man') and proceed to catalogue a number of admirable human endeavours and accomplishments – only to conclude that all such endeavour is in vain if man does not heed human νόμος and divine δίκη; and thus, retrospectively, to activate the complementary, negative reading of the word δεινά as well.[60] *Orestes'* opening γνώμη seems to trace a similar trajectory, with δεινὸν ὧδε in line 1 allowing (if not inviting) a positive interpretation, that is subverted in the subsequent lines as Electra mentions πάθη and συμφοραί.

If, with all these complications, Euripides' play can be seen to open on the idea that some things are too 'momentous' to be expressed, then this thought is complemented by Electra's subsequent account of the crime of Tantalus (already signalled above in section **1**):[61] ignoring, as we have seen, the traditional identifications of Tan-

---

nothing horrific, no suffering, no god-sent affliction, whose burden..."); but why would Electra hedge her statement like this?

[58] Cf. e.g. *Hec.* 956-7: οὐκ ἔστι πιστὸν οὐδέν, οὔτ' ευδοξία | οὔτ' αὖ κτλ. ('There is nothing secure, not a good reputation nor...').

[59] Cf. *Or.* 1155-6: οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲν κρεῖσσον ἢ φίλος σαφής, | οὐ πλοῦτος, οὐ τυραννίς ('There is nothing greater than a true friend, not riches nor power!'); also e.g. *Andr.* 986 (...κρεῖσσον...); *Hel.* 1618 (...χρησμώτερον βροτοῖς...). For δεινὸν ὧδε = ὧδε δεινόν at *Or.* 1, cf. S. *El.* 1081: τίς ἂν εὔπατρις ὧδε βλάστοι ('Who could grow so high-born [sc. as she]?)'; *Ba.* 1036 (with the lacuna following ὧδε).

[60] S. *Ant.* 332ff. Kamerbeek on *Ant.* 332 (p.82), for instance, observes that, while "*awe-inspiring powerfulness* is the concept that comes to mind when hearing the first strophic pair, [but] the limits of man's powerfulness are as it were included in the term". As Garvie on A.*Cho.* 585-93 (p. 203-4) notes, the Sophoclean *stasimon* reverses the thought of the the first *stasimon* of *Choephori*, which begins with πολλὰ μὲν γᾶ τρέφει | δεινὰ δειμάτων ἄχη... ('Many are the dreadful terrors bred by the earth'), and proceeds as follows: ἀλλ' ὑπέρτολμον ἀνδρὸς φρόνημα τίς λέγοι; ('... but who can adequately describe man's far-reaching ambition?'): here, the adjective δεινός initially assumes the negative sense, to which the positive sense 'awesome' stands in suppressed counterpoint.

[61] Tantalus is introduced as an exemplification of the opening γνώμη – presumably of the idea that there is no end to mankind's sufferings, implied in lines 2-3: ὁ γὰρ μακάριος, κοὐκ ὀνειδίζω τύχας, | Διὸς πεφυκώς, ὡς λέγουσι, Τάνταλος | κορυφῆς ὑπερτέλλοντα δειμαίνων πέτρον | ἀέρι ποτᾶται... (*Or.* 4-7: 'Thus the prosperous – I do not mock his fate – Tantalus, Zeus's son, it is said, hovers in mid-air, in constant fear of a rock hanging over his head'). The 'suspended rock' is familiar from lyric (if not from epic) accounts of Tantalus' unfortunate career; but the idea of Tantalus flying in mid-air cannot

talus' *faux pas*, Electra ascribes to her ancestor the αἰσχίστη νόσος of having an
ἀκώλαστος γλῶσσα – the 'shameful disease of having an unbridled tongue'.[62] This
mythographical innovation strengthens, or so I have suggested, Tantalus' status as a
'culture hero', an ambivalent figure familiar, e.g., from the Aeschylean *Prometheus*
plays and from the μῦθος ascribed to 'Protagoras' in Plato's eponymous dialogue;[63]
and it makes Tantalus an emblematic figure, whose negative example resonates
throughout *Orestes'* dramatic action, as its principal characters indulge their own
ἀκόλαστοι γλῶσσαι and/or experience their share of heaven-sent misfortune.[64]

Here, for instance, is how the Chorus introduce Menelaus upon his first ap-
pearance on stage:

> δῆλος ὁρᾶσθαι τοῦ Τανταλιδῶν | ἐξ αἵματος ὤν...
> χαῖρ᾽ εὐτυχίαι δ᾽ αὐτὸς ὁμιλεῖς
> θεόθεν πράξας ἅπερ ηὔχου.   (350-5)

'Your looks mark you plainly as being from the blood of Tantalus'
sons... Hail to thee, who consorts with prosperity and has from the
gods all the success you prayed for!'

When the Chorus deliver these lines, they seem unaware of the fact that the Tantalus
connection is cause for worries rather than rejoice: unlike the audience, they were not
present when Electra delivered her prologue speech, and this makes for some consid-
erable dramatic irony. At the other end of *Orestes'* action, the worrisome implications
of Menelaus' Tantalid inheritance are explicitly confirmed as, moments away from
Apollo's concluding *e machina* intervention, he is made to say: πέπονθα δεινά, 'I am
the victim of terrible πάθη' (*Or.* 1616) – a resounding echo of the 'δεινὸν πά-θος' of
the play's programmatic opening lines; and when in reply, Orestes observes that in
witholding his aid from the matricides, Menelaus called these πάθη upon himself
(σαυτὸν σύ γ᾽ ἔλαβες 1617), it transpires that, like his mythical ancestor, he has him-
self to blame.

Overt and covert references to the Tantalus *exemplum* thus conspire with the
sceptical, analytical attitude of Orestes his accomplices and his allies illustrated in
sections **1** and **2** above, and with the formal ban on communication with the matri-
cides, to create a strong sense of the dangerousness of speaking up – of wielding your
γλῶσσα in order to get your way. This sense of danger is complemented throughout

---

be parallelled: cf. Rosivach, '*Orestes* 5-7'; Willink, 'Tantalos Paradigm' 32 and on *Or.* 7 (p. 81). The
idea that Euripides' depiction – both here and at 982-6 – is indebted to Anaxagorean cosmology goes
back to antiquity: see Scodel, 'Tantalus & Anaxagoras'; Egli, *Zeitgenössische Strömungen* 38-42 and
44-9.

[62] *Or.* 10; the full text is cited and discussed above, in section **1**.

[63] For the Aeschylean *Prometheus* plays and Protagoras' myth, cf. ch. **I.1** above.

[64] For general accounts of the Tantalid myth-cycle's resonance in the play's lyrics, cf. esp. O'Brien,
'Tantalus'; Kyriakou, 'Pelops'; and Egli, *Zeitgenössische Strömungen* 258-72.

the play's dramatic action by an insistence on the positive value of silence. Thus, while the theme-words 'πάθος', 'ξυμφορά', and 'νόσος' resurface a number of times,[65] as does – as we have already seen in sections **1-3** – the notion of 'unbridled', 'uncurbed' or unchecked speech,[66] what is most notable as Electra proceeds with her prologue speech is, precisely, her reluctance to speak about the δεινὰ πάθη of her family. Having dispatched the Tantalus paradigm, Electra continues the genealogical account that naturally follows from it with Pelops and Thyestes, only to stop markedly short of finishing the story of their conflict;[67] and again, as she brings the narrative up to Clytaemestra's killing of Agamemnon, she interrupts herself to observe that the story is not 'fitting for a πάρθενος to relate in public'.[68] On one level of interpretation, Electra's "insistent coyness" is a means of making the prologue's exposition of the facts "less mechanical" than it is in some other Euripidean plays;[69] but narrative economy is not the only relevant consideration: there is an ethopoetical aspect as well, Electra initially abstaining from anything that resembles the 'excessive' speech for which her ancestor incurred his divine punishment.[70] In the subsequent *parodos,* Electra proceeds to caution the approaching Chorus to be as silent and demure as possible,

---

[65] Note e.g. *Or.* 413-6: οὐ <u>δεινὰ πάσχειν</u> δεινὰ τοὺς εἰργασμένους; – ἀλλ᾽ ἔστιν ἡμῖν ἀναφορὰ τῆς <u>συμφορᾶς</u> ... – μὴ θάνατον εἴπηις· τοῦτο μὲν γὰρ οὐ σοφόν ([Men.:] 'Isn't it δεινός what the perpetrators of δεινός acts are made to suffer?' [Or.:] 'My recourse in misfortune is...' [Men.:] 'Don't say "death": that wouldn't be wise') and *Or.* 447: ὦ μέλεος, ἥκεις <u>συμφορᾶς</u> ἐς τοὔσχατον ([Men.:] 'Poor man, you have reached the limit of misfortune') and see Willink on *Or.* 2 (p. 79).

[66] Notably at *Or.* 607 ... κοὐχ ὑποστέλληι λόγωι and *Or.* 903 ἀνήρ τις ἀθυρόγλωσσος. The former is a bold constellation (a sea-faring metaphor, replacing the equestrian imagery of *Or.* 10: cf. Willink *ad loc.* [p. 183]), the latter a commonplace (cf. Simon. *fr.* 541.2 ἄθυρον στόμα, Theogn. 421 πολλοῖς ἀνθρώπων γλώσσηι θύραι οὐκ ἐπίκεινται; at S. *Phil.* 188, ἀθυρόστομος is an epithet of Echo), though note that Aristophanes makes 'Euripides' use the phrase ἀθύρωτον στόμα of 'Aeschylus' at *Ran.* 838, amid a torrent of other Euripideanisms.

[67] *Or.* 14: τί τἄρρητ᾽ ἀναμετρήσεσθαί με δεῖ; ('Why go the length of these unspeakable things?').

[68] *Or.* 26-7: ὧν δ᾽ ἕκατι παρθένωι λέγειν | οὐ καλόν· τοῦτ᾽ ἀσαφὲς ἐν κοινῶι σκοπεῖν ('Why she killed him is no good for an unmarried girl to speak about: in public, that must be left unexplained'). Earlier, Electra had explicitly disavowed any *Schadenfreude* in Tantalus' fate (κοὐκ ὀνειδίζω τύχας, 4), and qualified her brief account not once but twice with the tag 'ὡς (μὲν) λέγουσι' (5, 8).

[69] So Norwood, as cited by Willink on *Or.* 11ff. (p. 82).

[70] Having concluded her prologue speech, she continues in her conversation with Helen for a while to walk a discursive tightrope: e.g. *Or.* 85 ([in speaking of Orestes' condition:] τὰ τούτου δ᾽ οὐκ ὀνειδίζω κακά 'Don't think I'm gloating over his misfortune!' – note the pointed echo of her words at *Or.*4 [cited at n.68]); but also the blunt αἷμα γενέθλιον κατήνυσεν ('[Orestes] spilled parental blood', *Or.* 89 – contrast her earlier reluctance to name the crimes of Pelops and Clytaemestra), and the tactless τότε λιποῦσ᾽ αἰσχρῶς δόμους ([to Helen]: 'You left your home disgracefully' – note Helen's reaction: ὀρθῶς ἔλεξας, οὐ φίλως δέ μοι λέγεις ['your words to me are true but unkindly spoken']).

lest they wake her sleeping brother (136-50):[71] apparently, they readily comply with her requests; and the resulting, remarkable piece of dramaturgy – a Chorus entering quietly on tiptoe[72] – forms a fitting conclusion to a prologue that seems crucially pre-occupied with establishing 'reticence' as a positive value to counterbalance the αἰ-σχίστη νόσος of Tantalus.

Moments of significant silence continue to play a structural role in the articulation of the drama, as for instance Orestes' contribution to the Argive debate is separated from the other contributions reported by the Old Man by a significant moment of silence (930 κοὐδεὶς ἔτ' εἶπε); and a similar moment of silence is observed on stage after the Old Man has concluded his recital, as Electra stands poised to deliver the long θρῆνος in which she finally reverts to the telling of her family history, and the Chorus comment:

> Cho.   ὦ δυστάλαινα παρθέν', ὡς ξυνηρεφὲς
> πρόσωπον ἐς γῆν βαλοῦσ' ἄφθογγος εἶ,
> ὡς ἐς στεναγμοὺς καὶ γόους δραμουμένη.   (957-9)

'O unfortunate girl, how downcast is your clouded face, how voiceless you are as if about to break forth into wailing and lamentation!'

The textual integrity of both these passages has been called into doubt, Willink for instance athetising the full extent of Orestes' Assembly speech,[73] and the majority of editors bracketing the lines in which the Chorus comment on Electra's prolonged 'voicelessness'; but the transmitted text fits admirably in the pattern we are tracing here, with first Orestes and then Electra breaking suspenseful moments of silence before delivering what they have to say.[74]

Electra's θρῆνος (960 ff.) itself clearly marks her emancipation from the seemly πάρθενος, purportedly committed to silence and reticence, of the prologue and *parodos*: from here on, she will no longer be 'silent'. When she is done with the de-

---

[71] Esp. *Or.* 136-7: ἡσύχωι ποδὶ | χωρεῖτε, μὴ ψοφεῖτε and 140-1: σῖγα σῖγα, λεπτὸν ἴχνος ἀρβύλας | τίθετε, μὴ κτύπειτε κτλ.; and again at 183-4 οὐχὶ σῖγα | σῖγα φυλασσομένα κτλ. At *Or.* 136ff., the con-stitution of the text and its distribution over Electra and the Chorus is quite uncertain: see Willink's successive notes on pp. 103-7. I follow Kovacs' Loeb edition in assigning 140-1, *pace* the manuscripts but with a number of ancient authorities, to Electra.

[72] Willink on *Or.* 136-9 (p. 103) contrasts *Ba.* 55-61, where Dionysus enjoins the Chorus of Asian Bac-chants to enter as *noisily* as possible.

[73] Cf. above, n. 47.

[74] The long lyrical section that begins at *Or.* 960 is assigned to Electra by the manuscripts, but most re-cent editors give them to the Chorus (with Electra either remaining silent throughout [so Damen, 'Elec-tra's Monody'], singing the second part [Biehl, Reeve, Diggle, Kovacs] or joining the Chorus in an-tiphony [Willink on *Or.* 960-1012 (p. 240-1)]). On the assumption that the Chorus starts the song, *Or.* 957-9 – lines that according to Σ were absent from some ancient witnesses – would indeed be superflu-ous; but if, with the MSS, we allow Electra to begin, this objection disappears.

tails of the myths that, earlier, she conspicuously passed over, and welcomes her brother back on stage with some choice phrases from the stock of tragic lamentation,[75] Orestes' first reaction is to impose silence on her:

> οὐ σῖγ' ἀφεῖσα τοὺς γυναικείους γόους
> στέρξεις τὰ κρανθέντ'; οἰκτρὰ μὲν τάδ', ἀλλ' ὅμως.   (1022-3)

> 'Won't you be silent, and stop those feminine laments? Take to your
> heart what has been ordained: it's lamentable, but there it is.'

But contrary to what her attitude in the play's prologue may have led us to expect, Electra does not comply: 'καὶ πῶς σιωπῶ;', she asks (1025). The Old Man's report of the Argive council has stirred Electra to speak up, and now there is no stopping her, even though – as her brother claims – it is 'killing' him (1027 σὺ μή μ' ἀπόκτεινε), 'cloaking [him] in unmanliness' (1031 μή ... μοι περιβάληις ἀνανδρίαν), and 'dissolving' his powers of resistance (1047 ἔκ τοί μ' ἔτηξας).

Then, as brother and sister stand poised for a double suicide, comes the turn of another traditionally 'silent' character: Pylades.[76] Earlier in the play, this man – who in Aeschylus' *Choephori* spoke just three lines, and none at all in Euripides' own *Electra* – had already engaged his friend Orestes in a very lengthy stichomythia;[77] here, although he has been on stage as the third actor since 1018, he has been silent for more than sixty lines, before entering into the conversation with a pithy 'Stop!' (ἐπίσχες).[78] Just as, in *Choephori,* Pylades briefly found a voice to provide the impetus for the murder of Clytaemestra, so he here speaks up to initiate a line of action that should result in the assassination of Helen (1098); and then, Pylades having once more played his part, Electra steps forward again – more than a hundred lines of silence on her side having passed – to propose a second twist to the assassination scheme: the kidnapping of Hermione. She commands maximum attention for her speech (ἄκουε δή νυν, καὶ σὺ δεῦρο νοῦν ἔχε – 1181), and concludes it with a stereotyped tag that, as Eduard Fraenkel has observed, properly rounds off a public discourse (εἴρηται λόγος, 1203);[79] and Orestes welcomes his sister's contribution with remarkable alacrity:

> ὦ τὰς φρένας μὲν ἄρσενας κεκτημένη,

---

[75] See the parallels in Di Benedetto on *Or.* 1018ss. (p. 203-4) and Willink on *Or.* 1018-21 (p. 260).

[76] For the new role of Pylades in *Or.*, see esp. Burnett, *Catastrophe Reversed* 213-5.

[77] *Or.* 729-806; on the irony of this cf. Dunn, *Tragedy's End* 167. Pylades, a κωφὸν πρόσωπον throughout E. *El.*, has no part to play in S. *El.*; his large role in the plot of *IT* seems, like so much else in this drama (cf. above, ch. **II** n.48), a novelty.

[78] Sixty lines is, as Taplin, *Stagecraft* 334 observes, an abnormally long time for a third actor to say nothing; though cf. Willink on *Or.* 1013-1245 (p. 259).

[79] E.g. Thuc. 2.46.1 (from Pericles' funeral oration): εἴρηται καὶ ἐμοὶ λόγωι...: cf. Fraenkel, 'Phoenissen' 52n.1 with further parallels; Di Benedetto on *Or.* 1203 (p. 232); Mastronarde on *Pho.* 1012 (p. 430-1).

τὸ σῶμα δ' ἐν γυναιξὶ θηλείαις πρέπον,
ὡς ἀξία ζῆν μᾶλλον ἢ θανεῖν ἔφυς.   (1204-6)

'You have the wits of a man, and a body that stands out among femi-
nine women: you are made for living, not to die!'

This is, by all accounts, an outrageous compliment: not only is it extremely rare for a
male tragic character to comment on a female character's good looks, but the φρένες
ἄρσενες with which Orestes credits his sister immediately call to mind the 'ἀν-
δρόβουλον κέαρ' (A. *Ag.* 11) of the matricides' own mother – emphasising, as many
commentators have observed, the ominous parallellism between the proposed killing
of Helen, the killing of Clytaemestra herself, and Clytaemestra's killing of Agamem-
non.[80] The very outrageousness of Orestes' compliment seems designed to underscore
all the more heavily the momentous development that has taken place in Electra's
character: after her initial seemly reticence and her elaborate 'feminine' lamentation,
Electra now emerges as a speaker able to participate in the plotting on an equal basis
with Orestes and Pylades.

      In the preceding paragraphs, I have focused on Euripides' ingenious patterning
of the speeches and silences that make up his drama: at key points, he has his speak-
ing characters display a marked reticence (Electra in the prologue) and impose silence
on others (Electra in the *parodos*; Orestes in the 4th episode), or conversely, confound
the spectators' expectations by bursting into speech (Electra; Pylades). As Menelaus
has occasion to observe in passing: 'There are situations when silence is stronger than
λόγοι, and others when λόγοι are stronger than silence'.[81] This patterning comple-
ments the play's thematic insistence on the dangerousness – the δεινότης – of un-
checked speech that is programmatically addressed in the opening mythological *ex-
emplum*, and in the dramatic significance of the repeatedly transgressed prohibition
for the matricides to be spoken with. Moreover, the gradual progression from silence
to speech feeds into the play's general dramatic movement, from initial stasis, towards
the escalating violence of the final scene: the more Orestes' allies (re)gain their
voices, the more the dramatic action comes to resemble the original matricide.

      All this comes together in one more remarkable passage, moments away from
Apollo's *e machina* appearance. The matricides have taken control of the palace,
which they threaten to burn down; Helen is presumed to be dead; Hermione is held at
sword-point, to secure the escape of her mother's purported killers; and Menelaus is
reduced to begging for his daughter's life. When Orestes refuses to comply, Menelaus
turns on Pylades, now – like Electra – a silent extra, and asks: 'What about you, Py-
lades: do you condone this murder?' (1591); and Orestes answers for his voiceless
friend:

---

[80] Cf. e.g. Greenberg, '*Orestes*' 184-6; Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* 223; Zeitlin, 'Closet of Masks'
58; Willink on *Or.* xxviii-iv; Holzhausen, *Euripides Politikos* 131-2.

[81] *Or.* 588-9, cited in the Preface to this dissertation.

... φησὶν σιωπῶν.   (1592)

‘He speaks through his silence’.

This brief exchange has been described as a parodic jibe at the three-actor convention;[82] and it has been described as a bold recasting of the remarkable passage in Aeschylus’ *Choephori*, already referred to above, where a (supernumerary?) Pylades unexpectedly speaks up to remind Orestes of his Delphic mission:[83] but apart from all that, surely, the passage should also be read as the culmination of the speech *vs* silence pattern identified above. The action having progressed to this highly charged point by means of successive eruptions of speech, it is now pushed even further by the ‘silent speech’ of a κωφὸν πρόσωπον: the final instalment in a sequence of events that reflects and extends the original matricide is sanctioned, not by an authoritative Delphic voice, but precisely in a way that underscores the absence of Apollo,[84] lamented by Orestes himself in the early scenes (section **1** above), and sorely felt during Orestes’ trial (**2**). By representing this absence as a moment of *silence* – we may imagine, for good effect, a loaded pause before Orestes answers *in lieu* of his friend – Euripides brings the action to a dramatically as well as thematically logical conclusion, before Apollo, unexpectedly *does* appear to restore cosmic and political order in Argos.[85]

5. Towards a conclusion: ideas about language in Euripides

What I have tried to show in the preceding sections is that in Euripides’ *Orestes*, ideas about language inform the drama at various key points, and at various levels of interpretation. The negative *exemplum* of Tantalus – who fell from grace because of his ‘ἀκώλαστος γλῶσσα’ – extends its scope over the exploits of his descendants, as first Orestes and then Menelaus suffers δεινὰ πάθη in consequence of their transgressions. These sufferings are caused at least in part through their Tantalid inheritance: Orestes’ revisionist perspective on the matricide’s moral and religious implications stands him in no good stead when he has to negotiate his impunity with the community that he has offended; and Menelaus’ cavalier treatment of the prohibition to converse with his nephew costs him dear. In other contexts, as we have seen, speech can be thought of

---

[82] So e.g. Winnington-Ingram, ‘Poietes Sophos’ 130; Burnett, *Revenge* 248-9. Willink *ad loc.* (p. 344) points to other passages in *Or.* where Euripides “highlights artificial conventions” of tragic drama.

[83] Cf. Nisetich, ‘Silencing of Pylades’; Davies, ‘Speaking & Silence’. The status of the actor delivering Pylades’ lines at A. *Cho.* 900-3 is uncertain: he could be the τριταγωνιστής who has just performed a ‘lightning change’ (so e.g. Marshall, ‘Casting’ 261-3 with references), or a fourth actor, or an off-stage voice (cf. Pickard-Cambridge, *Festivals* 135-7; Taplin, *Stagecraft* 353-4).

[84] The observation that Pylades in A. *Cho.* serves as a kind of stand-in for Apollo himself can be traced back to K.O. Müller: cf. the well-documented discussion of Roberts, *Apollo & his Oracle* 44.

[85] For Apollo’s *e machina* appearance as a decisive intervention in the dramatic action, cf. esp. Lefkowitz, ‘Apollo’. Others (e.g. Zeitlin, ‘Closet of Masks’ 69; Euben, ‘Corruption’ 240-5; Dunn, *Tragedy’s End* 170-4) would read the play’s ending as ironical: cf. above, ch. **II** n.118.

as a 'medicine' that can cure the ills of society (ch. **I.1** above); but the dramatic world of *Orestes* programmatically frames (excessive) speech as a 'disease', whose proliferation must be stopped to prevent misfortune from coming about. When in the play's second half, self-imposed restrictions on speech are lifted – when first Electra, then Pylades speaks out – the action inexorably moves towards a chaos that only Apollo can put right.

We discerned a similar pattern in the two Euripidean dramas discussed in ch. **I**: as initial attempts to alleviate the sufferings of Medea and Phaedra are supplanted by ever more aggressive uses of speech, both *Medea* and *Hippolytus* reveal a movement according to which proliferating speech engenders ever more momentous consequences; a movement according to which – to quote *Hippolytus*'s Phaedra – the 'noose of words' (κάθαμμα λόγου) requires other 'τέχναι and λόγοι' to be undone.[86] These plays display a subtle awareness of the ambivalent power of the spoken word, which aspires to be like the φάρμακα dispensed by a doctor, but which also has the potential to do untold damage; and they can be seen to anticipate Gorgias' unsettling insight, developed in his *Encomium of Helen*, that there can be no categorical distinction between speech as a (beneficent) 'medicine' and speech as (harmful) 'magic'. Like *Medea* and *Hippolytus*, Euripides' *Orestes* makes good dramatic use of the idea that there are things that had better remain unsaid: compare e.g. Electra's notable reticence in the later play's prologue with the protracted negotiations between Phaedra and the Nurse in *Hippolytus*' first episode (ch. **I.2.2**); or Electra's brief outburst at the end of the prologue (*Or.* 126-32) and Medea's similar outburst once Creon's back is turned (*Med.* 364ff.) – both passages marking a repressed woman's emancipation from compliant silence.

But if the earlier dramas and the late *Orestes* display a similar awareness of the limits of speech (and of the dangers of transgressing these limits), there are notable differences too. What seems to be absent from the earlier plays is the studied collision between mutually exclusive perspectives on the feasibility of the ἀγὼν λόγων that we have discerned in the '*agon*' scenes of both *Phoenician Women* and *Orestes*. In the ἀγῶνες of *Medea* and *Hippolytus*, the contestants disagree irreconcilably on many substantial points, and they each have scathing things to say about the other's discursive integrity;[87] but they do not disagree over procedural questions like, 'is truth's μῦθος singular?', or 'are τὰ καλὰ καὶ τὰ μὴ καλά manifest to all?'. Such considerations are introduced, as we have seen, in other Euripidean dramas, notably in such plays of the mid- to late 420s as *Suppliant Women* and *Hecabe*, in which outsiders like the Theban Herald and the Trojan queen Hecabe are given a remarkably wide scope to criticise Greek, or even Athenian deliberative practice, precisely by answering the questions listed above in the affirmative (ch. **III.3-4**). However, these plays

---

[86] *Hipp.* 670-1, as discussed in ch. **I.2.2** above.

[87] E.g. *Med.* 525 (n.30 above) and 580-5 (partly cited at ch. **III**. n.136); *Hipp.* 928-32 (Theseus to Hippolytus: 'a man should have two tongues, one to tell the truth and one to deceive') and 1038-40 (cited above, ch. **I.2.2**).

are different from *Orestes* and *Phoenician Women*, which situate such tensions between analytical and monolithical world-views within a single community, not in the stereotyped dialogical relationship between Greek *vs* barbarian or Athenian *vs* Theban.

    Orestes and *Phoenician Women* depict communities that are in themselves fundamentally divided over two contrary impulses: an excessive reliance on the power of speech to affect reality and create social fact on the one hand, and a distrust of the spoken word on the other. This is, again, a feature that distinguishes these plays from the dramas of the 410s discussed in ch. **II**. Both *Orestes* and *Phoenician Women* contain examples of ὄνομα-πρᾶγμα talk: the former in Orestes' ἀγών speech, when he acknowledges that he is ἀνόσιος but ὅσιος 'by another ὄνομα'; the latter in Eteocles' ἀγών speech, when he claims that καλόν and σοφόν resemble each other only 'by name' (ὀνομάσαι). But unlike in the earlier plays, ὄνομα-πρᾶγμα talk in *Orestes* and *Phoenician Women* is applied to value terms rather than proper names; nor does the notion of 'nominal' status or responsibility that preoccupied the poet in *Ion*, *IT* and *Helen* and that he took up again in *IA*, play a substantial role.[88] More importantly, whereas the plays of the mid- to later-410s show everybody happily if misguidedly engaging in ὄνομα-πρᾶγμα talk, in *Orestes* and *Phoenician Women* – as in the late *IA* – ὄνομα-πρᾶγμα thinking becomes a bone of contention within the drama: something that some characters reject, and come to blows over with those who favour it.

    We might conclude that while there is a strong continuity in Euripides' interest in ideas about language, he can be seen to put these ideas to different uses at different stages of his career. Striking correspondence in treatment or choice of themes is confined to plays of roughly the same period, such as *Medea* and *Hippolytus* (which both problematise the idea that speech can 'heal'), *Ion, IT* and *Helen* (which, with various degrees of emphasis, subject their human characters' use of ὄνομα-πρᾶγμα talk to more or less complex forms of dramatic irony), or *Suppliant Women* and *Hecuba* (which challenge, explicitly or by implication, Athens' reliance on a Periclean/Protagorean model of decision-making). Within these convenient pairings, further differentiations can certainly be made; but rather than proceed with cataloguing correspondences and differences between the Euripidean plays that I have been discussing so far, I would conclude this chapter on the poet's *Orestes* with an attempt to come a little closer to understanding the distinctive quality of this drama and the one it most resembles, *Phoenician Women*, by examining the historical circumstances in which they were produced.

---

[88] When at *Or.* 390, Orestes claims that 'his σῶμα is wasted, but his ὄνομα remains', his words resemble those of his counterpart in *IT*, who enjoins his sister to 'sacrifice his σῶμα, not his ὄνομα' (504); but in the later play, the ὄνομα-σῶμα contrast is merely one in a series of sophisticated antitheses: see my discussion in ch. **II.1.2** (p. 55).

6. Epilogue: *Phoenician Women* and *Orestes* – plays for their age?

As we saw above, *Orestes* and *Phoenician Women* depict communities that are fundamentally divided over contrary impulses: reliance on, and distrust of the power of speech. To be sure, that is by no means all there is to be said about these plays: *Phoenician Women* is also a hugely enjoyable phantasmagoria that reunites familiar characters from other tragic dramas – Oedipus, Creon and Antigone, as well as Polynices, Eteocles and Iocasta – and delights with such set-pieces as Antigone's τειχοσκοπία and the sacrifice of Menoeceus;[89] and in the preceding sections, we have seen something of the mythographical inventiveness that characterises *Orestes* as well.[90] Still, when we keep our focus on these dramas' treatment of ideas about language, and accordingly confine ourselves to the '*agon*' scenes and their embedding in the larger dramatic structure, it is their depiction of internally divided communities that leaps to the fore – especially if we compare these depictions with the relatively harmonious political communities of other tragic dramas, where threats and challenges come from the outside; and we may well ask, how come? Why do *Phoenician Women* and *Orestes* dramatise deliberative processes in a different way from that of *Children of Heracles, Suppliant Women* or *Hecuba*? And whence the general hostility towards the spoken word that pervades the action of one of the last play that Euripides produced before his death?

Despite a venerable tradition that has its roots in ancient scholarship, it remains as hazardous as ever to try and read tragedy in the light of contemporary political history:[91] and this is not only a matter of our patchy and partial knowledge of the history, but also of our necessarily imperfect understanding of what tragedy purports to do. Thus, even if we can plausibly map certain events in a tragic drama onto events in the recent historical experience of its audience, the explanatory value of this achievement will be limited: in the absence of statements of purpose on the author's part, and of records of the audience's appreciation of what they have seen, what more can we do than establish that, say, *Suppliant Women* may have reminded the spectators of the retreat at Delium in 425; or that *Trojan Women* was possibly inspired by Athens' brutal treatment of Melos in the winter of 416/5, as many scholars have assumed?[92] In this respect, it may be thought of little avail to labour the obvious – that, while a play like *Children of Heracles* was produced in the earliest years of the Pelo-

---

[89] The entertainment value of *Pho.* is discussed by Sluiter, 'SOAP' 25-32; for Euripides' remarkable manipulation of the audience's expectations, see also Saïd, 'Attente déçue'.

[90] This aspect of the play is particularly emphasised by Willink on *Or.* p. xxii-xxviii.

[91] For a critical survey of this tradition, see e.g. Saïd, 'Tragedy & Politics'.

[92] *Suppl.* and Delium: see above, ch. **III** n.71. *Tro.* and Melos: Van Erp Taalman Kip, 'Euripides & Melos' observes that the poet would hardly have had the time to turn these events into an interconnected trilogy produced in the spring of 415 (cf. Hose, *Drama u. Gesellschaft* 35-6; Kuch, 'Melos'); but it remains quite likely that the composition of Euripides' Trojan plays was inspired by the charged political atmosphere that gave rise to the Melian expedition earlier in the year: see esp. Sidwell, 'Melos'.

ponnesian War, when Pericles was still alive, *Phoenician Women* and *Orestes* were created after one of the most traumatic events in later-5th-cent. socio-political life: the *coup d'état* of the Four Hundred. On the other hand, the obvious should perhaps not be wholly ignored either; and a brief account of the years in which the Athenian public saw its last Euripidean productions may yet help to deepen our understanding of their distinctive depiction of deliberative process.[93]

By 413, the Sicilian expedition, publicly ratified in a spirit of elated optimism brought on by such military successes as the subjugation of Melos,[94] had ended in disaster; and the war effort went steeply down-hill, leading up to the *coup* of 412/11, when the Athenian general Pisander, leader of the Samos-based faction that was seeking Persian support, bludgeoned the Athenian Assembly into approving an essentially oligarchic reform, and secured the backing of the city's ἑταιρεῖαι.[95] Some months later, with Pisander on his way to implement this programme, the oligarchic revolution had already become a fact, with the covert assassination of several prominent democrats and the abolition of pay for public office.[96] During this time, the βουλή and ἐκκλησία continued to meet, but deliberation was effectively controlled by the revolutionaries;[97] and once Pisander arrived in Athens, the βουλή was replaced by a group of Four Hundred, and the Assembly restricted to a roster of Five Thousand men.[98] After a reign of four months, the Four Hundred were deposed, but the Five Thousand retained their exclusive power over the Assembly;[99] and full democracy was not restored before the summer of 410.

Aristophanes' comedies of 411 make no discernible reference to what was going on that very spring (though they show a marked decrease in the number of indi-

---

[93] My summary of the events is selective: for full surveys, see e.g. Kagan, *Fall* 131-57; Munn, *School of History* 127-51; Olson & Austin on Ar. *Thesmo.* pp. xxvi-xliv; Mann, *Demagogen u.d. Volk* 270-82, the latter with comprehensive references to scholarly treatments.

[94] Optimism: cf. Thuc. 6.24.3; on the relationship between the Melos affair (as reshaped by Thucydides) and the Sicilian expedition, see e.g. Kallet, *Corrosion of Power* 9-20; Greenwood, 'Fictions of Dialogue'.

[95] Thuc. 8.53-54.3, dating Pisander's actions to the winter of 412/11.

[96] Thuc. 8.65.2-66.1. Although Thucydides is not quite clear about the precise chronology, the assassinations are likely to have commenced soon after Pisander's first visit to Athens: cf. Hornblower on Thuc. 8.53-55 (p. 3.911).

[97] Thuc. 8.66.1-2; in the subsequent paragraphs, Thucydides describes the paralysing atmosphere of terror that prevailed among Athens' population.

[98] Thuc. 8.67.3; [Arist.] *Ath. pol.* 32.2 adds that the 5000 were chosen λόγωι μόνον, Athens in fact being ruled by the 400. Eventually, the βουλή was forcibly expelled by the 400, who were armed with knives and accompanied by a gang of 120 toughs (Thuc. 8.69-70.1).

[99] Thuc. 8.97-98.1; Thucydides describes the ensuing situation as a 'mixture between oligarchy and democracy' (μετρία γὰρ ἥ τε τοὺς ὀλίγους καὶ τοὺς πόλλους ξύγκρασις ἐγένετο, 8.97.2), and regarded this as a satisfactory arrangement (*ibid.*, καὶ οὐχ ἥκιστα δὴ τὸν πρῶτον χρόνον ἐπί γε ἐμοῦ Ἀθηναῖοι φαίνονται εὖ πολιτεύσαντες).

viduals satirised by name: this was a time to keep a low profile);[100] but Euripides' *Phoenician Women*, probably produced in 410, is a different matter.[101] By the time of the 411 Dionysia, Pisander had pushed oligarchic reforms in the Assembly and done the rounds of Athens' clubs, and the reign of terror described by Thucydides was in full progress; in the following year, the exclusive government of the Four Hundred had been replaced, but democracy had yet to be restored. In either of these years, the poet's choice to dramatise a conflict between two brothers – Polynices, who marches with a foreign army upon his own city, and Eteocles, who refuses to be bound by an equable agreement – would have been suggestive, to say the least; although, as observed above, this suggestiveness might be counteracted to some extent by the play's sheer entertainment value.[102] As for *Orestes*: shortly after the 410 Dionysia, Athens had slowly begun to regain its maritime supremacy with Alcibiades' victory at Cyzicus, and to recover sufficiently to reject Spartan peace-offers; but internally, the city remained divided, one faction of the now dispersed Four Hundred turning on their former associates, and the murderous activities of the ἑταιρεῖαι that originally supported Pisander continuing unabated. Again, Euripides' choice of subject – a community failing to find a satisfactory way of dealing with an archetypical crime, and descending into increasing violence – appears to be suggestive;[103] although as in the case of *Phoenician Women*, the exuberance of the dramaturgy may be seen to take away the sharpest edges.[104]

More so, however, than Euripides' more or less apt choice of mythical subject-matter, it is the dissolution of the deliberative processes highlighted in *Orestes* and *Phoenician Women* that makes these plays seem written with recent developments prominently in the author's mind. In Thucydides' account of the events narrated above, the revolutionaries' abuse of Athens' forums for public deliberation stand out as a constant feature: popular resistance to Pisander's proposals in the Assembly was apparently quenched 'by false hope and fear' (Thuc. 8.53.3-54.1), and the As-

---

[100] Fourteen κωμῳδούμενοι in Ar. *Lys.*, seventeen in *Thesmo.* – *versus* e.g. eighty-one in *Vesp.* (422), sixty-one in *Av.* (414), fifty-five again in *Ran.* (405). For the impact of the oligarchic coup on the composition of *Lys.* and *Thesmo.* see esp. Leszek, 'Aristophanes, Thucydides VIII' and Olson & Austin on *Thesmo.* p. xliv.

[101] Reviewing the stylistic and metrical data as well as the testimony of Σ Ar. *Ran.* 53 (which puts *Pho.* between *Hel.* and *Or.*), Mastronarde establishes a date-range between 411 and 409; but of these dates, 410 is the most likely, since poets appear mostly to have competed in the Dionysia every other year: see Hose, *Drama u. Geselschaft* 14-18 and 190-97 on "Müller's Law".

[102] Romilly, 'Actualité des *Phéniciennes*' 35-41 is the most even-handed treatment of possibly topical references in the play; also e.g. Newiger, *Phönizierinnen*; Neumann, *Gegenwart* 57-76; Meltzer, *Poetics of Nostalgia* 23-31.

[103] Different topical features of this play's *mythopoiesis* have been identified by e.g. Burkert, 'Absurdität der Gewalt' *passim*; Rawson, 'Aspects' 155-6; and Euben, 'Corruption' 236-7. Cf. n.49 above.

[104] In this context, we may note that the light-hearted satyr play *Cyclops* was probably part of the same production as *Or.*: for the juxtaposition of these two plays, see esp. Marshall, 'Dating the *Cyclops*'.

sembly was effectively dominated by revolutionaries (66.2-3; cf. n.98 above); laws controlling excessive proposals – a key feature of democratic procedure – were suspended (67.2); and to cap it all, the Assembly eventually ratified its own dissolution unanimously (69.1).[105] For Euripides to present an audience that has recently experienced such upheavals with a depiction of the ἀγὼν λόγων that is as unproblematical as that of *Children of Heracles*, or even as guardedly optimistical as those of *Suppliant Women* or *Hecabe*, would hardly have been opportune. We may never know whether the poet intended (or the spectators viewed) *Phoenician Women* and *Orestes* as cautionary tales, or as a topical parody of recent Athenian goings-on, but we may surmise that after the unprecedented, one-year-long suspension of Athens' democratic institutions, a 'successful' dramatic ἀγὼν λόγων on a politically salient subject would have been seen by the audience as jarringly incredible. What evidently still passed muster in the late 430s or the mid-420s , when popular confidence in the soundness of Athens' political institutions was by all accounts relatively unaffected, may not have done so any more in the century's final decade.

Moreover, a second consideration may here be taken into account. Our most eloquent testimony to the changes in Athenian political culture during the last part of the 5th cent. is the biased, but internally consistent narrative of Thucydides, whose account of what happened in 412/411 can be seen as the culmination of a trend – signposted by the historian himself at 2.65.11-13 – according to which the death of Pericles initiated a progressive decline in the city's deliberative culture.[106] As we have seen, the first post-Periclean instance of public deleberation reported in detail is the Mitylenaean debate, in which the historian juxtaposes Cleon's anti-agonistic rally with Diodotus' less-than-wholehearted defence of the ἀγὼν λόγων (ch. **III.2**); then come such meta-rhetorical set-pieces as the Corcyrean debate, the Melian dialogue and the debate about the Sicilian expedition, starring the wayward Alcibiades.

This series of complementary vignettes of Athens' declining deliberative standards, which culminates in the 411 *coup*, can be mapped to some extent, not just onto Aristophanic comedy of 425-414 and its insistent critique of war-time rhetoric, but also onto Euripidean tragedy. In ch. **III** and **IV** above, I have demonstrated that a number of Euripides' characters adopt a perspective on the ἀγὼν λόγων that closely resembles that of Thucydides' Cleon. These characters first appear in plays produced in the years round about the historical Cleon's heroic death in 422: for instance, *Sup-*

---

[105] The historian himself was in exile from Athens during the years of the oligarchic *coup*, but his facts are mostly confirmed by [Arist.] *Ath. pol.* 29-33; if anything, ps.-Arist. can be seen to downplay the intrigue reported by Thucydides' account (which he knows), to concentrate on the official documents supplied by his other main source, the pro-oligarchic Androtion. On the political prejudices that colour both accounts, cf. Westlake, 'Subjectivity' 183-6; and for a full comparison see Heftner, *Oligarchische Umsturz*.

[106] Cf. the literature cited above, ch. **III** n. 66. Hornblower on Thuc. p. 3.1053-4 observes that, whereas it seems unlikely that Thucydides, had he lived, would not have continued his history beyond 411, the final chapters of Book 8 show signs of closure on various levels of the text.

pliant Women's Theban Herald, who claims that 'even if there are two λόγοι' to choose from, 'everyone knows which is good and which is bad'; and *Hecuba*'s Hecabe, who categorically denies that a crime can be successfully defended. In giving voice to this anti-agonistic perspective in his tragedies, Euripides may be seen to acknowledge an emergent disenchantment with the dominant political ideology – even if, as I have argued, these plays still evince an essentially positive appraisal of the ἀγὼν λόγων as a political institution. A drama like *Trojan Women* of 415, by contrast, has often been seen by modern scholars to present Athenian politics in an ironically harsh light – and, in so doing, to align itself with Thucydides' programmatic condemnation of Athens' treatment of the unfortunate Melians:[107] here, on the eve of the Sicilian expedition, tragedy may be seen to sound a warning note. Finally, just as the 411 *coup* crowns Thucydides' prolonged narrative of dissolution, so Euripides' *Phoenician Women* and *Orestes* depict societies in which the ἀγὼν λόγων is a mere distraction in a larger pattern of exploding violence.

　　So, when we try to place Euripides' post-411 plays in their historical situation, two external correlates come into view: the historical events of 412/411, which may well have made the poet wary of presenting his audience with a naively optimistic perspective upon the feasibility of the ἀγὼν λόγων; and a narrative trajectory, traced with the benefit of hindsight by a historian writing in the final years of the century, that can also be discerned when we look at the tragedian's output from the late 430s to the years 410-408. And while arguably, none of this *explains* anything much about *Phoenician Women* and *Orestes* as works of art – for aren't we still left wondering whether these dramas were intended by the poet as cautionary tales, or as topical parodies, or as sheer entertainment after all? – it does give a historical dimension to the interpretations of their dramatic action advanced above. What is distinctive in these plays appears to have been conditioned both by the poet's abiding critical interest in the mechanisms of Athenian-style political deliberation, and by the variable historical circumstances in which his plays were produced.

---

[107] *Tro.* and Melos: cf. n.92 above. Condemnation: note e.g. the revealing phrasing at Thuc. 5.84.3: πρὶν ἀδικεῖν τι τῆς γῆς λόγους πρῶτους ποιησομένους ἔπεμψαν πρέσβεις ('Before *committing any crime* against the land, they sent heralds to make speeches'), and the fact that the historian does not allow the Athenians an answer to the Melians' description of themselves as ὅσιοι πρὸς οὐ δικαίους (5.104: 'justified against criminals') – though the balance of Thucydides' sympathies in the Melian dialogue remains a matter of debate: see Hornblower on Thuc. 5.84-118 (p. 3.218) with references. For the programmatic nature of the Dialogue, see also Andrewes on Thuc. 5.113 (4.183-4); and the literature cited above, n.94. In the 4th cent., the Melian question became a *locus* for discussing the rights and wrongs of Athenian imperialism *per se*: cf. e.g. Xen. *Hel.* 2.2.3; Isoc. 4.100 and 12.63 and 89; and see Romilly, *Imperialism* 282-6.