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TRAGEDY, COMEDY AND THE POLIS

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Political and cosmic turbulence in Euripides' *Orestes*

'All subsists by elemental strife'

(Pope, *Essay on Man*, Ep. i. 169)

Introduction

A huge cast, a mad scene, a flamboyantly sophisticated *agōn*, a singing barbarian eunuch, an imminent triple suicide, two brutal murders averted only in the nick of time, high comedy, suspense, surprise, and a final tableau in which the palace of the Atridae is nearly burned to the ground before Apollo and a catasterized Helen appear on the crane: these are some of the features of *Orestes* which made it so successful upon the ancient stage¹. Yet it fell foul of the critical establishment in the 19th century on the usual grim neo-Aristotelian grounds that it was episodic and immoral and its *deus ex machina* facile²: it was not until the 1960s that scholars started to turn their hermeneutic talents to *Orestes* with any sense of commitment; it has taken until very recently for editions in English to replace the little volume by Wedd published in 1895. Fortunately the play's ironic and self-parodying tone, its flashy metatheatricity, and its self-conscious awareness of the literary legacy which underlies it have begun to strike increasingly resonant chords in the last twenty years or so.

¹ Socrates was said to have been so pleased by the opening lines of the play, which assert the power of human endurance, that he called for an encore (Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.* 4.29.63). One hypothesis to the play calls it 'one of those dramas with a great reputation on the stage'. For further testimony to its ancient popularity see W.G. Arnott 1983:13 and nn. 1-7.

² In 1930 a scholar is still claiming that 'it is not a play that anybody can enjoy' (Bates 1930:167)!

Orestes works on numerous levels. Besides its ironic subversion of dramatic and theatrical conventions (Burnett 1971:182-222, W.G. Arnott 1982:41-43 and 1983), and its almost post-structuralist obsession with texts talking to texts (Zeitlin 1980), three aspects which have attracted critical attention are its relation to the contemporary political situation at Athens³, its interest in natural science⁴, and its notoriously problematic conclusion⁵. These features, however, have usually been studied in isolation from one another. This article suggests that they are inextricably interconnected.

The play concludes with Apollo appearing *ex machina* and resolving the conflict between Orestes and his uncle Menelaus. This theophany used to elicit uniform disparagement from critics influenced by Aristotle's condemnation of the Euripidean *deus ex machina* who does not spring organically from the plot (*Poet.* 1454a37-b1). 'Of all the like scenes in Euripides it is perhaps the most prodigiously absurd, unreal, meaningless, impossible' (Verrall 1905:257). Recently, however, this technique, whereby a dramatic impasse can be improbably resolved, has been more approvingly interpreted as a proto-Brechtian method of drawing self-conscious attention to authorial power over narrative (Lichtenberger 1986). But even now few critics have seen that the theophany makes a profound *political* statement: Apollo resolves civic *stasis*⁶.

Menelaus has won over the Argives to his side, and is able to call them to his aid in order to arrest Orestes and execute him (1533-4). When Menelaus appears at the palace of the Atridae he is accompanied by armed attendants, probably representing the citizens of Argos (1561-2, West 1987:290); his last words before the appearance of Apollo summon the Argive citizenry to arms in order to wreak vengeance on the polluted matricide whose existence threatens their *polis* (1621-4). Apollo therefore needs not only to

³ See e.g. Longo 1975, Schein 1975, Euben 1986b.

⁴ J.R. Wilson 1979, Scodel 1984b, Willink 1983:31-33.

⁵ See especially Lichtenberger 1986.

⁶ An exception is Burkert 1974, who sees the 'polarization' of social classes in Athens from 415 onwards as crucial to the poet's formulation of the myth.

prevent Orestes from killing Hermione, but to resolve the conflict between Orestes and his citizens. An exploration of the political antagonisms expressed and ultimately reconciled in *Orestes* reveals that they are related to cosmological theories and to images drawn from the elemental sphere. The domestic and political conflicts and their resolutions are universalized by a version of the pathetic fallacy: it is implied that they are reflected in, even caused by, analogous processes taking place simultaneously in the cosmic order.

Political Background

Orestes was first produced in 408 BC. The preceding years had been amongst the most turbulent in the history of Athens. They had seen the sailing of the Athenian fleet to Sicily, and the catastrophe in which the expedition culminated in 413 BC. Political instability followed in the wake of the disaster: seeing their opportunity, those at Athens who had always disliked the democracy began to plan its overthrow. In the summer of 411 the oligarchic regime of the Four Hundred took power. After four months, however, a split between the most extreme oligarchs and the so-called 'moderates' appeared. Under the rule of the Five Thousand which replaced the oligarchy, and subsequently under the restored democracy, political life was characterized by the reprisals against, and trials of, those involved in the coup: revenge was the order of the day. The historical backdrop is one therefore one of heightened political awareness and intense factional antagonism. Athens was locked in a deadly ideological battle which found political expression in the lawcourts. *Orestes* is implicated in and can be read to disclose both the struggles of this historical moment and the forms taken by their transmutation into tragic mythopoiesis.

Politics in 'Orestes'

It may be no coincidence that *Orestes* was produced exactly fifty years after the first performance of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, for it constantly refers to it and is consciously written against it⁷.

⁷ On the play's literary allusiveness see Winnington-Ingram 1969:133-135, Rawson 1972:155-157, Zeitlin 1980, West 1987:31-32.

Euripides' play fills in the events between *Choephoroe* and *Eumenides*. The hero has recently killed his mother. At the start of the play he is being harassed by the Erinyes, whom he just begins to glimpse at the end of *Choephoroe*, but he has not yet left Argos for Delphi, where he is to be found at the opening of *Eumenides*. The entire sequence of the plot, therefore — Orestes' quarrels with Tyndareus and Menelaus, his trial at Argos, his attempts to murder Helen and Hermione, the plan to burn down the palace of the Atridae — are Euripides' own invention: as the scholar Aristophanes said in his hypothesis, this *muthopoiia* does not occur in any other author.

The most outstanding alteration Euripides made to the traditional tragic formulation of Orestes' story is, however, political. In a sense *Orestes* covers the ground of both *Choephoroe* and *Eumenides*. His trial in the Argive assembly replaces his trial on the Athenian Areopagus; the description of the assembly is modelled in every detail on the Athenian assembly. Although Argos had itself seen an oligarchic coup followed by the re-establishment of democracy in 418/417, the Argos of *Orestes* 'is not called Athens, but there can be no doubt that it *is* Athens' (Vidal-Naquet 1988b:335). The most profound difference from the story depicted in the *Oresteia*, however, is that Orestes, far from being acquitted, is condemned to death.

In earlier dramatizations of Orestes' story Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus' rule was presented as a tyranny; Orestes' murder of his mother was approved by the *dēmos*. The perception of Orestes and Pylades had always been informed by a prosopographic code beneath which lay the prototypes of all ancient tyrannicides, Harmodius and Aristogeiton. But in *Orestes*, for the first time, the murder of Clytaemnestra is condemned as dangerous to the principles of the democracy; Tyndareus clearly argues that Orestes, the young aristocrat, presents a threat to the democratic imperative of the rule of law by taking it into his own hands and failing to take his case before a tribunal (491-506). Our Orestes 'is not driven by the same public motives that over-determined the matricide of Aeschylus' Orestes. There is no evidence that Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus

ruled as tyrants, and so Orestes cannot be a tyrannicide' (Euben 1986b:234).

The political nature of the play is revealed in the formulation of its mythical figures in terms of contemporary political conceptual codes. The Argive polis is presented as being locked in a battle between rival factions. Several characters are conceived according to a political character typology with powerful current valency. They represent a variety of divergent political positions and views, and appropriate a variety of modes of political rhetoric.

Orestes himself shares some features with Antiphon, the extreme oligarch recently tried and executed. Antiphon had always been an opponent of the democracy; his rhetorical talents were at the service of the oligarchic minority which had striven to undermine it, and he masterminded the revolution. But once a split had appeared in the council of the Four Hundred between the so-called 'moderates' and the extremists, amongst whose number Antiphon was prominent, the extremists appealed unsuccessfully for help from Sparta (Thuc. 8.91.1). When they returned to Athens in the early summer of 411 three figures stood their ground. Antiphon and his colleagues Archeptolemus and Onomacles were put on trial on a charge of treachery. Antiphon delivered what Thucydides calls the greatest speech ever yet delivered by a man on trial for his life (8. 68), of which a few fragments survive⁸. But along with Archeptolemus he was condemned and executed, his body refused burial, his house razed to the ground (see W.S. Ferguson 1932, Bauman 1990:85-87).

Orestes' career bears distinct similarities to Antiphon's: he is a master rhetorician; he appeals to Sparta (represented by Menelaus) for salvation and has his appeal refused; he is supported by his two aristocratic friends, Electra and Pylades; he is put on trial by a vengeful *dēmos*, pleads for his life, but is condemned to death.

During the extended *agōn* Tyndareus speaks in prosecution of Orestes as a democrat about the law⁹; Menelaus talks the language of

⁸ Conveniently published with translation in Maidment 1941: 294-298.

⁹ There was another tradition on which Euripides may be drawing in which Tyndareus and Erigone had prosecuted Orestes at the Areopagus. See *FgrH* IIIb (Suppl.) ii 48a. Will 1961 overplays the malice with which Tyndareus is invested; Norwood 1948:

cynical political opportunism and expediency; Orestes uses the vocabulary of those who justified the oligarchy on the grounds that the city must be saved. A recurrent word in his mouth is *sōtēria*, salvation: Orestes begs for Menelaus to save him; after Menelaus has declined, there is to be no hope of *sōtēria*. The term had a contemporary political resonance, the alleged need for *sōtēria* having been used to legitimize the oligarchy (Lévy 1976:16-27)¹⁰. Orestes also expresses standard criticism of the *ochlos* and of demagogues (771-2) of the kind familiar from Aristophanes.

In the messenger's narrative, a speech about political speeches (de Romilly 1972), we hear that Oeax opposes Orestes because of a family vendetta arising out of the conviction of Palamedes at Troy (432). The polis is at present under the control of another faction led by the *philo*i of the murdered Aegisthus (435); Talthybius speaks for this group. He is defined as 'ever the friend of those in power' (895-7): scholars have seen the shadow of Theramenes the famous turncoat here (C. Wolff 1968/1983:341), the man who managed both to be deeply implicated in the oligarchic revolution and to hold onto his life and his power when it collapsed. In Euripides' Argos Diomedes leads another, more moderate faction, in favour merely of exiling Orestes (898-902). Then there is a caricature of a demagogue who a scholiast claims is a disguised Cleophon; he puts the radical democrats' case, as a supporter of Tyndareus (902-916). We also meet a Pious Peasant, that cliché of this period of Athenian literature (Grossmann 1950:21-24); as a conservative and ally of the aristocratic he defends Orestes (918-930) and pleases the *chrēstoi* at the trial. And although no speech of his is reported at the assembly, the figure of the opportunistic Menelaus lurks behind the scenes, the kind of politician who deserts his *philo*i when it is expedient, waiting to exploit the wrath of the *dēmos* in order to promote himself to the throne of Argos¹¹.

270, who hears in his words the Periclean democrat, for whom the responsibility for punishing crime must rest with the state alone, is nearer to the mark.

¹⁰ On the theme of *sōtēria* in the play see Parry 1969.

¹¹ Aristotle complained that Menelaus in this play was unnecessarily depraved (*Poet.* 1461b 21). In the figures of the semi-orientalized Spartans Helen and Menelaus there is

Hetairoi

The characterization of Orestes, Pylades, and Electra also appropriates facets of the contemporary perception of the *hetairoi*, the 'clubs' of upper-class young people, bound together by some special oath (they are often called the *sunōmotai* or *sunistamenoi*), whose activities, especially their murder of the demagogue Androcles, had directly precipitated the oligarchic revolution of 411 (Thuc. 8. 65, see Sartori 1957:113-126). In the wake of the revolution, the important role which some *hetaireiai* had played in the toppling of the rule of the *dēmos* led to a general conflation of the concepts of 'oligarch' and *hetairos* (see Thuc. 8.48.3-4, 8.54.4, 8.65.2, Calhoun [1964]: 4-9). In 410, indeed, there was an attempt to nullify the influence of these clubs by making all Athenians swear an oath of loyalty to the constitution which would take precedence over all other oaths. But the clubs neither disappeared nor changed their political allegiances; they were soon to play an important role in the establishment of the Thirty at the end of the war (Sartori 1957:129-143).

One of the distinguishing features of the *hetaireiai* seems to have been that the members of a particular *hetaireia* were drawn from a single age group (Calhoun [1964]:29). Their activities were conducted in secrecy; oaths of loyalty were taken, accompanied by initiation rites. There was also an obsessive loyalty towards other members of the *hetaireia* which went beyond any 'natural' affinity of those of the same age, class, and temperament. Thucydides says of the importance attached to *hetaireia*-membership: 'Reckless daring was held to be loyal (*philetairos*) courage ... the man who took counsel beforehand to have nothing to do with plots was considered as a breaker of the bond (*hetaireia*) ...the club bond (*to hetairikon*) was stronger than blood relationship, because the comrade was more ready to dare without asking why' (3.82.4-6).

Rawson saw that the relationship between Orestes, Pylades, and Electra is defined in the language of the *hetaireia*. 'Does the evil

embodied another current Athenian political preoccupation — the aid which had been recently lent to Sparta by Pharnabazus, the satrap of Hellespontine Phrygia (Hall 1989b: 110 and n. 32).

alliance, founded in the murder of Clytaemnestra and now rampant in other crimes, not evoke that same dangerous political phenomenon, in which upper-class young people were bound together by some bold or even criminal deed, a *pistis*?' (Rawson 1972:160).

Electra, Orestes, and Pylades are bound in *philia*, in a conspiracy of three, a trioka of young aristocrats, a *hetaireia*: even the issue of age is raised by Orestes. Only after Tyndareus stomps out of the *agōn* and the play can our adolescent *hetairos* deliver his speech, he says, without having to deal with the senile interruptions of his elderly relative (629-30)¹². He also insists, like Thucydides' *hetairoi*, on the precedence that friends can take over family: 'a non-relative who becomes bonded to you by his character is a better friend (*philos*) to possess than a multitude of relatives' (804-5). Pylades supports Orestes in his trial: one of the most important functions of the *hetaireia*-members was to help their *hetairoi* in litigation and elections (Thuc. 8.54.4).

After the trial, in the scene where suicide is discussed, the three become bonded in a mutual relationship transcending all others: Pylades wants to die with his friend Orestes, for 'what is life without your companionship?' (1072), but the word for 'companionship' here is *hetaireia*. The suicide plan is eventually rejected in favour of the plan to murder Helen and take Hermione hostage (Pylades' and Electra's ideas respectively), the scene turning into a secret meeting of vengeful and obsessively loyal *hetairoi*. They call themselves the three *philo*i (1190), and Electra stresses the importance of absolute loyalty 'for this is all one alliance' (*pan gar hen philon tode*, 1192). There follows an excited passage in which the contents of the entire kommos of *Choephoroe* are compressed into about twenty lines; Agamemnon is asked to lend his blessing from the house of impenetrable Night to the murder of Helen, and Pylades, the ringleader at this stage, rounds off the scene by asking for success for this daring young *hetaireia*: 'for this trio of *philo*i there is one *agōn* and one settlement — death for all or life for all' (1244-5).

¹² On the increasing abrasiveness between the older and younger generations of men in Athenian politics during the last quarter of the 5th century see Reinhold 1976:32-38.

Philia

There are several terms used for *hetairoi*, but passages in Thucydides and Isocrates especially show that the *hetairos* is often called just a *philos*; the masonic relationship which binds him to his fellow *hetairoi* is often defined as *philia* (Thuc. 1.126.5, Isoc. 16.8). In our play the groups around the different figures struggling for power are called each others' *philo*.

Philia, always a popular concept in Euripides, is unusually prominent in this play. In an influential article Greenberg argued that there is underlying *Orestes* a fundamental opposition of *philia* and *sophia* (Greenberg 1962). It is certainly true that much of the rhetoric in Menelaus' argument with Orestes centres on these ideas and their mutual incompatibility. Orestes asks for help from Menelaus on the grounds of *philia*; Menelaus, as a *philos*, is bound to try to save his nephew; Menelaus excuses himself from lending aid on the grounds of *sophia*. There is more rhetorical play around these ideas later in the play, which further exposes the impossibility of behaving both expediently and according to the rules of *philia*. But Greenberg's *philia/sophia* formulation is too symmetrically antithetical, and too reductive; as Rawson saw, 'the *philia-sophia* contrast is not so equally balanced as Greenberg might lead us to think; there is a good deal more about *philia* than about *sophia*' (Rawson 1972:157). Perhaps there is more than one principle working in conjunction with and against *philia* in this play. In the deep mental structures of the ancient Greek mind, the most conventional antithesis of *philia* was not *sophia*, but strife, the cosmic force of *eris* or *neikos*, which in Empedocles' famous formulation, for example, battles continually with *philia* or *philotēs* for hegemony over the universe.

Eris

The first part of this article showed how Euripides' formulation of the Orestes myth focuses on political strife: this, I suggest, is ramified and universalized by his poetic appropriation and transformation of cosmological speculations, especially those concerning the cosmic principle of strife. Heraclitus had of course seen the universe as in constant struggle, and declared that *dikē* is

eris, that all things happen according to strife and necessity (22 B 80 D-K) and that *polemos*, probably the same principle as strife, is father of everything (22 B 53 DK). But the philosopher with whom the concept of strife is perhaps most intimately identified is Empedocles, in whose formulation the cosmos is governed by two conflicting principles, love and strife. This idea was highly influential and much discussed in the ancient world. There are problems in terms of reconstructing his system, and large areas of ambiguity. But it is at least clear that Empedocles 'accepted the Eleatic thesis that what is cannot come into existence nor pass away' (Hussey 1972:130), and that he perceived change as the rearrangement of his four permanently existing elements or 'roots' of earth, air, fire, and water; the change in the relations between these elements is effected by the two further eternally existing constituents of the universe, love and strife. Love brings the elements together; strife dissolves the mixture into its separate elements which war against one another. Love and strife dominate the cosmos alternately; there are periods when one is advancing, the other retreating, and vice versa. The rule of strife separates and makes antagonistic all the elements, until it reaches a peak of maximum disorder, before the rule of love begins again and all things are united in harmony.

Empedocles not only saw this system as explaining the changes in the physical world; it also accounted for human behaviour. According to Aristotle (*Phys.* 252a 27-31), the impetus behind Empedocles' invention of this theory was the observation that love and strife are the two forces having the greatest influence on the actions of men, making them come together in amity, or destroy one another in enmity. Even the fragments of his work show that love and strife are equally responsible for the separation and mingling in the realm of the elements, on a cosmic scale, and in the interrelationships between human beings; similar language is used: the principles of human behaviour and of the cosmos are identical (31 B 20 D-K, Wright 1982:31-32).

In epic the divine personification of strife, Eris, is connected with the judgement of Paris and its preliminaries: she appeared at the marriage of Peleus and Thetis in the *Cypria* (Kinkel 1877:17). She is also found in battle scenes (*Il.* 4.440, 5.518, 11.73). Hesiod produces

quite a sophisticated distinction between a good and a bad Eris (*Erga* 11-26); in his scheme she is a figure born from Night (Hershbell 1974:207-208). But in non-philosophical literature the concept remains relatively unimportant until Euripides. She is mentioned in several of his extant plays, starting with *Andromache*, but most conspicuously in all those from *Helen* of 412 onwards. Usually she occurs as in epic, in the visual arts (Giroux 1986:847-848), and in Sophocles' satyric *Eris*, in connection with the contest on Ida, with the rivalry between the three goddesses, or with the Trojan war, the strife ultimately caused by the contest (J.R. Wilson 1979).

At four significant moments in *Orestes*, however, strife is not associated with the contest on Ida and the Trojan war, but is the agent at work behind the myth of the house of Tantalus. A few lines into her prologue, Electra is explaining to the audience the background to the situation in which she and Orestes presently find themselves. It was Atreus, her grandfather, against whom 'the goddess Strife spun her coils of wool, combing them out, so that he would make war with his brother Thyestes' (11-14)¹³:

οὗτος φυτεύει Πέλοπα, τοῦ δ' Ἄτρεος ἔφυ,
 ὧι στέμματα ξήνας' ἐπέκλωσεν θεὰ
 Ἔρις, Θυέστη πόλεμον ὄντι συγγόνωι
 θέσθαι.

This image of the goddess Strife as a weaver of men's destinies, like the *Moirai* in Homer, is, as di Benedetto puts it, an audacious innovation which must have made a considerable impact¹⁴. Euripides enthrones the cosmic principle of Strife beloved of *phusikoi* like Heraclitus and Empedocles, and, by conflating her with the Homeric *Moirai*, turns her into the prime mover behind the curse on the Argive royal family, a curse whose trans-historical effects are still being felt by Electra and her brother. The novel nature of Euripides'

¹³ The text here reproduced is that of di Benedetto 1965, approved by Willink 1986 and Diggle (by personal letter).

¹⁴ Di Benedetto 1965:9: 'una innovazione audace, ma di grande effetto'.

daring formulation even led to widespread acceptance of a tamer alternative reading¹⁵.

At the heart of the play, when Orestes' appeal for help from Menelaus has been rejected, the chorus sing a great choral ode in which they once more trace back the family's problems to the quarrel between Atreus and Thyestes; again, the source of all the problems was a particular instance of strife, the strife first manifested in the dispute, *eris*, over the golden lamb (812-13).

After the young aristocrats have been officially condemned to death by the Argive assembly Electra sings an aria, which traces the original advent of strife to Pelops. From the death of Myrtilus there came a curse upon the family, and the golden lamb (988-1000). As a result Eris caused cosmic changes to take place: the sun and the stars altered their paths. Although the text is problematic, the most commonly accepted solution makes Eris remain the subject of the entire remainder of the aria: in return for Myrtilus' death, Eris brought the Thyestean feast, the adultery of Aerope, and the murder of Agamemnon; now her target is Electra herself (1001-12)¹⁶:

ὄθεν Ἔρις τό τε πτερωτὸν
άλιου μετέβαλεν ἄρμα,
† τὰν πρὸς ἐσπέραν κέλευθον
οὐρανοῦ προσαρμόσας < α >
< - > μονόπωλον ἐς ἄω, †
ἑπταπόρου τε δράμημα
Πλειάδος εἰς ὄδον ἄλλαν [Ζεὺς μεταβάλλει],
† τῶνδ' ἐτ' ἀμείβει† θανάτους θανά-
των τά τ' ἐπώνυμα δεῖπνα Θυέστου
λέκτρα τε Κρήσας Ἀερόπας δολί-
ας δολίοισι γάμοισι· τὰ πανύστατα δ'
εἰς ἐμὲ † καὶ γενέταν† ἐμὸν ἦλυθε
δόμων πολυπόνοις ἀνάγκαις.

In passages in *Electra* and *IT* Euripidean characters also refer to myths of celestial disturbances arising out of the quarrel between

¹⁵ θεὰ/ἔριν. The reading printed in my text was preserved as a variant in the Σ *ad loc.*

¹⁶ Text: Willink 1986:252-253. With Willink, and West 1987: 253-254, I am assuming that Ζεὺς μεταβάλλει at 1006 is intrusive, and should be deleted.

Thyestes and Atreus. These include alterations in the paths of the stars and the climate of Africa, in the relation of night to day (*El.* 737-42), and in the course of the sun (*El.* 737-42, *IT* 191-6). All the passages describe the changes in obscure poetic language which makes it difficult to see exactly what they entailed. But, as Morrison argued, they are based on theories of the *phusikoi*, some of them actually active in late fifth-century Athens; the theories of Anaxagoras and Archelaus, for example, supposed that at some point long ago there had been a change in the position of the stars and the sun relative to the earth. But in Empedocles' cosmogony something happened to the sun in the 'storm of the elements' concomitant on the beginning of the rule of the age of strife (Morrison 1970:87-88 and n. 5). Morrison suggests, therefore, that it is Empedocles' ideas which lie behind the *Electra* ode; it was the 'primal fraud of Thyestes ... which caused the disarray observable in the present cosmos... [Euripides] may have been aware that in Empedocles' semi-moral physical system the disarray was the result of the growing power of Strife'.

Something similar is apparent in the passage in *Orestes* quoted above. The most recent age of strife was inaugurated by an earlier crime in the family of Orestes and Electra, and marked by cosmic changes; thereafter the age of strife had perpetuated both ever-increasing cosmic disorder and the moral disarray manifested in acts of perjury, anthropophagy, and intra-familial murder—the works of strife according to Empedocles' *Katharmoi* (31 B 136, 137, 139 D-K). Tantalus is stranded in the aither with a detached *bōlos* dangling over his head, most of the other members of the family are dead, and Orestes is the most recent Tantalid to be condemned to pollution and vagrancy like the exiled Empedoclean *daimōn* (31 B 118, 121 D-K).

The last time where strife is explicitly mentioned is in a passage equally prominent with the other three. At the end of the play, after Apollo has appeared and given his prescriptions for the discontinuation of hostilities he concludes negotiations with the words 'resolve this strife' (*neikos te dialuesthe*, 1679 — Empedocles had used both *neikos* and *eris*, terms already coupled at *Iliad* 21. 513). There is to be a resolution of the age of strife, of the endless killings

and counter-killings in the Tantalid family, and of political stasis in the city. They are to be replaced by friendship between kin, marriages, and the settling of the dispute between Orestes and the citizens of Argos. *Philia* is to be reinaugurated in the family and in the state; analogous to the shift from conflict to *philia* is to be the move from war (*polemos*, 13) to peace (*eirēnē* 1683)¹⁷.

Euripides, however, complicates the straightforward transition from conflict to reconciliation by showing how love and conflict are really two sides of the same coin, as in the formulaic Homeric oxymoron 'beloved strife' (*eris te philē*, *Il.* 1.177, 5.891). The chaotic ethical scheme of the play ultimately even collapses the distinction between love and conflict, for it is from love that conflict arises. Menelaus, it is stressed, has always loved Helen, but it was his love for her which necessitated the appalling carnage at Troy. Helen herself embodies a dialectical union of opposites, of love and conflict, for this much loved — and in this play, loving — woman is connected through the imagery of weaving with the divine embodiment of conflict, Eris herself (12-13, 1431-6).

The plans to murder Helen and kidnap Hermione arise not only out of the desire to take vengeance on Menelaus (1098), but out of the obsessive *philia* of the three young *hetairoi*; although alternating with harsh confrontations with Helen, Tyndareus, Menelaus, and the citizens of Argos, in which words for hatred and loathing proliferate, the scenes involving Electra, Orestes, Pylades and the chorus who support them are dominated by *philia*. They are characterized not only by many visible manifestations of affection — embraces and kisses — but by explicit affirmations of love, abstract discussions of what it constitutes, a syrupy tenderness, an informality of diction indicated by a proportion of colloquialisms unheard of elsewhere in tragedy (Stevens 1976:64-65), and humour. This last reveals that the chaos expressed in political, cosmic, and ethical terms even extends to the play's genre orientation. Indeed, two alternative dénouements

¹⁷ But it is to reduce a synthetic poetic transformation of cosmology and current political ideology to crude polemic if we are to take *Orestes* as an overt exhortation to the Athenians to make peace with Sparta (Wedd 1895: xxxv-xxxvi). *Polemos* and *eirēnē* are contrasted at Heraclitus 22 B 67 D-K.

are offered, both belonging more to the realm of comedy than tragedy: the burning down of the palace (reminiscent of the end of *Clouds*) or a triple wedding. The superficially happy ending is of exactly the type deemed appropriate to comedy by Aristotle, *Orestes* being a play in which 'those who are the bitterest enemies in the story ... go off at the end, having made friends, and nobody kills anybody' (*Poet.* 1453a 35-39). Even Aristophanes' hypothesis notes that the play's dénouement is 'more of the comic type' (*to drama kōmikōteran echei tēn katastrophēn*)¹⁸. The text itself seems to be locked in a battle between tragedy and comedy; it not only decomposes and disintegrates the Athenian democratic charter-myth enshrined in the *Oresteia*, but it threatens to dissolve the very genre, tragedy, which had always been the most patent example of Athenian democratic cultural prestige (Euben 1986b:223).

Euripides and the Phusikoi

I have suggested that a similar relationship between love and strife to that explicitly formulated by Empedocles conditions Euripides' perception of the myth of the house of Tantalus. It is not absolutely necessary to my argument to prove that Euripides was acquainted with the actual text of Empedocles' works; Seaford, writing about the similarity between ideas expressed in the *Prometheia* attributed to Aeschylus and in the fragments of Empedocles, points out that since we have lost the great majority of the texts of this period and are also inclined to underestimate the degree to which ideas were orally disseminated, the primary question is not whether one author had actually read the work of another. 'Ancient poetical texts tend not so much to create ideas as to give

¹⁸ Other comic features include a preponderance of trochaic metre, a high proportion of resolutions in iambic trimeters, bathos, 'realistic' awareness on the part of characters that they are aware of conventional features of the genre (e.g. Electra complaining about the noise the chorus are making in the parodos, 137), and even direct address to the audience (128, Electra uses the second person plural *eidete*, 'did you see..?') when there is no-one on stage to whom this can be addressed). For a discussion of some other comic elements see Seidensticker 1982: 101-114. Some ancient scholars even claimed that, like *Alcestris*, the play was pro-satyric (see Ferguson 1969:111). It is surprising that it is not included in Knox's discussion of 'Euripidean comedy' (Knox 1979b).

them form'. Euripides in *Orestes* may simply be drawing on the same 'subliterary current of ideas' which found expression in the works of Empedocles (Seaford 1986:3).

It is, however, likely on *a priori* grounds that Euripides, as a learned intellectual of the second half of the fifth century, was aware of Empedocles' influential ideas. Empedocles wrote in verse which may make it more likely that he was used by other poets¹⁹, and a fragment of Aristotle's *On Poets* even says that he was 'Homeric' and masterful in the use of metaphor (Aristot. fr. 70 Rose, see Hardie 1986:8 and n. 9). The argument for direct Empedoclean influence could also be supported by the possible references elsewhere in the Euripidean corpus to the Empedoclean dualism of love and strife in the fragments, and probably in the characterization of the power of Aphrodite in *Hippolytus* (*Hipp.* 443-461, see Nestle 1901a:158). Two other passages in the play have also been brought into connection by critics with Empedoclean theory; they concern the pollution caused by the spilling of blood or the breaking of an oath. The chorus sing that the sword stained with the blood of a parent should not be revealed to the rays of the sun (819-22), and Pylades prays that, if he should abandon Orestes, the earth and aither should reject his blood (1086-8); this bears distinct similarities to the Empedoclean idea that the cosmic elements reject those who shed blood or commit perjury (31 B 115 D-K, see West 1987:259)²⁰.

Even more importantly, Euripides was already perceived by his contemporaries as being learned, bookish, and, like the Socrates of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, interested in natural science. Indeed, in the first version of *Clouds*, in which philosophers were called *meteorōleschai* because they were always studying *ta ourania* (Aristophanes fr. 401 K-A), it was alleged that it was Socrates who provided Euripides with ideas for his clever tragedies (Aristophanes fr. 392 K.-A.). At the beginning of *Thesmophoriazusae* Euripides is

¹⁹ On parallels between presocratic and Aeschylean thought see Deforge 1986:35-39.

²⁰ In Hesiod *Theog.* 782-806 *eris* and *neikos* arise among the gods in connection with perjury, and the guilty party is sent into exile. The motif of blood-guiltiness rendering the murderer abhorrent to the elements is particularly common in Euripides (*Med.* 1327-8, *HF* 1231, *IT* 1207): see Wright 1981:65-66.

discoursing on the results of the first division of aither (14-18); at *Frogs* 892-3 he is caricatured as praying to aither and to hyper-intelligence. There are ideas expressed in his works similar to the ideas of numerous *phusikoi*, including Anaxagoras, Archelaus and Diogenes (Nestle 1901a: 152-159, Nestle 1901b: 578-588). In *Orestes* itself there are expressions of theories about change which may echo Heraclitus (234, 1503; see Heraclitus 22 B 84 D-K and West 1987:197), and about physiology which show the influence of Hippocratic writers (Willink 1986:132). Towards the end of the prologue, Electra's words refer to the enthroning of *Phusis* by the *phusikoi* (126-7, see di Benedetto 1965:6).

It is almost at the beginning of the prologue, indeed, that Euripides seems programmatically to announce, in Electra's mouth, that *Orestes* is to concern itself, amongst other things, with theories from natural science. The punishment of Tantalus takes a new form, conditioned by 5th-century cosmology (4-16). He is hovering in the middle of the air, with a rock suspended over him (4-7):

ὁ γὰρ μακάριος — κοῦκ ὄνειδίζω τύχας —
 Διὸς πεφυκῶς, ὡς λέγουσι, Τάνταλος
 κορυφῆς ὑπερτέλλοντα δειμαίνων πέτρον
 ἄερι ποτᾶται·

In her monody Electra returns to the same theme. In a typical Euripidean topos, the expression by a character of the desire to escape elsewhere (Padel 1974), she wishes she could visit that same rock, 'strung in suspense between sky and earth by golden chains, the whirlwind-borne clod that came from Olympus, to cry in lamentation to old father Tantalus...' (982-5):

μόλοιμι τὰν οὐρανοῦ
 μέσον χθονός < τε > τεταμέναν
 αἰώρημασι πέτραν,
 ἀλύσεσιν χρυσεαῖσι φερομένην δίναισι,
 βῶλον ἐξ Ὀλύμπου,
 ἵν' ἐν θρήνοισιν ἀναβοάσω
 γέροντι πατρὶ Ταντάλῳ ...

Tantalus had not previously belonged in the sky; 'the only reason for

putting him between earth and heaven is the identification of his stone with a heavenly body' (Scodel 1984b:17).

Tantalus is floating in the air, always in fear of the stone suspended above him, like the heavenly bodies in Anaxagoras' system. The stone is called both a *petron* and *bōlos* ('clod'), a term which makes best sense if it refers to its formation by agglomeration (Scodel 1984b: 13-14). This corresponds with the interpretation of Anaxagoras' cosmology in which the heavenly bodies, because of the greater cold, congealed from earth particles at a point far from the centre of the cosmos (Cleve 1949:60-68); they are suspended in the present positions between the upper heaven and the earth by the centrifugal force of the vortex (59 A 42, 71 DK, see Richardson 1975:70). Now three other sources connect Tantalus with Anaxagorean cosmology, but, as Scodel argues, they may all ultimately derive from Euripides (Scodel 1984b: 14-17). She also suggests that the *bōlos* is not, as the scholiasts believed, the sun, but a meteorite: one of the most famous of all Anaxagoras' theories was his explanation of meteorites and the reasons for their falling to earth. The *dramatic* effect of all this, of course, is to assert the connection between cosmic and domestic disarray, and to portray the sufferings of the Tantalids as part of the natural order.

Elemental Imagery

The cosmic turbulence in Electra's aria is reduplicated in the metaphorical systems throughout. The image of fire, for example, is prominent. The enmity between the antagonistic parties in the family *and* in the polis is expressed in terms of inflammation. Tyndareus complains that Orestes' words only 'fire him the more' to want him dead (*mallon m' anapseis*, 609). Electra, he says a little later, had urged Orestes on to kill Clytaemnestra 'until she set the house aflame with hatred—a fire not of Hephaestus' making' (*heōs huphēpse dōm' anēphaistōi puri*, 621)²¹. The wrath of the citizens of Argos is characterized by Menelaus in similar terms. When a *dēmos* is angry, he says, it is 'as difficult to extinguish as a raging fire' (*homoion hōste*

²¹ This striking line was used by Verrall in the title of his essay on *Orestes*, 'A fire from Hell' (Verrall 1905: 199-264).

pur katasbesai labron, 696-7). The antipathy of fire and water is an apt analogue for the struggle between the *dēmos* and those who dislike its power; it universalizes the political struggle in the play and in reality by likening it to the separation and differentiation of the elements under the effect of strife. And at the end of the play the image of the fire of hatred is grimly materialized: the young arsonist opponents of the *dēmos* appear with blazing torches on the palace roof, in a spectacular, parodic inversion of the torches of celebration at the end of the *Oresteia*. Only Apollo's intervention quenches the fire of class conflict and saves the play from ending, like Aristophanes' *Clouds*, in total conflagration.

Earth is represented by the clod hung over the head of Tantalus, himself stranded in the aither; our young aristocrats are, it is frequently stressed, in danger of being stoned to death (50, 442, 536, 863, 914-915, 946), and Helen also fears such a punishment at the hands of the Argive citizens (59). Death by stoning now had a particular topicality, as the recent civic turbulence had seen illegal assassinations which took this form (Longo 1975:281-2): stoning in ancient Greece was conceived as a manifestation of 'people's justice' (Hirzel 1909:231). Clytaemnestra and Agamemnon are in the earth, after being 'cleansed in the fire' (40, cf. 403); the eunuch expresses a wish to escape either into the white aither, or into the ocean which encircles the earth (1377-9). Electra's monody recounts how Pelops had killed Myrtilus, the charioteer, by hurling him to his death in the waves from his chariot as it passed over the expanses of the sea, from the sea-surge to white-surfed Geraestus (988-94). Numerous members of the house of Tantalus, past and present, are thus brought into connection with strange and violent elemental contexts (cf. 31 B 115.10-12 D-K).

Tyndareus threatens to bring the whole city crashing down on the adolescent *hetairoi*, using language appropriated from earthquake contexts (*episeisō polin*, 613). Storms rage in the metaphorical system. Storms, especially at sea, are poetic analogues both for Orestes' fits of madness and for the anger which may arise in the *dēmos*. The chorus lament that prosperity is not lasting; some *daimōn* upsets it like the sail of a swift ship and swamps it in waves of doom (340-3). Orestes' appearance is described by Tyndareus: he is 'glinting

lightning-flashes of sickness' (*stilbei nosōdeis astrapas*, 480). When Menelaus is cynically describing how to manipulate a *dēmos*, he mixes his elemental metaphors; the crowd is like a raging fire, as we noticed above, but if, Menelaus continues, changing the analogy, one slackens the sail of a ship, the storm will in time blow itself out (696-700).

A few lines later he returns to the same theme; ships become submerged if the sheet is held too tight (706-7). As he emerged from madness Orestes had earlier said his famous line, 'out of the waves I see calm (*galēn'*) once more' (279)²². He returns to this figure later, when his request for assistance from Menelaus has been rejected, and Pylades appears. A trusty friend is a better sight to those in trouble than calm (*galēnēs*) is to sailors (728). Friendship, *philia*, has the same relation to trouble as calm to storm.

The Dénouement

These storm-figures are ironically prefigurative of the ending of the play, when calm is restored, and Helen, the woman who has caused so much strife, is to be taken up to heaven by Apollo. She is to sit immortal in the vales of aither (1634-5). The god is to take her 'across the shining starry vault', where she will preside with Hera and Hebe, and be the 'queen of the wet sea for mariners' (1684-90). No more suggestion of storms and earthquakes and elemental turbulence here; the resolution of the familial and civic conflicts is mirrored in the resolution of the storm of the elements, now to be serenely administered by the *Oresteia's* hellish hell-Helen herself.

Many Euripidean plays end with the sudden and seemingly arbitrary intervention of a divinity, but *Orestes* is the only play where the conflict to be resolved is overtly political. It not only divides members of an individual family, but is explicitly made to involve the whole of a democratic polis; it is a conflict between political factions.

²² This is the line famously mispronounced by the actor Hegelochus who played Orestes in the original production so as to give the meaning 'out of the waves I see a *weasel* (or *cat*) once more' (See Ar. *Ran.* 303 with Σ *ad loc.*, Sannyrion fr. 8 K-A, Daitz 1983). The comic poet Strattis called *Orestes* the 'cleverest of dramas' spoilt by a bad actor (Strattis fr. 1.2-3 K-A).

Orestes is on the roof of his dead father's palace at Argos, holding a knife to his cousin Hermione's throat, and his sister Electra is about to set fire to the palace, destroying the whole dynasty of Atreus. Menelaus has come to the palace with the knowledge that the Argive *dēmos* can be summoned to his aid, for they have decreed that Orestes must die and are intent on exacting their penalty. Throughout the play Euripides has implied the threatening presence of the citizens of Argos encircling the palace, closing off the escape routes, and gradually closing in²³. Ordinary citizens with revenge in mind, under the leadership of the cynical opportunist Menelaus, are in irresolvable conflict with a *hetaireia* of three young aristocrats. Nothing on *earth* can resolve this conflict, for Menelaus' faction will be satisfied with nothing less than Orestes' death; the *hetairoi*, however, will commit mass suicide and arson before they submit.

It is at this point that Apollo, who has been notably inconspicuous for much of the play (Roberts 1983:113-115), suddenly appears and briskly resolves the situation. Orestes will marry Hermione and reign happily ever after in the palace at Argos after a visit to Athens. Menelaus will also marry again and go back to his own palace at Sparta (1625-65). Helen will sit in the vales of Olympus keeping the elements calm for sailors (1683-90). But what about the citizens of Argos? What about their democratic vote that Orestes is guilty of murder and must die? These are the *politai* who must now miraculously agree to be subjects of Orestes the matricidal king. What of the opposition to Orestes organised by the factions of Oeax, of Diomedes, and of the friends of Aegisthus? About these previously insoluble conflicts all Apollo has to say is that he 'will set aright his [i.e. Orestes'] position as regards the city' (τὰ πρὸς πολιν δε τῶιδ' ἐγὼ θήσω καλῶς, 1664).

Euripides' *Orestes* negotiates an ideological and political settlement, a compromise between the criminalized young royals, Orestes' enemies, and the Argive *dēmos* — a political compromise of the kind which the events of the previous few years at Athens had shown to be impossible. The play, by focusing on the incompatibility of countervailing ideologies and political positions, looks forward as

²³ See Saïd (this volume).

well as back: in but four more years the democracy would once again fall, to Sparta and the regime of the Thirty tyrants. This tragic myth must therefore be seen as an ironic strategy of containment. The wrath of the democratic Argives and their spokesperson, Tyndareus, is contained; the machinations of the aristocratic *hetairoi* are contained; the antagonism between the various political groupings is contained. The ideological settlement is universalized by being placed in the context of the natural order, just as the political conflict, the conflict between Orestes and the Argive *dēmos*, had previously been universalized by the analogous storm of the elements raging in the metaphorical and semantic fields of the drama. And this is one of the ways in which the text subverts and undercuts the facile dénouement, the superficially happy ending, it offers; for the *phusikoi* strife was an eternal principle of the universe and not something which could be banished by a god from a machine. In Heraclitus everything happens according to strife; in Empedocles there is no cessation in the eternal alternation of love and strife. The same pessimism underlying these systems²⁴ underlies the ultimate pessimism of Euripides' most political play²⁵.

The conflicts of the Athenian polis might be resolved temporarily, settlements negotiated, compromises and uneasy truces achieved²⁶. But real life cannot be controlled like a literary narrative. As Aristotle later observed, it was impossible for oligarchs and democrats to share power because of the inherent distrust between them (*Pol.* 4. 1297a 4-13). While social and factional divisions still existed, between rich and poor, *chrēstoi* and *dēmos*, oligarch and democrat, the conflicts between them could never evanesce, as they do in Euripides' mythical Argos, at the wave of an omnipotent authorial wand.

All Athenian literature of this period attempts to deal with the current political conflict. Aristophanes spent his career inveighing

²⁴ On the pessimism of Empedocles' system see C. Osborne 1987:50.

²⁵ Despite its comic elements (see n. 18) Seidensticker 1982: 101 calls *Orestes* one of the 'darkest and most bitter' of all Euripides' dramas.

²⁶ For an assessment of the degree to which oligarchs had posed a threat to the democracy prior to the coup see H. Wolff 1979.

against the *ochlos* and trying to contain the conflicts in the democratic polis. Thucydides believed that factional strife must inevitably recur, though his explanation is *to anthrōpinon*, human nature. In Euripides' Argive soap opera both domestic and civic conflict are caused by the antagonism between love and strife. But it is only in the world of drama —and Euripides has constantly reminded us by self-conscious metatheatrical devices that we are watching a drama — that the *deus ex machina* can intervene in the laws of nature and abolish the ineluctable influence on both *oikos* and *polis* of the cosmic principle of strife²⁷.

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