

PARODIES AND BREAKDOWNS IN EURIPIDES' 'MORE COMIC' ORESTES

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Here we have Euripides, one of the world's greatest tragedians, and he seems to spend his time making sophisticated jokes at the expense of gods, of Aeschylus, and of stage conventions.¹

In 408 BCE, the *Orestes* of Euripides was performed, a mocking tragedy that is starkly different from the other surviving plays of the genre. One of the things that makes this work so distinct is that it is experimental and makes use of some theatrical aspects that are not normally associated with tragedy. In particular, the *Orestes* appears to borrow very heavily from Aristophanic-style comedy, specifically in the use of disruptive parody characters. In Aristophanes' own work, a good example of the sort of comic model that Euripides appears to be influenced by can be found in the comedy of the *Thesmophoriazousai*, where the incompetent Ktedestes' inability to convincingly play the roles he takes on allows the comedy to parody, mock and overturn plays like Euripides' *Helene*.² The tragedian does something similar in the *Orestes*; by constructing disruptive characters that parody older tragic traditions, Euripides is able to assert his own abilities and distinction as a tragedian. At the same time, Euripides' appropriation of comic characters can be seen as a response to Aristophanes' own recurring parodying of Euripides and his tragic characters. At the same time, although these competitive uses of parody are very pragmatic weapons in the contest of Athenian drama, the use of parody in the *Orestes* also indicates that the play has a metatheatrical interest in investigating the actual workings of drama. In borrowing the freedom of comic behaviour for his own characters, Euripides can make his disruptive parody figures explore the machinery of drama, particularly by bringing the whole play to a crashing absurd halt at the end.

For the purposes of this article, 'parody' is taken to include any case where a character closely imitates an artistic work from outside that play, while *simultaneously* mocking or satirising the original version.³ In a sense, parody can act as a sort of bridge between plays; through this sort of imitation, separate works can compete and refer to each other. If Euripides is indeed a great tragic experimenter, it is not particularly strange that he might be associated with comic parody, and more particularly with the comedian Aristophanes.⁴ Certainly there was some sort of interaction between the two playwrights. Aristophanes never made any secret about his interest in Euripides and his tragedies. In fact, so great was his obsession with Euripidean drama, that versions of the tragedian appear in three extant comedies: the *Acharnians*, the *Thesmophoriazousai* and the *Frogs*.

1 Winnington-Ingram (1969), 132.

2 Lines from the prologue of the *Helene* are quoted or closely imitated in Ktedestes' parody. E.g.: *Helene* 1f. at *Thesmophoriazousai* 855f., *Helene* 16f. at *Thesmophoriazousai* 859f., *Helene* 22 at *Thesmophoriazousai* 862, and *Helene* 52f. at *Thesmophoriazousai* 864f. The dialogue between Euripides and Ktedestes from 877 also quotes lines from the *Helene*. Aristophanes often deflates the original lines by commenting on them: when Ktedestes imitates line 52 of the *Helene* at lines 864f. (ψυχὰὶ δὲ πολλὰὶ δι' ἔμ' ἐπὶ Σκαμανδρίασι/ῥοαῖσιν ἔθανον, 'For my sake many souls perished beside the Skamandrian rivers'), another character add the quip ὦφελος δὲ καὶ σύ γε ('If only you had too!', *Thesm.* 865). This ridicule of the parody certainly seems to diminish the seriousness of the original.

3 For a discussion of the idea of parody, see Householder (1944).

4 See Miller (1948).

No doubt because these Aristophanic parodies are so explicit, Euripides' influence on Aristophanes has been widely discussed.⁵ Indeed, Aristophanes' interest in the tragedian's work was so apparent that the comedian Kratinos is supposed to have invented the wonderfully Greek compound εὐριπιδαριστοφανίζων ('Euripidaristophanizing')⁶ to describe the comedian's fixation with creating comic versions of Euripides' characters. Yet despite Euripides' reputation for experimenting with his genre,⁷ there is far less discussion of Aristophanic comedy's possible influence on the tragedian. After all, as E. Segal points out, 'Euripidaristophanization was a two-way process'.⁸

In examining this interaction between the tragedian and comedian, 'paracomedy' is usually used to refer to the use of Aristophanic comic conventions in the tragic genre, and 'paratragedy' to the use of aspects of tragedy within a comedy.⁹ Seidensticker made an early attempt to look at paracomedy in Euripides, by examining 'comic elements'¹⁰ (such as humour) that feature in his plays, emphasising that Euripides and Aristophanes both influenced each other's work. Just as Aristophanes has his characters act out aspects of Euripides, so too does Euripides borrow the amorphous and self-referential nature of Aristophanic characters in order to use competitive parody and expand the creative limits of tragedy itself.

The tragedy works as an experiment in two areas. On the one hand, this *Orestes* develops the use of characters who play paracomical parody roles. This adaptation of comic parody is used by Euripides to subvert established mythic characters, while competing with versions written by other tragedians. On the other hand, the tragedy also attempts to inject some comic instability and absurdity into the character of Orestes himself. Orestes possesses the mutability of a comic character like Dikaiopolis of the *Acharnians* (who can change from a simple rustic to an urbane speaker), but the experiment is not a complete success, since Orestes has no control over the roles he plays. His mad Bacchic freedom clashes with the established mythic role he is expected to act out, resulting in the breakdown of his identity and eventually of the play. Orestes' failure to act out a role in his parody is more spectacular than that of Kedeates in the *Thesmophoriazousai*, because he is unable even to play 'Orestes'. However, despite the dramatic failings of the character and the broken plot, Euripides has succeeded in creating a unique metatheatrical character in Orestes: one who cannot play roles not just because of ignorance, but because of his own instability.

As for the paracomical parody roles that Orestes plays, the first evidence for this aspect of the play comes from one critic (who was not quite as far removed from Attic drama as we are today) who writes a very casual but interesting sentence on the *Orestes*. The scholiast, Aristophanes of Byzantium, has a particular criticism of the play:

τὸ δρᾶμα κωμικωτέραν ἔχει τὴν καταστροφήν
(Hypothesis to Euripides' *Orestes*, 9)¹¹

The drama has a more comic ending (*katastrophe*).

5 E.g.: Miller (1946); Miller (1948); Wycherley (1946); Harriot (1982); Foley (1988).

6 Kratinos, fr. 342 from Kassel & Austin (1983), 288.

7 Zeitlin (1980), 51.

8 Segal (1995), 46-55.

9 For an analysis of Aristophanes' use of parody and paratragedy, see Schlesinger (1936, 1937); on general paratragedy and paracomedy, see Taplin (1986), 170f.; for an example of paracomedy in Euripides' *Herakles* see Kirkpatrick & Dunn (2002), 35-39.

10 Seidensticker (1978), 305.

11 Schwartz (1887), 93.

Of course, he needn't mean that it is 'more funny'. The chaotic, unmotivated violence of Orestes and his merry little band does not necessarily produce a laugh a minute. The scholiast is not saying that this ending was amusing, but rather that Euripides has committed the literary sin of using comic *techniques* in tragedy.

This is not to say that Euripides may not have tried to inject comic laughs into his plays. The scene where Elektra tells the chorus not to make so much noise or else to go away (*Or.* 166-74) seems silly enough to be humorous. Likewise, Burnett argues that the exchange between Orestes and the cowardly Phrygian eunuch (*Or.* 1524-27) is also supposed to be funny.¹² But this sort of humour in tragedy is not a new trick that Euripides has developed. Aischylos knows that punctuating tragedy with a quick laugh gives the audience a break, leaving them unready for the next bloody wave of violence. In the dramatic ancestor of this *Orestes*, the *Oresteia*, Aischylos interrupts the tense action with an amusing, domestic description from the Nurse as to what Orestes the murderer was like as a little nappy-soiling baby (*Cho.* 742-65).

Froma Zeitlin's important take on this play inadvertently helps explain why these comic roles exist in Euripides' *Orestes*. She describes the play as 'perhaps the first work of literature in which close sustained familiarity with other texts is imperative for any genuine appreciation of its meaning and achievement'.¹³ While Zeitlin is correct in stating that this Euripidean tragedy requires some knowledge of other stories, it is scarcely the first work that needs its audience to be familiar with other versions. In actual fact, this sort of familiarity is necessary for a 'genuine appreciation' of something that already exists in comedy as early as the *Acharnians*—parody. Similarly, somebody who does not know much about Euripides' *Helene* might find Aristophanes' parody in the *Thesmophoriazousai* funny, but they are not fully going to appreciate the comedian's mocking scene. The metatheatrical nature of comic parody inherently requires an understanding of outside texts for that 'genuine appreciation'. So when the behaviour of characters in the *Orestes* ridicules an earlier production, they are playing the exact sort of comic roles taken up by Ktedestes and comic-Euripides as they mock tragedies in the *Thesmophoriazousai*.

In one way, this tragedy is 'more comic' because Euripides' characters are emulating Aristophanic mocking roles.¹⁴ Likewise, if the ending is 'more comic' than it should be, it is possible that there are other instances throughout the play where Euripides has appropriated the tools of Aristophanes' Old Comedy. Indeed, through the play Euripides adapts comic techniques in a build-up to the unusual ending.¹⁵ At the conclusion of the *Orestes*, the use of parodying and unstable characters comes to a head in a spectacular breakdown of the tragedy. In terms of a consistent plot, this tragedy is not really a successful integration of comic and tragic personae, but it is still a useful experiment.

Borrowing Comedy's Competitive Parody

When Aristophanes uses parody, it usually works as a tool in his competition for dramatic authority. He satirises tragedians in plays like the *Acharnians* and *Thesmophoriazousai*, de-

12 Burnett (1971), 218.

13 Zeitlin (1980), 53.

14 Taplin (1986), 165.

15 Dunn (1989), 239.

claring that tragedy is taken too seriously but comedy does not have the respect that it deserves for educating the audience.¹⁶ In this way, parody allows Aristophanes to compete with other dramatists. The distorted re-enactment mocks a competitor's work for being silly or incompetent, while extolling the comedian for his cleverness in creating an innovative parody.

Given this strong competitive aspect in Aristophanes' comedy (where Euripides himself is often the butt of the comedian's parodies), if Euripides is using a comparable comic technique, he must be using his parodying characters against another playwright. After all, the tragedian is himself just as involved in the competition of Attic drama as Aristophanes. Although Euripides responds to Aristophanic parody by borrowing his techniques, the comedian is not his main victim. A line of the *Acharnians* indicates that comedy and tragedy are not usually taken in an equal class of dramatic competition. When Dikaiopolis claims τὸ γὰρ δίκαιον οἶδε καὶ τρυφῶδία ('for even a comedy knows what is just', *Ach.* 500), it implies that comedy has to fight to have the authority of its sister genre. Thus comedy is unlikely to be the main competitor for a tragedian. Instead, Euripides has other tragic poets to contend with. In particular, Euripides cannot avoid the long shadow cast by his famous predecessor, Aeschylus.¹⁷ Aristophanes certainly seemed to think that there was enough of a rivalry between the two poets' works and styles to base most of the *Frogs* around a contest between these two tragedians. There is also evidence to suggest that Aeschylus' *Oresteia* was a popular work, which is significant because the *Orestes* is Euripides' re-interpretation of some of the elements found in this extant Aeschylean cycle. Since this trilogy (performed before Euripides' career even began) is supposed to have been granted the rare privilege of being performed a second time, it would seem that the *Oresteia* had the beginnings of the respected reputation it tends to enjoy in more recent times.¹⁸

If Aeschylus is such an influential, well-respected poet, then it makes sense for Euripides to choose him as a source for parody. By doing so, he can attempt to make fun of the established Aeschylean version of a plot and lessen the weighty authority that play carries. Essentially, a parody of Aeschylus would operate as an intellectual acknowledgment of Euripides' dramatic predecessors,¹⁹ while pushing them to one side with subtle mocking, so that Euripides' own efforts can be held up as having an originality and authority of their own.

Problems in Tragic Parody

Of course, it has to be admitted that parody in tragedy is not always easy for us to detect. In a genre with constantly recycled plot outlines, it can be hard to say whether a scene recalls another play because it is following a traditional myth, or whether it is parodying those antecedents. Taplin argues that tragedy parodying tragedy is an interesting but unlikely prospect, and prefers to believe that 'tragedy may make use of other earlier literature, and be greatly enriched by it, without the kind of specific allusion and quotation which are everywhere in

16 Slater (2002), 9.

17 While it must be granted that comparisons with Aeschylus are bound to arise in our age (given the tiny number of tragedians that we have), it appears likely based on the evidence of Aristophanes that later tragedians, like Euripides, were also being compared at the time with this dominant figure of tragedy.

18 Hammond (1984), 379.

19 Winnington-Ingram (1969), 129.

comedy'.²⁰ He also correctly points out that tragedy, due to its 'realism', does not have the same intergeneric resources as comedy.

That said, this does not necessarily prevent Euripides from adapting the comic technique of parody. In fact, given that tragic plotlines are repeated amongst tragedians, Euripides may be able to assume that his audience has a much broader knowledge of specific myths. The audience must come to a play called the *Orestes* or *Electra* with some sort of preconceived idea of how this famous myth has played out in other productions. There is no indication that comic audiences are in the same 'tragic mindset'. When Aristophanes switches from dirty jokes to parody, he needs to use obvious comic indicators, like having a Euripides figure come on stage to satirise Euripidean tragedies in the *Thesmophoriazousai*. Given the inventive plots of Old Comedy, Aristophanes' audiences are not seeing his parodies in a context where they would necessarily be thinking about myth or tragedy. Thus Euripides has some advantage over the comic poet. If he wants to try to parody something, he doesn't necessarily *need* to work as hard to make the audience think about the tragic versions he wants to counter.

In opposition to Taplin's claim, there are several scenes in Euripides that could indeed be interpreted as the sort of tragic parody he thinks unlikely to arise.²¹ For example, the scene in Euripides' *Phoinissai*, where Eteokles discusses the seven warriors attacking Thebes and claims that ὄνομα δ' ἐκάστου διατριβὴ πολλὴ λέγειν ('to speak the name of each man is a great waste of time', *Phoin.* 751), derides the opposing descriptions of warriors and shields that is so central to the *Seven Against Thebes* of Aischylos. It is a particularly Euripidean sort of parody, since the poet has his cake and eats it too; he seems to mock Aischylos' long-winded description of shields as a waste, yet has the messenger consume time in exactly that manner when he describes the battle.²² Likewise, there is a scene in Euripides' *Electra*,²³ where the same tokens used to recognise Orestes in the *Choephoroi* are dismissed by Euripides' Elektra as ridiculous (*El.* 525-46). The scene from the *Elektra*, in the manner of Aristophanic parody, uses a mocking yet familiar dramatic creation to bring an element of ridicule to another's work.²⁴ These are both strong cases for Euripides' previous flirtations with parody, an indication that characters in parody-roles in the *Orestes* are not so unlikely.

Making fun of Aischylos

The *Orestes* continues this trend of genre experimentation, as Euripides again attempts to use comic parody to give his work distinction. As if to underline the fact that this play is attempting to overturn a tragic 'classic' and is using comic techniques to do so, Menelaos remarks ἐστὶ ταῦτα καὶ πολὺς γέλως ('this matter is also very laughable', *Or.* 1560) when he hears about the deeds of Orestes and his band.

Dunn highlights two possible direct parodies of Aischylos' *Oresteia* in the *Orestes*. One is Orestes' claim that he will not tolerate murdering wives who flash their breasts to gain sym-

²⁰ Taplin (1986), 171.

²¹ Taplin (1986), 171.

²² See Goff (1988), 135.

²³ I see little reason to consider this scene as spurious (as Taplin [1986, 171] suggests) merely because it does not fit into 'expected' conventions of tragedy. Euripides scarcely writes traditional or conservative tragedy, and if this element seems to jar with the play and genre as a whole, this seems to me to be further evidence of Euripides' experimenting with borrowed comic techniques.

²⁴ For further discussion of this scene, see Hammond (1984). For Goldhill's resonances of imagery between this *Elektra* and Aischylos' *Choephoroi*, see Goldhill (1986), 250.

pathy from their vengeful children (*Or.* 566-70). Of course, in the *Choephoroi* Klytemnestra uses exactly this tactic to try and stop Orestes (*Cho.* 896-98).²⁵ While this small bit of literary criticism does recall the more explicit comments of Aristophanes, it is still a throwaway line and does not feature a character taking on certain traits for the sake of parody. Unlike Kede-
stes and Euripides of the *Thesmophoriazousai*, Orestes does not need to try and play another part here.

The other example provided by Dunn is far easier to justify as character parody, since it is based on Orestes' behaviour.²⁶ Orestes' justification of his matricide on the grounds that the father is the true parent (*Or.* 552-54) is described by Dunn as 'lampooning' Apollon's defence speech in Aischylos' *Eumenides* (657-65). The mockery of Aischylos' defence speech arises because of the very different nature of the speaker in the *Orestes*. In the Aischylean version, Apollon himself points out that he is a divine authority and μόντις ὧν δ' οὐ ψεύσομαι ('being a prophet, I shall not lie', *Eum.* 615). Orestes has no such claim.

In addition, although Apollon explains his 'truth' that a mother is no parent and provides Athena as an example, Orestes' frenetic justification is a jumble of weak excuses that he does not elaborate on.²⁷ Orestes is a very human, very fallible and very unstable character in Euripides' version. By removing this Aischylean speech from one who speaks with authority, Euripides has given the familiar justification to a madman who does not even know how to behave as Orestes should, thus stealing away any divine authority. In the *Eumenides*, Apollon's defence ultimately acquits Orestes. When Euripides' Orestes tries to speak like a god, his inept arguments have no such positive effect because, like Kedestes in the *Thesmophoriazousai*, he is unable to control the roles he plays and is left helpless in a theatrical world where dramatic knowledge equals power.

This confused Orestes is a very different version from the confident and just figure Aischylos wrote for the latter plays of his trilogy. In the *Frogs*, Aristophanes makes an exaggerated point of the sorts of differences between Euripidean and Aischylean characters. The comic version of Aischylos claims that he always presented characters who had some morality and dignity, but tells Euripides that ἀμοῦ χρηστῶς καταδείξαντος διελυμῆνω σύ ('what I introduced in a wholesome way, you reduced to a shambles', *Frogs* 1062). Regardless of moral judgments on Euripides' characters, Aristophanes is indicating that they have lost the stature of their Aischylean counterparts. A just Orestes with a god on his side has become nothing more than a deranged and characterless mockery. Madness is only a temporary episode for Aischylos' Orestes, but a permanent state for Euripides' wretch. Likewise, the 'supporting cast' of Elektra and Pylades could be read as being an extreme reversal of their Aischylean equivalents, as they too act to mock those older roles. The fundamentals of their characters are the same as in Aischylos (loyalty to Orestes), but their actions are so exaggerated that it is as if Euripides is distorting the Aischylean nature of these characters to such an extent that, as often happens in Aristophanic parody,²⁸ they become ridiculous and satirise the Aischylean versions.²⁹

For example, the character of Pylades famously says nothing for most of Aischylos' *Choephoroi*, only opening his mouth for a short speech (900-02) urging Orestes not to forget his

25 Dunn (1989), 243.

26 Dunn (1989), 243.

27 Zeitlin (1980), 58.

28 Such as Kedestes' Helene in the *Thesmophoriazousai*, who is very unlike Euripides' character, since he is clearly presented as an old man acting badly in a dress.

29 Zeitlin (1980), 56.

mission and duty to the god Apollon. Euripides has taken this taciturn character and turned him into a scheming blabbermouth.³⁰ Whereas Pylades is the quiet moral support in Aischylos' *Choephoroi*, Euripides' version supports Orestes' mania by devising amoral, pointless and violent schemes against Menelaos and Helene (*Or.* 1105-52).

In the *Choephoroi*, Aischylos' Elektra is something of an embodiment of quiet maidenly restraint. Elektra has only a minor role at the start of the play, in which she shows herself hesitant and unsure (*Cho.* 84-99). She also obligingly vanishes from the action after line 480. Euripides' Elektra has no intention of leaving the stage. Like Pylades, she is often the driving force where Orestes lapses into inactivity. It is this conniving and cunning Elektra who suggests taking the young Hermione as a hostage (1183-1203), declaring that the innocent girl should have her throat cut if Menelaos cannot be broken by their threats (1199). This Elektra is so far from uncertain and restrained that it is difficult not to see her as a parody of the demure maiden of Aischylos.

Euripides has chosen these extreme characters to accompany a befuddled Orestes in a bid for innovation and originality, emulating the anarchistic freedom of Aristophanes' comic protagonists. This parody and licence of his 'more comic' characters also helps Euripides compete for more dramatic authority by mocking Aischylos' versions. Indeed, Orestes is such a failure at playing himself, that he makes fun of the very traditional identity of 'Orestes'. As a type of mocking, the parody that arises from Orestes' loss of his own role is reminiscent of Kedestes playing Helene poorly in the *Thesmophoriazousai*. In both situations, a bad actor fails to emulate a role, diminishing and disrupting the original version by acting it out badly. The novelty lies in the fact that the role Orestes fails to play is his own 'default' persona, not an additional identity like the one Kedestes takes on. Euripides has scored a double competitive blow, creating a character who mocks and distorts the Aischylean model, while topping Aristophanes' Kedestes by creating a mythic individual who cannot even play his own part. Thus although Orestes' lack of definitive traits makes him an inconsistent and unengaging character, yet his madness serves a competitive purpose for Euripides.

Into Insanity

Aristophanes did not remain silent about Euripides' comic-influenced experiments on tragic characters like Orestes. In the *Frogs*, the tragedian is famously accused of degrading noble tragic figures in rags (1063f.). However exaggerated this comic complaint is, Euripides was guilty as charged of turning a hero into a beggar when it came to Menelaos in the *Helene* (416-417). In the *Orestes*, Menelaos still lacks nobility and influence; he fails to assert himself or have any effect on the action of the play and finally accepts his violent enemy as a son-in-law with barely a whimper. Both versions of Menelaos are passive and powerless figures directed by the director-like figures Helene and Apollon. Yet Menelaos' rag-play in the *Helene* was itself borrowing elements of Aristophanic comedy. The idea that rags can completely change a character lies behind Dikaiopolis' behaviour in the *Acharnians*, where he borrows the tattered costume of Telephos from Euripides to turn himself from a grumpy farmer into a sympathetic and accomplished speaker (*Ach.* 414-17). Aristophanes' *Frogs* passage not only criticises the Euripidean novelty of changing noble figures into pathetic beg-

30 Nisetich (1986), 50.

gars, but also his use of Aristophanic amorphousness. After all, fluidity of identity in extant Athenian drama first appeared in the costume swapping of Aristophanes' *Acharnians*.

There is none of the blatant costume play of comedy in the *Orestes*, but clothes are not all that is needed for playing a role. Again, this is seen the *Thesmophoriazousai*, where Kedestes undergoes a complete costume make-over so that he appears like a woman (*Thesm.* 249-64), but still cannot play the part. Euripides' comment that ἀνὴρ μὲν ἡμῖν οὐτοσὶ καὶ δὴ γυνὴ/τό γ' εἶδος ('Our man here is also now a woman, well, at least his appearance is', *Thesm.* 266f.) reveals the problem: Kedestes is a woman in *eidōs* (appearance) alone. It is not only the costume itself that is important, but also the underlying mutability of identity that permits actors to play multiple roles. A role is partly created from the costume and partly from acting out the appropriate persona. An aspect of this Dionysiac fluidity is certainly present in *Orestes*' changing roles and in the instability of his madness.³¹ Froma Zeitlin draws attention to the play's emphasis on unstable identities:

Change (metabolê) is sweet in everything, says Electra (234, cf. 976-81), and we might add, nothing is more changeable than personality.³²

Likewise, *Orestes*' illness is described by his sister as sudden change: ταχὺς δὲ μετέθου λύσσαν, ἄρτι σωφρονῶν ('you changed quickly to madness, although you are just now sane', *Or.* 254). Euripides depicts *Orestes* as basically unable to stay in one persona. He plays a lethargic wreck (40-238), a deluded victim (251-87), a defendant (546-679) and eventually a homicidal maniac (1506-1620). His madness gives him a mutability reminiscent of the comic *Dikaiopolis*, whose identity is also in constant flux. Yet *Orestes* exists in the mythological and consistent framework of tragedy, not in the surreal world of Aristophanes. His erratic changes ignore the conventions of tragedy, where there is an expectation that characters and situations proceed in a fairly logical fashion so a convincing 'reality' is maintained.³³ Indeed, part of what may make this *Orestes* such an unsympathetic tragic figure is his inconsistent nature.³⁴

In interpreting the changes of the character, Burnett sees *Orestes* as taking on the characteristics suitable for different *types* of tragedy throughout the play:

Orestes is weak, ill and threatened, and these qualities are displayed by a 'suppliant' action; he is alienated from home and power and thus fits into a 'rescue' piece; he would destroy his kin, and so he plays the hero of a 'vengeance tragedy' with its catastrophe supernaturally interrupted.³⁵

In contrast, Zeitlin's take on the matter sees *Orestes* as trying to fit into epic and heroic narratives, but constantly failing to remain in one persona.³⁶ From 932-942 there is a brief report of *Orestes*' attempt to play the part of a noble defender of the city, proclaiming to the citizens that ὑμῖν ἀμύνων οὐδὲν ἦσσον ἢ πατρὶ/ἔκτεινα μητὲρ' ('I was defending you no less than my father as I killed my mother', *Or.* 934f.). In contrast to *Dikaiopolis* in the *Acharnians*, *Orestes*' inability to adopt and maintain a persuasive persona means that he cannot win his audi-

31 Burnett (1971), 213.

32 Zeitlin (1980), 55.

33 Burnett (1971), 183.

34 Vellacott (1975), 79.

35 Burnett (1971), 222.

36 Zeitlin (1980), 51-77.

ence over. This 'noble defender' pose collapses and Orestes becomes pathetic again at 946f., pleading to avoid death by stoning. Clearly Orestes' problem is that he cannot decide which persona he wants to wear. Like Dionysos with his Herakles outfit in the *Frogs*, no matter what identity Orestes attempts to take on, he is unsuccessful in turning it to his advantage and he dashes frantically from one identity to the next. He is an Orestes in name only, without the consistent traits or logical character development that might create a semi-realistic and convincing personality. Perhaps this is what Orestes means when he explains to Menelaos that τὸ σῶμα φροῦδον· τὸ δ' ὄνομα οὐ λέλοιπέ μοι ('My body is gone, but my name has not left me', *Or.* 390).

Of course, madness is also an aspect of Bakchos, and Euripides hints at the link between unstable identity and insanity when the Phrygian slave describes the maddened Orestes and Pylades as being like Βάκχαι ('Bakchantes', *Or.* 1493). The inconstant Orestes seems able to defy tragic conventions of character development because his instability comes from Bakchic madness. A similar link between instability of roles and insanity exists in Pentheus' dressing-scene in the *Bakchai* (913-44), where a change of costume highlights the fact that his personality has been radically altered under Dionysos' power of madness. Likewise, Orestes is only changed through insanity. There is a strong parallel between Pentheus and Orestes; both try to alter their identities but fail to act out their new personae. Just as Pentheus, Orestes is a victim of that instability which makes him a mass of confused and incomplete identities. This is the metatheatrical source of Orestes' madness: his inability to maintain a single role, even that of 'Orestes'. His lack of identity forces his character to break down into insanity.

Thus the 'more comic' ending arises from Orestes' frenzied inability to play a single role and his failure to act as any 'Orestes' at all. His instability infects the whole play, causing the plot to crash because Orestes does not play his part in the conventional myth. At the point where the slave tellingly calls Orestes a Bacchant, the confusion of identity begins to unravel the whole tragedy.

Katastrophe: The Breakdown of Tragedy

Euripides' drama does indeed start to tear away from a sense of dramatic 'reality' at that part of the play which has been kindly pointed out by the scholiast for being 'more comic': the *katastrophe*—the ending and breakdown of the play. Dionysiac irrationality flows through Orestes as he constantly changes his identity to 'adopt a "chaos of roles"'.³⁷ The ultimate result of his inability to play any role within the conventions of tragedy is the disruption of the plot. Before the comic-style *katastrophe* of Apollon's arrival, a tense situation exists: a blood-thirsty Orestes is holding a knife to Hermione's throat (just after apparently killing her mother), while Elektra and Pylades are about to burn down the scenery. However, rather than involving them in all this violence, the conventional myths appear to have married off these pairs.³⁸ This contradiction of the expected plot is not resolved in a particularly logical or earthly fashion, but by the unexpected interference of a god. All sense of consistent reality is thrown out the window because Orestes and company won't play the parts put to them. Rather than simply killing Klytemnestra, Euripides has his protagonist embark on a spree of

37 Zeitlin (1980), 57.

38 Euripides' older plays follow this line. *Elektra* 1340 has Elektra and Pylades marry, while in the *Andromache* (966f.) Orestes weds Hermione.

pointless violence, even threatening to kill the girl that the audience probably expects him to marry. Since the unstable Orestes cannot play the right role, the plot cannot proceed and a god needs to intervene to set things right.

Through Apollon, a potentially dangerous scene that smacks of dark tragic realism and mad desperation is completely pushed to one side for a fantasy resolution. In every sense this disrupted myth requires a *deus ex machina* and it is only through Apollon's directorial attempts to fix the broken plot that Orestes agrees to marry the girl he very nearly murdered, Elektra and Pylades go off happily and Menelaos suddenly abandons his anger and weakly agrees to obey everything as it is set out. To make things worse, Apollon confirms that the murder of Helene never actually happened, invalidating the previous tragic action.

In a sense, this ending is 'more comic' because it provides an incomprehensible and unearthly solution to a real problem. Aristophanes writes several comic flights of fantasy that ignore the restrictions of the everyday to overcome strife. Euelpides and Peisetairos escape Athens in the sky-city of the *Birds*, and Trygaios in the *Peace* flies to heaven on a dung beetle in order to find the lost personification of Peace. The resolution of a real problem in comedy is often the result of an unreal bit of action and Apollon's appearance certainly seems to fit this pattern. One minute, all the characters appear a step away from murdering one another, the next, there is no trace of this enmity. No other divine appearance in Euripides has quite the same impact on the action as Apollon's surprise visit.

Not only is this ending comic in its use of the unreal to resolve human problems, but it also does so in such a way as to contradict any sense of consistency in this dramatic world. If Orestes, Menelaos and company can change their attitudes so drastically, then it is as if Euripides' final point is to remember that this is only role-playing. Any sense of anger or pity you might have towards Orestes is confounded by Euripides' ending, where all the characters are revealed as nothing more than empty masks who play the parts they are assigned by the playwright Apollon. In a manner unlike any other extant Euripidean tragedy, this breakdown of the *Orestes* encourages the spectators to disengage themselves from the plot. As Zeitlin argues, the forced nature of the god's appearance reminds the audience that they are watching a play.³⁹ Before the *Orestes*, this sort of exposure of the theatre was something more commonly enacted by Aristophanes' characters. In an Aristophanic manner, Euripides is using his broken ending to show off his understanding of what makes drama work.

In the end, the use of all these comic roles in the *Orestes* means that Euripides' experiment has moved away from tragic norms. By borrowing parody, changing characters and creating a temporary breakdown of dramatic reality, Euripides has created a distinctly new type of tragedy. His use of paracomedy may cause the *Orestes* to break down, but this does not mean that the play fails exactly. As Burnett writes, the breakdown at the play's end is the whole point, as 'Only the *Orestes* makes outright failure its subject'.⁴⁰ When the play stops from an overdose of comic freedom, parody-roles and instability, it allows us to see that, behind his competitive play with dramatic convention, the tragedian has a developing interest and expertise in dealing with the fundamental aspects of theatre.

39 Zeitlin (1980), 69.

40 Burnett (1971), 184.

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