

## TANTALID HISTORY AND EURIPIDES' *ORESTES*\*

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**ABSTRACT:** The focus of the article is the presentation of the Tantalid history as it appears in the *Orestes*: the gradual development of the narrative seems particularly adequate in context of the dramatic plot: such interest in the concept of history would bring Euripides in a close relation to Thucydides, while simultaneously throwing some light on the possible meaning of Apollo's epiphany.

Considering the lively interest attracted by the Euripidean *Orestes*, many features of which were repeatedly scrutinized or highlighted, it may seem surprising how little attention was paid to the potentially interesting portrayal of the Pelopid history as the latter emerges in the play<sup>1</sup>. Strikingly enough, it is not that singular events went unnoticed, or that the modern scholarship ignored the possible meaning of either Tantalus' transgression or Atreus' crime<sup>2</sup>: it is rather that scholars tend to gloss over the very meandering of the story, which seems to be only gradually revealed in the play, resulting in somewhat distorted

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\* The present essay is a by-product of a larger scale inquiry into the composition and the poetics of the Euripidean *Orestes*, which accounts for some aspects of the play being addressed only in passing. The reading proposed here is certainly on a highly abstract level, yet it gains considerable support from the text itself – and while I will prefer not to enter into the debate concerning the sophistic influence on Euripides, my argument rests upon the fundamental assumption that the poet displayed a lively interest in contemporary intellectual debates, which, combined with a imaginative and discerning mind, could have prompted some doubts on the epistemological aspects of history.

<sup>1</sup> It is hardly the place to mention all the studies devoted to the exegesis of the *Orestes* in the history of the modern scholarship: the play provokes various, often conflicting attitudes ranging from the straight condemnation of both the play and its hero (thus e.g. Kitto 1961: 346–351), through the verdicts of overall nihilism and *Sinneskrise* possibly related to the political reality of the time (Schein 1975; Parry 1969, and, significantly, Vellacott 1975: 53–81) or a manifestation of a deep crisis within the tragic genre itself (e.g. Burkert 1974; Dunn 1989), to the assumption of highly intertextual character of the play seen as endowed with strictly comical overtones (Zeitlin 1980; Dunn 1996: 158–179; Burnett 1998: 247–272).

<sup>2</sup> Possibilities raised by the opening reference to Tantalus were investigated by O'Brien 1988, while the probable parallels between Menelaus and Pelops received due attention in the contribution of Kyriakou 1998.

picture of the past<sup>3</sup>. In the present essay I intend to focus on the flow of historical narration in the *Orestes*, highlighting the connection between the actual dramatic developments and the nature of the events narrated, on the circumstances that bring about certain disclosures concerning the past deeds of the house.

## I. THE PROLOGUE

The first name to be mentioned in the play is that of the protagonist's great forefather, Tantalus, the son of Zeus. Excessively lucky, he was deemed worthy of participating in the Olympians' banquets, yet by his own will and fault he fell from grace: floating above the ground, in eternal fear of a rock that threatens to fall upon him, the king pays for the guilt incurred because of *glossa akolastos*, uninhibited speech, a fact that provoked much scholarly discussion and inspired Dunn's reading of the whole play, with its focus on the gradual passage from unbridled speech to uninhibited behaviour<sup>4</sup>. The 'blessed' Tantalus gave life to Pelops (11), whom Electra mentions in passing only, immediately proceeding to the tale of Atreus and Thyestes (11–18), and then, to the account of the marriages contracted by the two Atridae (19–23), the betrayal and death of Agamemnon (24–27), and the divinely ordained matricide (28–32). Considerable part of the prologue is then devoted to the present state of affairs, with the description of Orestes' malady (34–45), and the threat of judgement and death that looms over the two siblings (46–51). Now, it seems symptomatic that starting with Tantalus' privileged position that was lost to his unruly tongue, Electra's tale proceeds through the fates of the family to the description of its present plight: descendants of the ruler of the world the Tantalidae may well be, but their *genos* stands on the verge of extinction, the last of its male descendants being bound to stand trial by Argive citizens. It is a striking progression in itself – from the enjoyment of divine company to being shunned by the lowly masses or, indeed, to be judged by mortals. It seems enough to think of the exalted lot of the family's forefather when we contemplate Electra's description of the present:

... κυρία δ' ἤδ' ἡμέρα,  
 ἐν ἣ διοίσει ψῆφον Ἀργείων πόλις,  
 εἰ χρὴ θανεῖν νόῳ λευσίμῳ πετρώματι (48–50).

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<sup>3</sup> As far the inconsistencies of argument/character are concerned, the focus of the scholarly debate is on Orestes himself, while the evaluation of his arguments is closely linked to questions such as the hero's sanity, his moral backbone etc. (on this cf. e.g. Collard 1975; Biehl 1968; Zürcher 1947: 151–155, 159–160, 186–190 and, for an exhaustive treatment, O'Brien 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Dunn 1989 and 1996: 161–172 (even more expressly).

Judgement is no longer, one may think, a matter of divine intervention: patently, the principal danger to the siblings (at least in Electra's perception) comes from equally mortal (inferior) people. Thus, the family history manifests itself as the transition from the realm of the divine to that of the human jurisdiction (it will become even more striking once one reflects on the nature of human justice as portrayed in the *rhesis*)<sup>5</sup> and it will be well to keep in mind the direction so manifestly displayed here: after all, the issue of justice and jurisdiction may be considered to play the crucial part in the development of the tragedy's plot, which seems to invert the Aeschylean pattern, thus calling into question the very tradition it invokes<sup>6</sup>. It seems significant, though, that the appearance of human judges may be conceived as much more than a simple challenge to the Aeschylean model<sup>7</sup>: while the latter reference is certainly present, with Euripides' all too human judges placed where his poetic predecessor put his divinely sanctioned Areopagus, the remodelling is probably to be considered against the whole history of Tantalus' family, the stoning being possibly introduced as a purposeful remnant of the punishment suffered by Zeus' son himself<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, the resulting picture would be of people throwing stones onto the murderous pair, instead of the hypothetical image of gods positioning a stone in such a manner as to threaten continuously the one who transgressed. To this, one may add yet another mention of stoning: according to Electra, Helen stands considerable risk of stoning should she venture farther from the palace (59). Even if one hesitates to embrace O'Brien's hypothesis, it is nevertheless certain that the threat of stones lacerating human flesh results quite prominently from the text: indeed, yet another reminder of this punishment may be found in the short, almost negligible mention of Palamedes, emerging in lines 432 f. The death of this particular hero, brought about by the treachery of Odysseus, occurred by stoning: the mention of his demise when considered in the wider context of the *Orestes* may be seen as

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<sup>5</sup> It seems interesting that the scholars stressing the aristocratic danger as impersonated by Orestes, Electra and Pylades do not pay closer attention to this passage – cf. Schein 1975; Rawson 1972; Euben 1986.

<sup>6</sup> On the justice problem cf. Eucken 1986.

<sup>7</sup> The complex nature of Euripides' attitude toward his great predecessor is discussed comprehensively in Aéliou's massive book (Aéliou 1983); several interesting remarks on the character of Euripides' creative activity in relation to those of his predecessors or contemporaries can also be found in Michelini 1998, particularly pp. 52–128; additional data may be drawn from the number of minor contributions such as e.g. Raeburn 2000.

<sup>8</sup> The issue of stoning and its importance in the *Orestes* is given much attention in O'Brien 1988, though this scholar tends to highlight the basic similarity of the position without giving much attention to the deeper modifications in the substance of the plot it may emphasize. On the other hand, one may note that the substitution of the standard assembly for the divinely ordained members of the Areopagus may reflect far more general tendency manifested in the play, i.e. the tendency to adopt the stand traditionally held by the divine agencies (compare Orestes' use of Apolline argumentation in lines 544 f. or his final appearance at the *theologeion* in 1567).

aiming at highlighting both the notion of familial obligation (to be rejected by Menelaus) and the importance of the manner of death that is to befall the hero.

Apart from the steady deterioration of the Tantalid condition, there are several other interesting features to this prologue: the first is the ‘uninhibited speech’ that resulted in Tantalus’ fall from the divine favour – while there are traces of certain diversity in this particular story, the central crime varying between the cannibalistic meal served to the divine guests, the stealth of ambrosia, and too much gossip<sup>9</sup>, the version Euripides refers to remains certainly unorthodox one – as such, it would certainly attract audience’s attention, and certainly could influence the perception of events portrayed in the play. Indeed, what needs to be noted, the progression described in the prologue reflects a symptomatic change: it is not only fall from grace, from being considered worthy of attending the Olympian banquet to playing victim to chthonic divinities, but also a notable passage from excesses of speech to extreme isolation: in his sickness Orestes is utterly alone, cut off from the human company except for that of his sister and accomplice<sup>10</sup>. At this point it seems important to notice yet another aspect of Orestes’ plight, an aspect that relies on the well known attitude the Greeks displayed with reference to murderers before these latter could be purified: the siblings are banned from the company of other people, indeed, excluded from the speaking community. Yet, one may note, Electra’s words seem to refer this particular situation to the actual will of the Argives, as if a different perspective were possible:

ἔδοξε δ’ Ἀργεῖ τῶδε μὴδ’ ἡμᾶς στέγαις,  
μὴ πυρὶ δέχεσθαι, μήτε προσφωνεῖν τινα  
μητροκτονούντας (46–48).

As a result, their world would dramatically narrow, leaving them alone in the most complete sense of the word<sup>11</sup>. This aspect of Orestes’ and Electra’s isolation seems particularly striking given the nature of their ancestor’s crime: speech is denied to those whose ancestor enjoyed too much of this particular luxury.

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<sup>9</sup> The various versions of the story were criticized by Pindar *Ol.* 1, 83–85. Concerning the Euripidean attitude to myth one may also refer to Scullion 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Now, it needs to be understood that what I am referring to at the moment is the progression reflected in Electra’s words rather than the later development of dramatic action – indeed, this latter remains open to the reading proposed by Dunn, who suggests what may be viewed as openly contrary direction within the plot development: for him, Electra and Orestes pass from silence to uncontrollable action via uninhibited speech (Dunn 1996: 161 ff.).

<sup>11</sup> One may recall the isolation of Heracles after slaughtering his own children in Euripides’ *Hercules Furens*. It is to be remembered, however, that this isolation would be very much in tune with the actual reality of Greece, as the ritual and religious policy effectively excluded those tainted with blood from the public life (on this cf. e.g. Mikalson 1983: 50–52).

Moreover, as it was stressed above, the prologue presents also a progression from the divine retribution that fell onto Tantalus to human justice about to descend onto his unlucky descendants: it is between these two extremes that Atreus story stands in a ghastly contrast to the blessed banquets attended by Zeus' son: eating and food is in fact yet another important element of this account, for it passes from the ambrosian, through the cannibalistic, to the utter refusal of food and drink as displayed by Orestes<sup>12</sup>. Viewed against such a background, Euripides' choice of this particular version of Tantalus' myth appears all the more significant: in refusing to follow the tradition of Pelops being served as a dish to his father's divine guests the poet obtains a clear downward regress. Moreover, he avoids what could be seen as a repetition of crime, a pattern within the family, which would otherwise easily be conceived as feeding upon itself. Instead, there is only one cannibalistic act – the Thyestean banquet, the horrid scene where children's flesh is served to their father: ἔδαισε δ' οὖν νιν τέκνα ἀποκτείνας Ἄτρεός (15).

Next, the relatively long account of Tantalus' story (1–10) contrasts with brief mention of his son, whose sole achievement seems to have been the fathering of Atreus and Thyestes, destined by gods to quarrel with one another. Thus, the responsibility for the quarrel is manifestly laid on the gods, which may anticipate the similar transferral of responsibility in the case of matricide. It was because of divine will that the bloody quarrel came about – and no explanation is given for this apparent whim whatsoever. Clearly, this is not to say that Euripides' public would be unaware of the somewhat complex circumstances of this divine causation; similarly, it is not that the public would be inclined to acquit either Atreus or Thyestes from their respective responsibility<sup>13</sup> – it is rather that by presenting the story as it appears at this point, and by making Electra his mouthpiece Euripides may have aimed at giving us some insight into the development of the plot, into the motivations of the protagonists etc. Thus, I imply that by emphasizing Electra's reluctance to speak the poet would draw attention to the untold elements of the story: thus I would claim that it is these untold parts (and the fact that they remain untold for the time being) that are at the very least as essential to the understanding of the plot as is Electra's observance of the social norms of proper behaviour (proper speech)<sup>14</sup>. Two purposes may

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this aspect of the prologue may be of particular interest for any interpreter of anthropological inclinations: the tale passes through all possible kinds of transgression – from partaking in what is usually denied to humans (divine ambrosia), through partaking of a forbidden feast (human flesh), to end with the account of extreme, self induced fast. One may note that deviations from the usual feeding patterns are given some attention in C.P. Segal's discussion of the *Hippolytus* (Segal 1965 and 1970).

<sup>13</sup> For a rudimentary analysis of the concept of causality as employed by Euripides one may compare the elucidating comments of Allan 2000 a: 233–266.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Dunn 1996: 161 ff.

be achieved by Euripides by making his heroine silent: first, as it was remarked above, his account of the Tantalid history is given a clear downward direction. Second, one obtains a first glimpse into the nature of historical narration as the latter is portrayed in the play: fragmentary, biased, incomplete. Indeed, it is the very incompleteness of the account that is of crucial importance here, for we hear, in all the explicitness, that the story delivered was for some reasons censored, some of its parts having been purposefully and consciously removed.

Certainly, modern scholarship devoted considerable attention to Electra's reluctance to speak of the reasons motivating the conflict of Atreus and Thyestes and to the fact that the reasons given for this reticence in the prologue depend on social conventions and may be regarded the civilization of speech, cutting one's words to fit the social status or social expectations (in short, behaving in a manner actively rejected by Tantalus). Yet, there may be much more to this reticence – the guilt of Aerope is at least implied, even if conventions of speech are observed, by the repeated protestations of the speaker's reticence connected with explicit mention of Agamemnon's and Menelaus' parentage (... Ἀγαμέμνων ἔφν / Μενέλεός τε Κρήσσης μητρὸς Ἀερόπης ἄπο, 17 f.) and there would probably be none in the audience who would not observe the procession of unfaithful females that haunt the royal abode<sup>15</sup>. Thus, if Electra may be seen as glossing over the apparent causes of the conflict (Aerope's betrayal of her husband), and chooses to invoke the divine causation instead, this may also be regarded symptomatic of the play's opening in quite a different sense than establishing the pattern of broken conventions or broken social norms. The brothers are destined to feud as Orestes was ordered to murder his mother, this latter deed resulting from Apollo's command: yet, the likeness of the two notwithstanding, an interesting difference seems to emerge. Thus, one may compare the meaning of the two respective passages:

<p>... Ἄτρεϊδς ἔφν ὧ στέμματα ξήνασ' ἐπέκλωσεν θεὰ ἔριν, Θυέστη πόλεμον ὄντι συγγόνῳ θέσθαι... (11–14)</p>	<p>παίθει δ' Ὀρέστην μητέρ' ἢ σφ' ἐγείνατο κτεῖναι (29 f.)</p>
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Strikingly, the fatal feud is regarded as being woven into the fabric of the universe, as stemming from the decree of Moirae. By contrast, Orestes *was persuaded / ordered* to murder his mother (and thus, to avenge his father), a fact that may potentially highlight the active part the protagonist took in the decisive process, even as Electra hastens to emphasize that the final deed was

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<sup>15</sup> One may note that the gravity of Thyestes' offence is borne out by the passage from Hesiod's *Works and Days* 327–329, where an affair with brother's wife ranks on par with harming a suppliant. Concerning the legal sanctions on marital infidelity in general cf. e.g. Carey 1995.

effectively a proof of his obedience to the divine will (οὐκ ἀπειθήσας θεῶ, 31)<sup>16</sup>. Apparently, his own will, the active act of choice, is implied at the moment, which would clearly distance his deed from those preordained for Thyestes and Atreus: as a result, the complexity of possible causation stands out relatively clearly even in spite of Electra's manifest wish to exonerate her brother. For now, however, it seems enough to mark this particular difference for later use, and emphasize that regardless of the above, the two descriptions may in fact reveal an interesting pattern in Electra's storytelling, namely the tendency to invoke the divine explanation with the possible effect of emulating the closeness with the divine that was enjoyed by Tantalus. Yet, to wholly appreciate the scheme possibly underlying the portrayal of Tantalid history as painted in the prologue, one needs to look further, to the evolution of the story in the later accounts.

## 2. THE CHORAL ODE (807–844)

The ode, full of paradoxes and adorned by several oxymora, provides the second account of the family history – delivered after Orestes and Pylades have departed for the assembly meeting, it looks back onto the past, centring on two events: the feud of Pelops' sons and main hero's matricide (in 1:2 proportion)<sup>17</sup>. The choice is interesting in itself, for the song juxtaposes the two most ghastly transgressions against *genos*: the killing of children seems to be bound with the killing of parents, and the ode turns into a portrayal of the family consuming itself in a series of internecine acts of violence.

The picture emerging from the song is as striking as was the one deduced from the prologue, as the ode effectively juxtaposes two grossest transgressions against the social norms: the fratricidal hatred and the vengeance that calls for maternal blood. Additionally, as if in search for an acceptable explanation of the unacceptable deed, the events surrounding the fraternal feud are identified as the source of all calamities. While it may appear to concur with the version given by Electra, a significant change seems to have occurred: while Electra invokes the

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<sup>16</sup> This emphasis on Orestes' obedience may allude to the Aeschylean portrayal of the matricide in the *Choephorae*, with its characteristic notion of divine order (cf. *Choe.* 899–902).

<sup>17</sup> The choice of the first subject is sometimes taken to constitute a proof of the chorus' basic sympathy for the protagonist's plight and its condemnation of Menelaus' treachery: in this latter, Agamemnon's son proves to be a true descendant of his family, his desertion equal to the crime of his forefathers, his mind tempted by the glamour of the Argive throne, as minds of both Thyestes and Atreus were seduced by the splendour of the golden lamb (thus e.g. Kyriakou 1998). Yet, regardless of its particular relation to the recent developments of the plot, it is as an account of the past that the ode needs to occupy us at the moment, hence the chorus' potential sympathies will be of importance only as far as they may reflect on the organization and impact of the narrative contained in the song.

divine will that prompted intrafamilial murder, the chorus regards the very crime as the origin of present misfortunes:

... παλαιᾶς ἀπὸ συμφορᾶς δόμων,  
 ὁπότε χρυσεΐας ἔρις ἄρνός  
 ἦλυθε Τανταλίδαις,  
 οἰκτρότατα θοινάματα καὶ  
 σφάγια γενναίων τεκέων·  
 ὅθεν φόνος φόνος ἐξαμεί-  
 βων δι' αἵματος οὐ προλεί-  
 πει δισσοῖσι Ἄτρείδαις (811–818)

Thus, it is from that very moment that the house is racked by reciprocal acts of bloodshed (indeed, an unnerving thought, it is very much present calamities that the chorus invokes – after all, it is the Atridae who are mentioned in line 818). True enough, the chorus does mention – for the first time in the play – the part played in the development of the fatal conflict by the golden lamb, yet it may well seem significant that nothing is said concerning the origins of the animal: the lamb, source of quarrel, appears to have come out of nowhere, a thing of beauty whose appearance set in motion a chain of dire, ugly events culminating in the matricide. Thus, the paradoxes of the antistrophe, the *paranoia* of the mother-murder, are in a manner anticipated by the very paradoxical character of the golden lamb viewed both as a mark of dominion and as the catalyst of gruesome intrafamilial conflict. Thus, it may well be significant that the antistrophe opens with the famous phrase τὸ καλὸν οὐ καλόν (819) – as there were hitherto no references to Orestes' actual plight, the phrase could have been referred to the central theme of the strophe, which would potentially accentuate the possible connection between the story connoted by the lamb and that of the matricide.

Yet another question needs to be asked: is it important that the account is provided by the chorus? Indeed, I would argue it does make a difference: even if the chorus of the *Orestes* is devoid of the dignity and authority of some others (e.g. the chorus of the *Phoenissae*)<sup>18</sup>, it nevertheless stands apart from the family troubles, which may (though not necessarily so) endow it with some impartiality where the storytelling is concerned. Furthermore, there is the apparent randomness of the divine intervention that may be of importance at this point: as we remember, Electra claimed that the feud was ordained by the Moirae – the chorus supplements her story by revealing the means that intervention

<sup>18</sup> Apolline prophetic gift was claimed for the *Phoenissae* chorus by Mueller-Goldingen (1984: 204 f.). The theory is convincingly rejected by Hose (1991: 135–137), yet it seems symptomatic that a possibility has been raised. The most comprehensive account of the choral activity in the play is nevertheless that of Arthur 1977. For the more general rules concerning the character and behaviour of the Greek choruses cf. Gould 1996 and, for a different view, Goldhill 1996.



took, and, furthermore, seems to draw yet further parallel between the events of the past and those happening now: the will of gods comes double-edged and incomprehensible, their commands bringing discord and pain.

### 3. THE MONODY (960–1012)

When indulging a lament for herself and her hapless brother, Electra gives what may be termed the second outline of family history: yet, this time it is not Tantalus who dominates the account. In his place – Tantalus being only briefly mentioned together with his eternal torment – stands his son, Pelops, the triumphant winner of the Pisidian race and, which we learn for the first time, the cause of family misfortunes.

... Μυρτίλου φόνον  
δικῶν ἐς οἶδμα πόντου,  
λευκοκύμοσιν  
πρὸς Γεραιστίαϊς  
ποντίων σάλων  
ἦόσιν ἀρματεύσας.  
ὄθεν δόμοισι τοῖς ἐμοῖς  
ἦλθ' ἀρὰ πολύστονος  
λόχευμα ποιμνίοισι Μαιάδος τόκου,  
τὸ χρυσόμαλλον ἄρνός... (990–997).

It seems important to note that by the time this monody is recited a notable change has occurred in the situation of the protagonists: their plea for help effectively rejected by Menelaus (711–715, paraphrased in *Orestes*' much discussed *eulabeito*, 748), they face sure death according to the verdict of the Argives (857 f.). It is precisely after learning of the details of the assembly meeting that Electra breaks into the monody acknowledging the events that preceded the infamous feud between Pelops' two sons. Now, there are several issues at stake here. First (and possibly also most importantly): why Pelops appears as the *Ursache* of later misfortunes only at this precise point, when the fortunes of his descendants appear to have reached their nadir? And what prompts Electra's modification (or possibly elucidation) of the earlier story? Next, there are the details to be considered: the Myrtilus story involves the divine retribution falling not on Pelops himself but on his offspring instead – the *alastor* will be expressly mentioned only later, but there is a taste of his work in the account, with the vengeance falling on the perpetrator's descendants.

Now, the mention of Pelops and his betrayal can understandably be construed as referring to (indeed, anticipating) the later development of the dramatic action – the respective parallels between Menelaus and his glorious ancestor

were convincingly discussed by Kyriakou, who highlighted the importance of betrayal in the past and actual reality of the *genos*: in her interpretation the divine retribution that falls on Pelops' family foreshadows the threat of doom to endanger Menelaus' household<sup>19</sup>. Yet, notwithstanding the possible advantages of the interpretation, this seems to be an *a posteriori* reading: one is still left wondering what would be the *ad hoc* effect of this belated revelation: would it be conceived, as implied by Dunn's reading, as a proof of Electra's gradual loss of her hold on both speech and behaviour<sup>20</sup>, or would it bring to the attention the possible biases on the stories told, thus bringing into perspective any narrative appearing within the play? After all, the lament is preceded by two agones, the first of them played in full view of the audience, the other put into perspective by the mediating messenger's speech: the agones highlighted the differing views of the matricide (indeed, differing narratives of the latter) – now, a historical narrative provided in the prologue is being supplanted with another, its focus suddenly switching from the blessed Tantalus to the latter's treacherous son, the crime of language put into shadow by the temporally posterior act of murder.

At this point it may be useful to look back to another instance where the crime of Atreus is introduced only late in a play – it is in the *Agamemnon*, in the celebrated vision of the doomed captive, Cassandra<sup>21</sup>. Characteristically, a Trojan go-between will be used in this play as well, and he will serve – in much similar way – to disclose the events within the palace walls: the barbarian eunuch, half crazed with fear, and yet speaking in obscure, ornate words of blood being shed in the palace<sup>22</sup>. It seems symptomatic that his words, drawing a close parallel between Orestes' invasion of the palace and the assault on the city of Troy may be read as casting considerable doubt upon the heroic dimension of the Trojan narrative: in linking so closely the two events, the Phrygian implicitly belittles the Homeric tale, comparing the glorious achievement of the Greek military to merciless slaughter of clearly panicked servants and women. On the other hand, it is the tale that may be of interest here, as it turns what many of present-day scholars view as ghastly atrocity<sup>23</sup> into a deed worthy of poetic adornments:

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Kyriakou 1998. In her interpretation, the postponed mention of the betrayal is linked to the recent development of the plot and provides a historical background against which Menelaus' act is to be considered, an interesting possibility not to be lightly rejected. Still, one may think that there is an additional dimension to this modification should we consider the story against the more general features of historical narrative that this latter emerges from the tragedy.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Dunn 1996: 161–169.

<sup>21</sup> *Ag.* 1090 f. and 1219 f.; on the scene cf. e.g. Ferrari 1997.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Or.* 1369 ff.

<sup>23</sup> The assault on Helen is unequivocally criticized by Smith 1967; Burkert 1974; Schein 1975; Euben 1986, and others, with particularly virulent comments on the character of the protagonists coming from Vellacott 1975: 53–81. Much different attitude is manifested by Porter (1994: 86 ff.).

viewed from such a standpoint, the song this unusual messenger sings fulfils at least a twofold purpose. First, he encourages a reflection on the famous war of Troy, but second, and possibly more interestingly, he provides a glimpse into a narrative being written, into a historical report being composed, thus standing in what we may regard as a counterbalance to the far 'clearer' account of the assembly meeting<sup>24</sup>. The two are thus inextricably linked, the apparent purity of the assembly report possibly nasconding the specific biases of Agamemnon's old retainer sent to break the evil tidings to his mistress<sup>25</sup>, while the poetic form of the assault narrative, though far from the epic beauty of the heroic hexameters, provides an account whose lyrical form seems to belie a tale of considerable violence, a tale modified and shaped by fear-infused mind. Which is more reliable, one may rightly ask: is it the lucid account for which we have no counterbalance or the hysterical narrative of an obscurity that foretells the wonders to come, partially vindicated by the 'absurdity' of the final prophecy.

Yet, to return to the issue at hand, at the discussed moment Electra chooses to disclose the events which were hitherto absent from her account: the betrayal and the quarrel it brought about by the will of gods. It seems symptomatic that in her present tale the two are irrevocably connected, Myrtilus' murder providing the reason for the fatal gift duly brought by Hermes. It is only now that the crime of Pelops is explicitly mentioned, the murder of Myrtilus being invoked as the source of all later calamities including implicitly the present plight of the two siblings. At the nadir of Argive fortunes, Electra speaks the betrayal committed by her ancestor: one may wonder whether this mention is motivated only by the fact that the present situation arose from the behaviour of Menelaus<sup>26</sup>. There is possibly a deeper end to this sudden disclosure: neither nobility of birth (*eugeneia*), nor Apollo-like arguments saved Orestes at the assembly meeting, no divinity appeared to defend him from the wrath of the citizens: the downfall of the royal line seems complete – it is no wonder that the *Ursache* invoked proves to be a transgression of major proportions, the famous betrayal of a friend, of a person bound to the heroic Pelops by reciprocity of *charis*, and, hence, a shedding of blood likely to invoke the divine wrath upon the head of both perpetrator and his descendants.

There is, however, more to be noticed in this monody: indeed, in her anguish, Electra turns to invoke the very man she has mentioned in the prologue, the 'old

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<sup>24</sup> This is hardly the point for an extended comparison between the two, yet even the first-glance differences may result striking: one messenger is identified as male and Greek, the other as an Eastern eunuch; one speaks in stately trochaic meter, where the other sings in frantic dochmiacs; one follows the diachronic arrangement typical of historical account speaking with utmost clearness and providing what appears to be an accurate rendering of the past action, the other is almost incomprehensible in his elaborate ornaments and shifting perspectives that positively disable any chronological sequence.

<sup>25</sup> For the bias of the messenger report cf. e.g. Schein 1975: 61.

<sup>26</sup> Thus e.g. Kyriakou 1998.

Tantalus': she calls upon him to witness the utter destruction visited onto his descendants due to the crimes of his son. Well may we ask for the reasons that prompt his mention at this precise point, immediately preceding the long-awaited (and still incomplete) account of Pelops' contribution to the family fortunes. Interestingly, he appears as a true forefather, the predecessor of the very founder of the *genos*, Pelops – thus, Electra invokes the last to taste the true happiness, and significantly, no mention of his own transgression appears in this particular context.

Then, a possibly insignificant point, there is the matter of the epithet employed to describe Hermes' gift: the lamb is *polystonos*, very much like Helen in the prologue (56). Both have brought infinite sorrow to those apparently blessed with their presence and both are credited with something like the divine origin: certainly, the analogy would not be manifest on superficial reception, but it might be symptomatic that Euripides chose precisely the same descriptive to put it in Electra's mouth on two quite different occasions. If noticed, the repetition would probably highlight the basic similarity between the woman and the other gift, both infinitely beautiful, both highly desired, both bringing forth pain and bloodshed – this similarity would be likely to problematize the very presence of Helen, drawing attention to her peculiar status in the world of the drama and possibly preparing the grand entry of Pythian Apollo, with the newly divinized daughter of Tyndareus.

#### 4. THE CHORAL ACCOUNT (1537–1549)

Two accounts of the past history were given by a member of Tantalid family: the final one, brief yet noteworthy, is once again provided by the chorus. The verses in question, marked with crux and riddled with textual difficulties, run as follows:

δι' ἀλαστόρων  
ἔπεσ' ἔπεσε μέλαθρα τάδε δι' αἰμάτων  
διὰ Μυρτίλου πέσημ' ἐκ δίφρου (1547–1549)

Significantly, this is not the first time when the *alastōr* is invoked in the play – it is however interesting to note that this is the first instance where the feud and the downfall of the Tantalid house is explicitly blamed on the baneful spirits of curse: hitherto, it was only Clytemnestra's blood that drew the ghastly avenger to Orestes (337), while the overall calamity was linked to the crime of Pelops without any specific mention of the curse-spirit. As a result, it is only at this particular point that the fall of Myrtilus is connected not only with the beginning of all troubles (as it was in Electra's account) but rather with the

appearance of the bane of the Atridae, of the angry spirit of curse haunting the house of Pelops. Thus, the historic betrayal acquires clear religious connotations that make it parallel to matricide (after all, this latter provided a context in which the name of the *alastor* appeared at the beginning of the play). The missing datum is supplied by the chorus – while Electra gave the outline of the story, with Pelops throwing the carcass into the sea, the Argive women provide the detail of possibly fundamental importance: from that moment onwards, the family was victim to a curse.

Now, the above may well seem far-fetched, yet, even if one rejects the possibility, we are left with a significant point: at the highly emotional moment of the play, a curse-spirit is invoked as providing an explanation of all calamities that befall the house in its entirety. The chorus who refers to this explanation is often described as being half crazed with anxiety, almost hysterical in its powerlessness: yet, from the depth of this turmoil, it reaches out to give a possible explanation, to provide a conceptual frame which, given the benefit of the doubt, may retrieve something of the universal order, mythical that it may be. Significantly, both the killing of Helen and the danger that overtook Hermione involve Menelaus' family: thus, the bane that loomed over the children of Agamemnon seems to have transferred itself: at present it is Menelaus' family that stands on the verge of utter destruction: in this context, one may feel well justified in maintaining, together with Biehl, that the term *alastores* denotes in fact the twin instruments of the curse-spirit, Orestes and Pylades<sup>27</sup>. If the chorus chooses this precise moment to remind the spectator that it is the Pelopids who are tainted by divine wrath, the fact needs not to be accidental: as others before him, the Spartan king belongs to a line haunted by evil deeds of the past. Let us, however, pay some attention to the personage and family of Menelaus.

Agamemnon's brother was greeted as the descendant of Tantalus, his luck having been praised and extolled by the chorus, his arrival eagerly awaited by his niece as that of a saviour. Indeed, for Electra, Menelaus seems to fulfil the role Apollo has, for all that appears to her, rejected – thus, Helen's husband, married to Zeus' daughter, is counted quasi on par with gods – and any mention of his consanguinity with the treacherous Pelops is absent from the play. It is only with reference to the plight of Orestes (Electra) that this latter will be mentioned<sup>28</sup>. If Menelaus seems to have been kept far from the hereditary bloodlust of the Pelopidae, it seems all the more surprising that here, at the very critical moment of the play, the catastrophe seems to envelop all the house, inclusive of both Agamemnon and Menelaus. Certainly, there is a notable difference between his

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Biehl 1965: 167.

<sup>28</sup> The characteristic exception is the mention of *dissois Atridais* in the already discussed song of the chorus (318), although even there it is not in connection with Pelops but rather with the golden lamb that the brothers are mentioned.

appearance in the opening *epeisodion* and the manner in which he enters at now: in both cases, his arrival is eagerly awaited, yet several shifts seem to have occurred – the eagerness seems to be more that of the chorus, while Menelaus himself shall at best be a very reluctant saviour (if saviour at all). Even more importantly, it is no longer the elegant, suave descendant of Tantalus who enters – he rushes in frantic search for his family – in fact, owing to the harsh measures adopted by his nephew, the word around him all of the sudden collapses into that of Thyestes, as if by the very fact of occupying the family house he has plunged into the abyss of hereditary curse. Indeed, it may well be significant that the chorus speaks of the house that is being torn down by the *alastores* – its proximity seems to have an unwanted effect on the members of Pelopid family, the danger culminating in Orestes' command to set the palace on fire. This seemingly silent building may be seen as dominating the imagination of all present, indeed, as dominating the dramatic plot, although all the accounts seem to dwell on the members of the family instead of the building itself<sup>29</sup>. Yet, one needs to remember that a profound link would be perceived as existing between community, the royal family, and their house – not for nothing Dionysus shakes the royal palace of Thebes in the *Bacchae*, not for nothing Oedipus lives behind the shuttered doors of the family house in the *Phoenissae*.

To emphasize, there is an aspect to the curse story that deserves to be highlighted here: in invoking the angry spirit of family bane, the chorus clearly seeks to introduce some order into the world apparently ruled by chaos. In a way, the presence of *alastores* seems to be regarded as explanatory of the disorder resulting from the past history of the Tantalids, of Menelaus' questionable loyalty, or of the very actions of Orestes; moreover, such an explanation proves preferable to the alternative, as this latter involves accepting the disorder at face value, while making allowance for the import of human will. Should we however accept the reading proposed by Biehl, the resulting picture is of humans propelled by malicious, divine agency toward an end that is not exactly their own: and certainly, the ruin that threatens to overwhelm the world of the *Orestes* is easier to accept when it stems from the workings of the baneful, evil yet potent *daimon*. Thus, the chorus, much in the manner of Electra in the prologue or in the lament, appears to seek the explanatory rule which would account for the present state of the family affairs: as a result, it provides what is in fact a historical explanation – looking back, it locates the *origo malorum* in an act of betrayal and murder, but also in a curse uttered by the murdered man, thus invoking the

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<sup>29</sup> It may be significant that the last account, that provided by the chorus, furnishes the link that was hitherto missing: finally, the bane is connected physically to the royal abode (which seems to fit with the traditional understanding of the Atreid house, as attested in Ferrari 1997, and by the large majority of the commentaries on Euripides' *Electra*), turning this latter in a ghastly source of pollution and wrath.

supernatural, vindictive agency as an ultimate explanation of the present, and partially shifting the responsibility for the crisis from the protagonists onto their invisible tormentor<sup>30</sup>.

#### 5. APOLLO'S PROPHECY (1625–1665)

Having investigated the pictures of the past as these emerge in the *Orestes*, it is time to mention yet another account, covering both past and future, the account provided (for once in the play) by a divinity. It seems important to consider the source together with the contents: after all, hitherto we dealt with views of the past presented by either *dramatis personae* (or rather one *persona*) or the chorus: now, at the end of the dramatic action, in a moment of utmost tension and dramatic standoff, we are faced with the final explanation, provided by an omniscient, prophetic divinity, the very divinity whose authority was so confidently claimed for the highly problematic act of matricide<sup>31</sup>.

The interesting point is that Apollo does introduce himself: while easily disregarded as a by-product of the exigencies of the present situation, where no *Vorankündigung* is provided for his entrance, or emphasized as the final, true epiphany anticipated in the silencing of Pylades<sup>32</sup>, the self-introduction is particularly striking should we recall that the god went almost forgotten during the intrigue-part of the play. Thus, one may wonder whether his (re)appearance, additionally stressed by the fact that the deity who bears (as it were) some responsibility for the central act of matricide must reintroduce himself, should not be regarded as indicative of some major ideological design.

Now, the contents of Apollo's final prophecy are often taken as indicative of either Euripides' distrust of the traditional religion, or his profound dissatisfaction with the limitation of the tragic genre<sup>33</sup>. The god solves the crisis by simply ordering Menelaus to desist from the assault on the palace, insisting that Orestes' frees Hermione (only to marry her afterwards), and throwing in a few hints concerning the origin of the present situation. Symptomatically, he is accompanied by the now divine daughter of Tyndareus, who as a child of Zeus takes her place among the gods rather than humans, which provides an interesting commentary on both

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<sup>30</sup> Parallel shifts in the acknowledged responsibility for acts performed by humans are visible in the views on the matricide expressed by Orestes and Electra: they seem continuously to hesitate between acknowledgement of the sole responsibility of the murder and the transferral of the moral 'blame' onto Apollo's oracle (or, for that matter, onto Apollo himself).

<sup>31</sup> Apollo's part in the play is particularly problematic once one realizes that Electra views her and Orestes as his 'sacrificial victims' – on this cf. Gibert 2003.

<sup>32</sup> Thus respectively Biehl (1965: 178), and Nisetich (1986).

<sup>33</sup> One may mention Burnett 1998; Dunn 1996 (most prominently, 170–173); or Parry 1969 with his insistence on the 'norm' of myth. Cf. also Cilliers 1985.

Orestes' attempt on the woman's life and the history of the Trojan war. And finally, he returns the plot to its expected (though seemingly abandoned) track, providing thereby a glimpse of the future destiny of Orestes and his sister. As a result of its apparent brusqueness, the intervention was often regarded as offhand or even clumsy, the psychological inadequacies of the ending being emphasized in order to highlight Euripides' alleged dramatic failure (or, for the matter, his ultimate atheism)<sup>34</sup>. One may wonder, though, whether the authoritativeness of Apolline command is not to be taken as mirroring his part in the resolution of the prior conflict: after all, the matricide resulted, a fact alleged in the prologue, from the divine command very much as the present resolution does. Not to obey is a course unthinkable to both Orestes and Menelaus: both of them bow to the divine will, accepting the path shown to them. Should we consider the intervention of Apollo as a twin one to that resulting in Orestes' vengeance, the divine would appear as the only agency capable of solving man-caused, deadlocked conflict of obligations. The divine, one may say, proves necessary, its existence and importance vindicated by the human inability to deal with man-caused events.

The feature that may be regarded as particularly interesting in the context of the Tantalid story is the apotheosis of Helen – the woman who appeared in Electra's words as a paragon of female flightiness and treachery, who was regarded by Orestes and his friend Pylades as the incarnation of all evil that befell Greece<sup>35</sup>, is raised above the human status owing to her divine paternity<sup>36</sup>. This is indeed interesting, given that another child of Zeus mentioned in this play was condemned to endless punishment: he was Tantalus and, possibly significantly, he is portrayed as floating midair in eternal fear – by contrast, Helen, also raised above the ground, also midair, is to become an instrument of rescue, giving hope to the storm-afflicted sailors on par with her divinized brothers. The interesting thing, however, is that Helen seems to transcend the human limits in more ways than this: according to Apollo, the part she played in the Argive/Greek history resulted from Zeus' plan:

ὡς ἀπαντλοῖεν χθονὸς  
ὑβρισμα θνητῶν ἀφθόνου πληρώματος (1641 f.)

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. e.g. Will 1961. One may also mention the 'cracked replica' metaphor of Parry (1969: 339), or the criticism heaped onto the scene by Schein 1975.

<sup>35</sup> Cf., respectively, *Or.* 126–131, 1134 ff. It seems particularly striking in a drama of the *Orestes'* proportions that Helen is being repeatedly blamed for both the misery of Tantalidae and the ruin of all Greece (thus e.g. by Electra, 128ff.). Her denouncement by both Orestes and Electra gives us a glimpse of yet another portrayal of history, where a full accountability of human agents is assumed – ironically, by blaming Helen as the two siblings do, they undermine their own position, for the full accountability of Tyndareus' daughter implicitly question the part of Apollo in the matricidal act of Orestes.

<sup>36</sup> It seems striking that paternity is the only reason given for the sudden elevation of Helen (1365).



This, one may reflect, is in some respects reminiscent of the tale of the golden lamb, another divine gift that poisoned human minds, bringing about utter catastrophe and destruction<sup>37</sup>. It is probably because of this peculiar status of Helen that Menelaus is told to remarry – in this remarriage, he will be leaving the realm of myth, thus making his return from Troy complete.

On the other hand, Menelaus' remarriage may be regarded as a dramatic device of a nature similar to that of Orestes' promising to marry Hermione: the divinity has spoken, confirming the protagonist's claim on the Argive throne, and, moreover, confirming his claim on Hermione's very person. On this order, the world seems to be returning to its proper *kosmos* – but it is not that the god is authoritative; rather, humans are allowed to live only when their experience is ordered by actual superimposition of divine command. In a way, one could say that by influencing (or even modifying) their perception of actual events, the god allows the humans to survive where this survival is endangered. The road to relative happiness seems thus to pass through the acknowledgement of human limitations, including the necessary fragmentariness (or incompleteness) of our knowledge: it is striking indeed that when revealed, the divine perception of history remains foreign (and yet acceptable) to all concerned. In recognizing the validity of Apollo's command, stemming as the latter is from the superior understanding of events, both Menelaus and Orestes change the present crisis into the past history – indeed, into a chapter of the *genos* history they will be able to narrate, probably in partial and fragmentary manner, afterwards. The crisis of the play is thus relegated into a mere element of a catena of past events, and may henceforth be included in the narrative of Tantalid history.

Characteristically, the tale of earth suffering from overpopulation is all too often interpreted as a proof of Euripides' nihilistic tendencies, of his profound doubt concerning the divine<sup>38</sup>, or as a logical continuation of the story that problematizes all there is in the Argive myth<sup>39</sup>: yet, one may wonder, the close parallel between the part played by Helen and the part played by the lamb (the latter, let us remember, brought to Argos by the divine messenger, Hermes) may be regarded as reflecting something of the author's latent intent. Indeed, it may well seem that both wonders of beauty are sent down to facilitate punishment, to act as a catalyst in the process aimed at returning the lost balance of the universe: this is why they are both sent down by the will of Zeus and this is why they remain, to a large extent, foreign in the world of mortal men. Helen cannot die, for she is Zeus' daughter, yet being Zeus' daughter she is particularly equipped to

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<sup>37</sup> One may remember the bitter commentary of Schein, who considers this particular explanation a striking absurd, which certainly confirms his view of the play as nihilistic (Schein 1975: 64 f.).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. e.g. Dunn 1996: 173–179; Burkert 1974; Parry 1969.

<sup>39</sup> Thus e.g. Burnett 1998: 247–272.

fulfil a role that was assigned to her by the ruler of the world<sup>40</sup>: it may well seem surprising that the unabashed queen of the opening, fearful of her status or, for the matter, for her looks, proves to be a goddess in disguise – yet, it is her beauty that makes her a close correspondent of the lamb: like the latter, she is followed by a trail of destruction, the effects of her presence contrasting sharply with the graciousness of her aspect. In this, she is illustrative of the paradox so glaringly described by the chorus; moreover, to invoke the formulations employed by Electra, both Helen and the lamb are *polystonoi*, ‘abounding in misfortune’.

Apart from the very paradoxicality of Helen’s nature, there is yet point that should claim our attention: the war was intended to bring back the balance of the universe – this is particularly interesting when we consider the fact that the Argive myth is particularly rich in references to the divine attempts at restoring the established order. Even when we forgo the element of the Atreus/Thyestes tale which does not emerge in the play (the direction of the solar path reversed due to Thyestes’ treachery)<sup>41</sup>, the punishment of Tantalus and the fatal appearance of the lamb are enough to remind us of the existence of universal justice in a sense of some superior order or fundamental balance upon which the existence of the world is dependent. Thus, Helen, much in the manner of her precedent, becomes a manifestation of divine wrath, the bloodshed she brings about amounting to the necessary retribution for endangering the universal harmony. Symptomatically, on such a reading, the apparent arbitrariness of divine decrees becomes increasingly problematic – indeed, any doubt concerning the divine may be regarded as a by-product of the fragmentariness of our cognition or of the subjectivity of perception.

## 6. ORESTES

As we come closer to the conclusion of the present discussion, it seems reasonable to take a look into the perception of reality as presented by the very protagonist of the drama: affected by physical as well as psychical sickness, Orestes may be viewed as providing yet another manifestation of the human tendency to modify the narrative of the past. Indeed, in his case an additional factor is at work: the protagonist himself defines his memory as failing (215 f.), simultaneously confessing a preference for the dream world, for the death-like

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<sup>40</sup> Symptomatically, she will perform yet another role in her divinized form – this time, however, in exact opposition to the time of her mortal existence, her beauty assumes the salutary character: nevertheless, she will still be an instrument of her father’s will (which in turn emphasizes the basic opposition between her and Tantalus, whose eternal life is irrevocably linked to suffering and fear). Concerning the truth of this particular aitiology, compare Scullion 2000.

<sup>41</sup> On this cf. the study of Rosivach (1978)

state, where he can escape the confines of reality, indeed, escape the dire effects of memory itself (211–214). Indeed, he invokes Forgetfulness (*Lethe*, 213) as his refuge and saviour, thus distancing himself from the intrinsically human tendency to keep track of events, to preserve their memory<sup>42</sup>. In fact, immersed in his calamity he recognizes the ability to annul, to eliminate the perception of misfortune as a unique, yet specific gift of forgetting. It is interesting to note that in this drama, filled with references to the past, and full of remembrances and attempts at providing an explanation of the present through the past events, the protagonist begins by speaking of the blessings stemming from the erasure of memory, thus, from the denial of one's own humanity<sup>43</sup>.

Characteristically, the shifts in Orestes' approach to the murder he committed received due attention in the modern scholarship, yet the attention was paid primarily to the question of Orestes' sanity<sup>44</sup> – meanwhile, the shifting perspective taken by the protagonist seems to correspond with the much wider tendency as exemplified by Electra, the chorus, or even the assembly. Orestes modifies his story (as he does the notion of his own responsibility for the fatal deed), yet his modifications are no different than those furnished by other *personae* – indeed, some of his much criticized arguments invoke the divine responsibility for the murder, which in fact may be regarded an echo of Helen's attitude toward her own behaviour (in lines 78 f.), while the others refer to the mythical/tragic tradition already existent in the times of Euripides: that the hero seems to waver in his own estimation of murder is to some extent explicable by the very nature of the deed which simply cannot be fitted into what we may consider 'normal' course of events. Orestes' mind is failing because of the Erinyes, yes, but it is also failing because of the fundamental difficulty in weaving the matricidal act into the overall narrative fabric, a difficulty that manifests itself in the paradoxical oxymora of the above discussed *stasimon* (807–843). Others experience considerable problems when referring to the violent past of the house – is it such a wonder that the view

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<sup>42</sup> On this, cf. e.g. Vidal-Naquet 1980 (chapter I 2). One may recall that memory is defined as a basis of learning (and thus as a trait intrinsic in humans) in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (980a30–980b2).

<sup>43</sup> This becomes particularly striking once we realize that in the course of action considerable doubts are raised with respect to *dikaion*, yet another instance of a common denominator of Greek social life being thrown aside – on this particular issue and its possible Gorgianic inspiration cf. O'Brien 1987: 191.

<sup>44</sup> Thus e.g. Smith 1967; Vellacott 1975: 53–71; or Dunn 1989. One may also mention the interesting study of O'Brien 1987, who instead of the sanity issue chooses to emphasize the basic similarity of the attitudes displayed by Orestes, Menelaus and Tyndareus, thus highlighting the importance of value/emphasis shifts for the understanding of the ideological aspect of the drama. To quote his conclusions: "The pointed repetition of themes treated in sharply contrasting ways by the same speaker [...], far from breaking the continuity of the such dramatic persons, is actually a way of calling attention to it" (1987: 199).

of the matricide remains a shifting one? Gods are invoked as ultimate explanation of the Thyestean banquet by the chorus (or, for that effect, by Helen as she refers to the issue of her escape), which seems to provide a pattern into which Orestes wants to weave his own deed. Still, at the same moment he continues to blame both his aunt and his mother for infidelity that engaged Greece in a long war with an even bloodier aftermath, leading to his present dilemma (248, 585–588 *et al.*). In a manner, the hero dramatizes the process of the present as it becomes (or, rather, is made into) a historical narrative, his choices of explanation throwing into light the less obvious mechanisms governing the accounts of the past as they were provided by the chorus or by the *dramatis personae*. It seems significant that he is vindicated by no less of a divinity than Apollo, the godly diviner, the one who through his shrine in Delphi provides explanations to all calamities and misfortunes befalling the Greek world: and yet, at the same moment, it is also symptomatic that his actions (stemming as they are from his attempts to introduce some order into the world broken by treason and matricide) lead to a bloody impasse, to an escalation of violence that threatens the existence of the Pelopid line itself. After all, notwithstanding all the efforts, he proves unable to vindicate his actions or to impress his vision of events upon others: indeed, on his own he lacks the authority and consistency that would vindicate him and his accomplices.

#### CONCLUSIONS

It is time to summarize the results of the above inquiry: it seems highly likely that the gradual disclosure of the past, through both Electra and the chorus, was aimed at attracting the audience's attention: if the crime of Pelops is left out in the original account, where the emphasis lies first with Tantalus as the quasi-divine founder of the dynasty, and the sad fate of Agamemnon, his existence would nevertheless be remembered by the larger part of original public – yet, one may well wonder how exactly he would be remembered – as the triumphant vanquisher of Oenomaos, as the treacherous murderer of Myrtilus, or as the lover of Chrysippus? Now, I do not maintain that this point would be foremost on the mind of Euripides' audience: instead, I would wish to stress that the express mention of his contribution to the family misfortune would be all the more noticed owing to the delay of the disclosure. By postponing the mention of Pelops and of the sad results of his treachery until (as one may think) the final calamity has befallen his descendants, Euripides may wish to stress the importance of his betrayal and the family discord that was its price, the evil harvest his betrayal reaped in the blood of Pelops' descendants. Still, his aim may be more sophisticated: the mention of the intrafamilial conflict that followed the treachery precedes the emergence of the vengeance plan, and thus may be taken to foreshadow the rise of intrafamilial hatred that endangers, for yet another time,

the very survival of the Tantalidae. Moreover, the history of the *genos*, presented in the fragmented, broken narration so unlike the clear, diachronic exposition of the *Phoenissae*, may be regarded as counterbalancing the hectic, changing plot, oscillating as this latter is between vengeance, despair, comedy, and rescue<sup>45</sup>. The fragmentation of history corresponds to the fragmentation in the individual world-perception – the *prosopa* of this particular play are all characterized by very biased, hence incomplete perception of the surrounding world and its events. At the same time one may justifiably wonder at the notable change occurring in Electra's accounts of the Tantalid past: beginning with a relatively straightforward enumeration of calamities that had brought about the decline of this once magnificent *genos*, the heroine seems to enter a totally different mode of storytelling in her monody – here, the account is of explanatory, causal nature, as if the author were trying to impose order on the chaos that surrounds her.

Additionally, the fragmented narratives that are produced by different personages within the play culminate in the account of Apollo: sketchy as this latter is, it reveals something of the underlying pattern, providing a glimpse of possible rationality and a chance at returning to some kind of orderliness. At the same moment, Apollo's arrival highlights the incompleteness and imperfections of the human cognition, the basic inability to construct the true historical narrative. Cognition of history being necessarily impaired among the humans, the divine offers yet another unclear and, one may say, insufficient explanation of the events. And this leaves us in an untenable position of choice: we may either choose doubt and rejection of an inconceivable supernatural order, or display compliance and resignation in the face of our incapability to comprehend what is beyond our cognition. Thus, on the proposed reading, the epiphany and, subsequently, the speech delivered by Apollo become necessary supplement of the historical narration as presented in the play, a device aimed – among many other things – to emphasize what we may term an epistemological crisis within the drama. *In summa*, the *Orestes* may be regarded as questioning and problematizing much more than the norm of myth – what it problematizes is history itself. The narrative of the past, as it appears in the drama, is a matter of human interpretation. The divine purpose (if there is such a thing) seems elusive and distanced by the weakness of our perception. This is a brilliant drama: indeed, it may be read as a work of outstanding depth of nearly philosophical dimensions, a drama which seems to play (but what a dangerous play it is) with the Protagorean notion of subjectivity or with the newfangled intellectual notions<sup>46</sup>. In a way, the attempts

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<sup>45</sup> On this generic variation within the tragic genre as manifested by the *Orestes* compare Zeitlin 1980; Dunn 1989; Burnett 1998: 248–266. For the wider perspective compare Goff 2000.

<sup>46</sup> Concerning the level of the sophistic influence on Euripides I share the careful attitude of D.J. Conacher (as presented in Conacher 1998), yet I do recognize the legitimacy of M. Wright's

to locate this play with respect to the Thucydidean reflections on war<sup>47</sup>, though heading toward another interpretation, may also prove illuminating – it is, after all, a human crisis that is portrayed onstage, a crisis resulting from the human weakness and the human biases, which among many other things prompt us to search for the reasons for present misfortunes somewhere else, in a source different from us ourselves. Yet, in a way, it may also be seen as a play about history itself, about the human inability to see through its mechanism, and, by contrast, about human ability to fit the historical narrative to very particular needs of the moment. Indeed, it may be viewed as an answer to the sentiments akin to those expressed by the Athenian historian in the proud claim: καὶ οἱ αὐτοὶ ἤτοι κρίνομεν γε ἢ ἐνθυμούμεθα ὀρθῶς τὰ πράγματα (Thuc. II 40, 2). What Euripides may be doing here is to ask, whether, being what we are, we can actually evaluate the events that we see happening around us and to us. As a result, the bleakness of the *Orestes* reaches much deeper than possible description of the actual collapse of contemporary society or inquiry into the darker aspects of human strivings – in a manner, the drama is not only “the dark night of the Greek soul”<sup>48</sup>, but also the dark night of the intellect itself.

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claim concerning the poet’s interest in Gorgias’ (or Gorgianic) reflection on the nature of both the language and human knowledge (cf. Wright 2005). In general, one may be inclined to share the careful attitude displayed by Allan 2000 b.

<sup>47</sup> For the historical actuality of the play compare e.g. Euben 1986; Schein 1975; Manuwald 1994/1995.

<sup>48</sup> Parry’s description of the play, stemming from his 1969 article, where he suggested that the *Orestes* manifests the rift in actual experience and human perception of this experience, that the dissonances of the play are in fact a representation of madness.

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