

Euripides' *Orestes* and the Problem of Food

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I. Euripides, *Orestes* 1-15

Electra: Οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲν δεινὸν ᾧδ' εἰπεῖν ἔπος
οὐδὲ πάθος οὐδὲ ξυμφορὰ θεήλατος,
ἦς οὐκ ἂν ἄραιτ' ἄχθος ἀνθρώπου φύσις.
ὁ γὰρ μακάριος — κοῦκ ὀνειδίζω τύχας —
5 Διὸς πεφυκῶς, ὡς λέγουσι, Τάνταλος
κορυφῆς ὑπερτέλλοντα δειμαίνων πέτρον
ἀέρι ποτᾶται· καὶ τίνει ταύτην δίκην,
ὡς μὲν λέγουσιν, ὅτι θεοῖς ἀνθρώπος ὢν
κοινῆς τραπέζης ἀξίωμ' ἔχων ἴσον,
10 ἀκόλαστον ἔσχε γλώσσαν, αἰσχίστην νόσον.
οὔτος φυτεύει Πέλοπα, τοῦ δ' Ἄτρεὺς ἔφνυ,
ᾧ στέμματα ξήνασ' ἐπέκλωσεν θεὰ
ἔριν, Θυέστη πόλεμον ὄντι συγγόνῳ
θέσθαι. τί τάρρητ' ἀναμετρούσασθαί με δεῖ;
15 ἔδαισε δ' οὖν νιν τέκν' ἀποκτείνας Ἄτρεῦς.
There is nothing so terrible to describe,
or a suffering, or a heaven-sent affliction,
that human nature has not borne its burden.
For the blessed — and I'm not reproaching his fortune —
begotten of Zeus, as they say, Tantalus
flies through the air, fearing the rock that threatens his head.
And he is paying this penalty,
as they say, because being a man among gods
and sharing the honor of a common table,
he had an unbridled tongue, a shameful affliction.
Tantalus begot Pelops, and from him Atreus was born,
for whom the goddess, when she had carded her wool,
spin a web of strife, to wage war with Thyestes, despite being a brother.
Why must I retrace the unspeakable?
For Atreus slew the children and feasted on them.

II. Euripides, *Orestes* 35-38

Electra: ἐντεῦθεν ἀγρία συντακεῖς νόσῳ νοσεῖ
35 τλήμων Ὀρέστης ὅδε πεσὼν ἐν δεμνίοις
κεῖται, τὸ μητρὸς δ' αἰμά νιν τροχηλατεῖ
μανιασιν· ὀνομάζειν γὰρ αἰδοῦμαι θεὰς
εὐμενίδας, αἱ τόνδ' ἐξαμιλλῶνται φόβῳ.
Here poor Orestes, wasted away by a savage sickness,
is ill; he's fallen down and is lying on his bed,
and his mother's blood is giving him a dragging death by madness.
I am shy to call the goddesses the ones with benign minds,
for they are driving him out of his mind with fear.

III. Euripides, *Orestes* 807-818

XO. ὁ μέγας ὄλβος ἅ τ' ἀρετὰ
μέγα φρονούσ' ἀν' Ἑλλάδα καὶ
παρὰ Σιμωντίοις ὀχετοῖς
810 πάλιν ἀνήλθ' ἐξ εὐτυχίας Ἀτρεΐδαις

πάλαι παλαιᾶς ἀπὸ συμφορᾶς δόμων,
ὅποτε χρουσείας ἕρις ἄρονος
ἤλυθε Τανταλίδαις,
οἰκτρότατα θοινάματα καὶ
815 σφάγια γενναίων τεκέων·
ὄθεν φόνος φόνος ἐξαμεί-
βων δι' αἵματος οὐ προλεί-
πει δισσοῖσιν Ἀτρεΐδαις.

The great prosperity and the valor
Thinking highly of itself in Greece
and beside the streams of the Simois
has gone back again out of good fortune
from the Atreidae long ago from and old disaster of their house,
when strife over a golden ram
came upon the descendants of Tantalos,
the most pitiable banquet and
slaughters of noble children;
from there murder exchanges with murder
and will not forsake through blood
the double sons of Atreus.

IV. A. Euripides, *Orestes* 917-930 (Messenger's report on farmer's speech)

ΑΓ. ἄλλος δ' ἀναστὰς ἔλεγε τῷ δ' ἐναντία,
μορφῇ μὲν οὐκ εὐωπός, ἀνδρείος δ' ἀνὴρ,
ὀλιγάκις ἄστῃ κάγορός τε χραινῶν κύκλον,
920 αὐτουργός — οἵπερ καὶ μόνοι σφίζουσι γῆν —
ξυνετός δέ, χωρεῖν ὁμόσε τοῖς λόγοις θέλων,
ἀκέραιος, ἀνεπίπληκτον ἡσκηκῶς βίον·
ὃς εἶπ' Ὀρέστην παῖδα τὸν Ἀγαμέμνονος
στεφανοῦν, ὃς ἠθέλησε τιμωρεῖν πατρί,
925 κακὴν γυναῖκα κάθειον κατακτανῶν,
ἢ κεῖν' ἀφήρει, μήθ' ὀπλίζεσθαι χεῖρα
μήτε στρατεύειν ἐκλιπόντα δώματα,
εἰ τᾶνδον οἰκουρήμαθ' οἱ λελειμμένοι
φθείρουσιν, ἀνδρῶν εὐνιδας λωβώμενοι.
930 καὶ τοῖς γε χρηστοῖς εὖ λέγειν ἐφαίνετο.

Messenger: But another man got up and spoke in opposition to him,
a man not handsome in appearance, but brave,
rarely appearing in the city or the crowd in the market,
a farmer — for they are the only ones who save the land —
knowledgeable, and eager to come to issue with the questions,
inviolable, practicing a way of life unlikely to be condemned.
He said that they should crown Orestes, who wished to avenge his father,
murdering an evil and godless woman
who would prevent men from taking up arms
and going on foreign service,
if those left behind destroy households inside
by corrupting men's bereft wives.
To those better men he seemed to speak well.

B. Euripides, *Orestes* 943-945

ΑΓ. ἀλλ' οὐκ ἔπειθ' ὄμιλον, εὖ δοκῶν λέγειν.

νικᾶ δ' ἐκείνος ὁ κακὸς ἐν πλήθει λέγων,

945 ὃς ἠγόρευσε σύγγονον σέ τε κτανεῖν.

But he (the farmer) didn't persuade the crowd, although he seemed to speak well. For that wicked man who gave a speech in favor of killing you and your brother was victorious in speaking among the mob.

V. A. Thucydides, Book V.81.2

[2] καὶ Λακεδαιμόνιοι καὶ Ἀργεῖοι, χίλιοι ἑκάτεροι, ξυστρατεύσαντες τὰ τ' ἐν Σικυῶνι ἐς ὀλίγους μᾶλλον κατέστησαν αὐτοὶ οἱ Λακεδαιμόνιοι ἐλθόντες, καὶ μετ' ἐκεῖνα ξυναμφότεροι ἤδη καὶ τὸν ἐν Ἀργεῖ δήμον κατέλυσαν, καὶ ὀλιγαρχία ἐπιτηδεῖα τοῖς Λακεδαιμονίοις κατέστη. καὶ πρὸς ἕαρ ἤδη ταῦτα ἦν τοῦ χειμῶνος λήγοντος, καὶ τέταρτον καὶ δέκατον ἔτος τῷ πολέμῳ ἐτελεύτα.

The Lacedaemonians and Argives, a thousand from each, made a joint expedition. The aforementioned Lacedaemonians went to Sicyon and set up a more oligarchical government, and after this the two groups together disbanded the democracy and established an oligarchy acceptable to the Lacedaemonians. These things happened at the close of winter toward spring; thus ended the fourteenth year of the war.

B. Thucydides, Book 5.82.2

καὶ Ἀργείων ὁ δῆμος κατ' ὀλίγον ξυνιστάμενός τε καὶ ἀναθαρσήσας ἐπέθεντο τοῖς ὀλίγοις, τηρήσαντες αὐτὰς τὰς γυμνοπαιδίας τῶν Λακεδαιμονίων· καὶ μάχης γενομένης ἐν τῇ πόλει ἐπεκράτησεν ὁ δῆμος, καὶ τοὺς μὲν ἀπέκτεινε, τοὺς δὲ ἐξήλασεν.

The popular party among the Argives, organizing gradually and regaining courage, attached the oligarchy, keeping an eye on them at the festival of the Gymnopaediae at Lacedaimon. After a battle took place in the city the popular party won; they killed some (of their adversaries) and exiled others.

VI. Diodorus Siculus 12.80.2-3

περὶ δὲ τοὺς αὐτοὺς χρόνους ἐν τῇ πόλει τῶν Ἀργείων οἱ κατ' ἐκλογὴν κεκοιμένοι τῶν πολιτῶν χίλιοι συνεφώνησαν, καὶ τὴν μὲν δημοκρατίαν ἔγνωσαν καταλύειν, ἀριστοκρατίαν δ' ἐξ αὐτῶν καθιστάναι. [3] ἔχοντες δὲ πολλοὺς συνεργοὺς διὰ τὸ προέχειν τῶν πολιτῶν ταῖς οὐσίαις καὶ ταῖς ἀνδραγαθίαις, τὸ μὲν πρῶτον συλλαβόντες τοὺς δημαγωγεῖν εἰωθότας ἀπέκτειναν, τοὺς δ' ἄλλους καταπληξάμενοι κατέλυσαν τοὺς νόμους καὶ δι' ἑαυτῶν τὰ δημόσια διώκουν. διακατασχόντες δὲ ταύτην τὴν πολιτείαν μῆνας ὀκτὼ κατελύθησαν, τοῦ δήμου συστάντος ἐπ' αὐτούς: διὸ καὶ τούτων ἀναιρεθέντων ὁ δῆμος ἐκομίσσατο τὴν δημοκρατίαν.

And about the same time in the city of the Argives those Thousand chosen out of the muster of troops came to an agreement, and they decided to dissolve the democracy and to establish an aristocracy from among their number. Having many collaborators because of their prominence in wealth and bravery, they first seized and killed those accustomed to lead the people, and having terrorized the others they dissolved the laws and were managing the affairs of state by themselves. After holding the government for eight months they were overthrown when the people organized against them; and so, with these men having been put to death, the people got back their democracy.

VII. Euripides, *Orestes* 1678-1690

ΑΠ. χωρεῖτέ νυν ἕκαστος οἱ προστάσσομεν,
νείκας τε διαλύεσθε.

ΜΕ. πείθεσθαι χρεῶν.

1680 ΟΡ. κἀγὼ τοιοῦτος· σπένδομαι δὲ συμφοραῖς,

Μενέλαε, καὶ σοῖς, Λοξία, θεσπίσμασιν.

ΑΠ. ἴτε νυν καθ' ὁδόν, τὴν καλλίστην

θεῶν Εἰρήνην τιμώντες· ἐγὼ δ'

Ἐλένην Δίοις μελάθοις πελάσω,

1685 λαμπρῶν ἄστρων πόλον ἐξανύσας,

ἔνθα παρ' Ἥρα τῇ θ' Ἥρακλέους

Ἥβη πάρεδρος θεὸς ἀνθρώποις

ἔσται σπονδαῖς ἔντιμος αἰεὶ,
σὺν Τυνδαρίδαις, τοῖς Διὸς υἱοῖς,
1690 ναύταις μεδέουσα θαλάσσης.

Apollo: Go now each of you to the place I have appointed,
and resolve your quarrels.

Menelaus: I must obey.

Orestes: And I likewise. By libations I will make a truce with the circumstances,
with you, Menelaus, and the oracles of Apollo.

Apollo: Go on your ways, honoring Peace,
the fairest of gods. I will bring Helen
to the halls of Zeus

when I have reached the vault of the gleaming stars.

There as a god sitting by Hera and Hebe,
and as the wife of Heracles

she will be honored by people with libations forever,
along with the Tyndarids, the sons of Zeus,
guarding the sea for sailors.

All translations are my own.

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