

Hostage Situations in Euripides

My paper draws on film theory to shed light on the final episode of Euripides' *Orestes*. I specifically address the "hostage situation" precipitated by Orestes' seizure of Hermione, an element hard to parallel from Greek tragedy (or Greek literature generally) but exceedingly common in contemporary "action" films.

Most of Euripides' play explores the social and political alienation of the matricide Orestes. In the final episode, however, Orestes, Electra and Pylades pursue a bizarre plot to murder Helen in order to punish Menelaus for his indifference to Orestes. The young men storm the palace, attempt to murder Helen (who is rescued by the gods), take Hermione hostage at sword-point, and set the palace on fire while mocking Menelaus from the roof. Only the appearance of Apollo forestalls a triple murder/suicide. All of this appears to be free invention on Euripides' part, and Orestes' criminal actions have shocked generations of critics, who sometimes make a comparison with terrorism (e.g. West 33). The taking of a hostage with threat of immediate physical harm has no clear parallel in Greek tragedy or other Greek literature, with the notable exception of an earlier, very controversial play of Euripides (the *Telephus*).

I analyze the episode using the concept of "situational dramaturgy," which examines how dramatists sometimes create effects through stock situations that do not develop logically from a play's narrative. Particularly favored are "discrete moments, often of suspense or deadlock, when characters are arranged in seemingly inescapable dilemmas" (Higgins 2016: 11). The concept of situational dramaturgy has been useful in exposing important links between the conventions of 19th-century theater and early film (Brewster & Jacobs 18-32, Higgins 2016: 10-15, with reference to Polti 1895). Higgins has drawn further connection to formulaic elements of the "action" genre of contemporary film (Higgins 2003: 76-93). Hostage situations are common

in action movies, particularly towards their endings, where such films “invariably deploy races to the rescue, hostage situations, or chases, with specific tangible deadlines and pyrotechnic displays” (Higgins 2008: 88). Although the hostage situation was hardly a “stock element” for Euripides and his audience – it must indeed have been a shocking innovation – there is still a clear parallel in the way the tragedian uses it to add suspense-building complication to the seemingly irresolvable situation in which Orestes and his accomplices find themselves.

This perspective can put a finer point on the place of “melodrama” in Euripidean drama. The term is often applied to Euripides, but its appropriateness or exact meaning is much debated (cf. Mastrorarde 61-62, Marshall 49-54, Micheleni 321-24). In film, melodrama becomes a gesture of tension between the classical plot (driven by character and logic) and the “situational” plot emphasizing happenstance and complex situations unmoored from the inherent logic of the narrative (Brewster & Jacobs 20-24). Such a gesture is arguable for Euripides as well, even if he invents these “situations” rather than drawing on a traditional repertoire.

The argument can also address particular controversies about the play. For example, Orestes’ command to set the house on fire as he holds Hermione at sword-point, *after* Menelaus has apparently capitulated to his demands (1617-20), has struck scholars as completely illogical. It has even been suggested that this is the result of transposition of lines or actors’ interpolations (see Willink 345-47). However, accumulation of crises and suspense-building “deadlines” are typical of the “continuous climax” of the contemporary action film (cf. Bordwell 29). The burning house is an ancient Greek equivalent of the action-movie cliché of the ticking time-bomb, used to add an additional layer of suspense to an already explosive dilemma.

At the end of the paper I offer some brief remarks on Euripides’ lost *Telephus*, a play that was notorious for a scene of hostage-taking (in this case, baby Orestes seized and threatened by

Telephus). In particular, the concept of situational dramaturgy can make sense of how Telephus's violent gesture of hostage-taking can be reconciled with his role as a suppliant (on this problem see Csapo, Heath 275-77, Preiser 89-91).

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