

## Euripides' *Orestes* and the Problem of Food

The disruption of normal patterns of food and drink is a common theme in the later plays of Euripides. In *Electra*, for instance, a family celebration with its attendant rituals is a pretext for matricide, while in *Iphigenia in Tauris* the cultural cleavage between Greek and non-Greek is represented through the threat of human sacrifice, which is itself disrupted. In *Ion*, Xuthus's banquet for the protagonist's integration into Athenian society is based on incomplete information and nearly comes to disaster; in the *Bacchae* the rites of Dionysus devolve into a *sparagmos*.

In *Orestes*, presented in 408 BCE, both the traditional account of the curse on the Tantalids and the idea of eating itself come in for disruption. Electra, in the opening of the play, ties what “they say” (5 λέγουσι) about Tantalus and his “equal status” (8 ἀξίωμα...ἴσον) of the shared table with the gods, and Thyestes’ “unspeakable” deeds (14 τᾶρρητ’), with the fact that Orestes is too sick from his matricide to eat (35-41). In any event, Orestes is an outcast from Argive hearths, and no one consumes food or drink at any point in the play. The timing and role of the chthonic deities, the Eumenides, is also recast. Aeschylus turns the Eumenides into guardians of the earth at the behest of Athena, acting like a gardener (*Eum.* 911 ἀνδρὸς φυτόπιμενος δίκην) after she casts the deciding vote for Orestes’ acquittal. They are already present in Euripides’ play during the young man’s torment (38), an account echoed in the chorus’s moral evaluation of the complete family tree at 807-841.

As we proceed through the play, food-related issues foreground the corruptions of war and its aftermath (re corruption, cf. Wolff, 1968, and Barker, 2017, *inter alios*). Aeschylus’s depiction of Helen as a “two-footed lioness” (δίπους λέαινα) who slays Cassandra in the absence

of a “noble lion” (*Ag.* 1258-9) becomes Euripides’ Δυσελέναν, the lion cub (*Or.* 1385-6) associated with “the two twin Greek lions” (1402), yet all-but-murdered.

In Orestes’ trial at Argos, the only member of the citizenry to overtly support the young man’s defense is a nameless farmer (917-930). The trial in the Argive assembly is emblematic of at least a partial democracy (Morwood, 2009, p. 361; Euben, 1986, p. 234; Tomlinson, 1972, pp. 191-211). We should not overstate the parallelism between Athens and Argos (Barker, 2017, p. 277) or deny the multiplicity of voices in the two debates (Wright, 2008, ch.5). Nevertheless, the “intelligent” (921 ξυνετός) and “guileless” (922 ἀκέραιος) farmer’s willingness to come to grips with the discussions (921 χωρεῖν ὁμόσε τοῖς λόγοις θέλων) ties together the themes of morality, sufficiency, and war-weariness. The messenger’s observation that farmers are the only ones to save the earth (920 αὐτουργός— οἵπερ καὶ μόνοι σώζουσι γῆν) may be taken both politically and literally, given the importance of sustenance in *Orestes*.

Orestes’ deprivation of food and commensality is emblematic of his expulsion from Greek society as a polluted murderer. Because his reintegration is only prophesied, his hunger is a necessary component of the play. It is also fitting that this hunger is represented through its imagery and language. Unlike in many other dramas, the local landscape and topography, which ordinarily remind us of agriculture and food production, are also virtually absent in *Orestes*. Social integration and the lack thereof are portrayed through language, particularly the unsuccessful discourse of philosophy, and the failure of traditional familial, political, and religious institutions. Finally, the loss of commensality in *Orestes* is emblematic of the disruption in the Greek world toward the end of the Peloponnesian War, when Athens, like some other states, could no longer count on its traditional grain suppliers (Moreno, 2007). While the Argive plain may be superior agriculturally to Athenian land and was suitable for irrigation, the

area may not have met the needs of the entire population (Tomlinson, 1972). Seen in this perspective, the unusual outcomes of Orestes' trials in both Argos and Athens are another reminder of the geopolitical disturbances faced by the Greeks in their everyday lives after a generation of warfare (cf. West, 1987, p. 36, and Wright, ch. 5).

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