

What Happened to Euripides? *Iphigenia among the Taurians* and Handel's *Orestes*

G.F. Handel's opera *Orestes* (*Oreste* in Italian) was produced at the Covent Garden Theater in December of 1734. It makes a particularly interesting case study in intertextuality and reception of Classical tragedy in opera. *Oreste* was based on the story in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris* that Iphigenia was not sacrificed, but became a priestess of Artemis in a human sacrifice cult in the Crimea, whence she was rescued from the native tyrant Thoas by Orestes and Pylades. In the opera's version of the story, Hermione, daughter of Helen and Menelaus, also appears on the Taurian shores, searching for her fiancé Orestes. The Taurian story-line thus experiences a kind of *contaminatio* from the story told in the Euripidean *Andromache*, which concluded with the murder of Neoptolemus and the flight of Hermione and Orestes.

Handel's libretto was adapted anonymously from a little-known Italian libretto by Giangualberto Barlocchi that was produced in Rome in 1723. In Handel's London version, explanatory recitative was much shortened and aria texts altered to fit the new context. To provide one striking example, in scene I.5 of the opera, Hermione makes her first entry without introduction, observes that she's in Tauris, wonders where Orestes is, and launches into a lament aria. Pylades enters and asks, "O sorrowing Hermione, will you never cease your weeping?" Why, we may ask, is Hermione there? Where did Pylades come from? Has he been with Orestes? Why does he tell her to stop weeping? This paper will argue that audience ability to make sense of the plot of Handel's opera at moments like this depends less on knowledge of Euripides' play than on a familiarity with Latin sources and contemporary theater.

The popular Brumoy translations of the complete Greek tragedies were the main source of knowledge of Greek tragedy in the 18th century, but these did not begin to appear until 1730, and Euripides' *IT* would have been read by comparatively few people. The story was

nevertheless familiar from more available sources in Latin literature: Ovid *Met.* 12.24-38, *Ep. ex Ponto*, 3.2, and *Trist.* 4.4; Cicero *de Am.* 24; and Hyginus *Fab.* 120-21. These sources emphasize the faithful male friendship of Orestes and Pylades displayed in Euripides' recognition scene. References in the English press dependent on this Latin tradition show a shift in the story's emphasis. The rescue of the statue of Artemis and the reunion of the Atreid siblings in Euripides gives way to a moral tale of the faithful and self-sacrificing friendship between Orestes and Pylades. The change in emphasis was absorbed in encyclopedic works like those of Pierre Gautruche's *Poetical History*, (ed. 6, 1693: 231-33), which also observes that "[Orestes] afterwards married Hermione, the daughter of Helena for whom he stabb'd Pyrrhus, the son of Achilles, who had taken her by force. He was afterwards a very happy prince, and succeeded his father in the government of the kingdom of Argos."

These elements became part of the spoken and sung presentations of the story on the London stage. As Hall and MacIntosh (*Greek Tragedy and the British Theater*, 2005) and Hall (*Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris*, 2013) have shown, Handel's was among several Iphigenia dramas in late 17th- and early 18th-century London. Handel's audience might most recently have attended Lewis Theobald's *Orestes* in 1731, a burlesque adaptation of *IT* with music and dance that included Circe as Thoas' mistress. Even more influential in making the characters familiar was Ambrose Philips' *The Distrest Mother*, a much-revived English adaptation of Racine's *Andromaque*, which featured Orestes and Hermione as maddened and compromised figures.

This paper argues that Handel played a complicated intertextual game with his audience using the shared cultural knowledge summarized above. By depending upon what his audience knew from the popular press and London stage, Handel let his auditors fill in the blanks caused by the curtailed recitative and unexplained entrances. Through his music he then provided his

own ways to view the characters and events, perspectives that might agree with or violate expectations previously created by the dramas of Theobald and especially Philips.

If this is true, then Euripides' Greek play all but vanishes. The title, subject matter, and characters lend a sense of legitimization to the opera with an appeal to Greek precedent, but not much else. What dominates the opera is the Latin tradition received by French tragedy, then reinterpreted for English drama, and finally reinterpreted again by Handel in an Italian *opera seria* crafted for London. A Baroque operatic technique of turning away from the Greek tragedy stands in contrast with the romantic operas discussed in this panel, *Norma* and *Don Carlo*, in which non-Greek subjects have direct and formative links to Greek tragedy.