

And Who Is My *philos*? Redefining Friendship in Euripides' *Orestes*

Trouble among *philo*i is common in tragedy (Ar. *Poet.* 1453b), and many scholars have noted that *philia* plays a particularly significant role in the tragedies of Euripides, with special attention paid to the *Medea* (Schein 1990), *Electra* (Konstan 1985), and *Iphigenia Aulidensis* (McDonald 1990). Others have observed, in the process of making other points about the play, that *philia* is a major theme in the *Orestes* (Rawson 1972, Hartigan 1987, Zeitlin 2003). Nevertheless, there has not yet been a full study of how this play explores relationships between *philo*i. This paper considers how the title character in the *Orestes* comes to define *philia*, emphasizing shared suffering rather than shared blood. Having found Pylades more loyal than Menelaus, Orestes announces that “a man who fuses with your character, though a foreigner, is a better friend for a man to have than countless relatives” (ἀνὴρ ὅστις τρόποισι συντακῆ, θυραῖος ὄν / μυρίων κρείσσων ὁμαίμων ἀνδρὶ κεκτῆσθαι φίλος” 805-6). Words with συν- prefixes, such as συντακῆ, are statistically more common in this play than in others by Euripides, a detail which I argue points to the definition of friendship that emerges in this play, which depends on friends sharing one another’s troubles.

This definition of *philia* has a dark side, however. Pylades frames the plot to murder Helen and Hermione as a last-ditch attempt to *make* Menelaus share in Orestes and Electra’s troubles after their uncle hesitates to help them: “Since we will die, let’s come to a shared plan for how Menelaus might suffer along with us” (ἐπεὶ δὲ καθθανούμεθ’, ἐς κοινούς λόγους / ἔλθωμεν, ὡς ἂν Μενέλεως συνδυστυχῆι, 1098-9). For Orestes, Pylades, and Electra, *philia* becomes a pretext for violence and destruction. “Again and again in Euripides’ plays,” observes McDonald 1990, “friendship shows man's superiority to the gods and the way that he can survive

in a hostile universe.” In the *Orestes*, however, this is not the case; here a god must intervene to set things right. Apollo never uses forms of *philos*, nor does he apply any verbs with συν- prefixes to mortal characters, focusing instead on family, marriage, and politics as the appropriate channels for restoring order.

This paper suggests that Orestes’ approach represents one extreme logical end of a distinctly tragic form of *philia*. Aristotle, too, relies heavily on words with συν- prefixes in theorizing *philia*, but whereas he focuses on more everyday ways of spending time together, Orestes emphasizes actions like συνδυστυχέω (to be unfortunate together) and συνθνήσκω (to die together). To some extent, the form of tragedy—the compressed timeline, the dire circumstances—necessitates that friendship be more urgent onstage than in philosophical treatises. Whereas some other tragedies posit that this intense friendship can be redemptive and productive, however, the *Orestes* paints a picture of *philia* as a destructive force. Reciprocity is central to many Greek considerations of friendship, including Plato’s and Aristotle’s, but here Euripides asks what reciprocity truly means in the midst of suffering. By examining this disastrous breakdown of tragic *philia*, this paper contributes to the ongoing conversation about the *Orestes*, which scholars have characterized as exploring the failure of such significant concepts and institutions as reason (Porter 1994), wisdom (Greenberg 1962), democracy (Mastrorarde 2010), and—on a metatextual level—tragedy itself, at least in its traditional form (Zeitlin 2003). Not only does a full consideration of the play’s treatment of relationships between *philoï* help us better understand the *Orestes* as a text, but it also widens our view of how fifth-century Athenians theorized friendship.

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