

## Orestes' *Mania*: Euripides', Mee's and Bogart's Apocalyptic Vision

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In the *Phaedrus*, Plato shows that *mania* can be destructive, but also that it can be creative. It can lead to egocentric isolation or social integration. Plato, through his *persona* Socrates, talks about the *mania* of love both negatively and positively. The jealous drive for possession can easily crush the love object, or it can lead to the perception of the good and the beautiful, which he claims is the ultimate end of life (*Phaedrus* 244a ff.). There is a human madness, which is mostly harmful, and a divine madness, which is fourfold (265a ff.) and beneficial: first, the *mania* of Apollo, i.e., of a prophet; second, the *mania* of Dionysus, a cult *mania*, that of the mystic that in traditional depictions of Orestes ultimately leads to the expiation of his guilt and thus purification (244e); third, the *mania* of the artist, or the creator, which is associated with the Muses; and, fourth, the ultimate *mania*, the love of what is everlasting, the love of truth and beauty: The ultimate lover is the philosopher, and this lover is subject to *Eros* and *Aphrodite*. The praise of this last *mania* continues in Plato's *Symposium*, where the end is also beauty/good (τὸ καλόν). Plato takes traditional myths and concepts of *mania* and links them to his philosophy. Plato's conception of *mania* helps us understand Euripides' work by contrast: *Orestes* shows how *mania* unhooked from the gods and from idealism can create the ultimate nightmare. It is human, all too human.

Euripides' play was written during the final years of the Peloponnesian War, and the violence of the period was well described by Thucydides in his account of the war: "A man thought more of avenging an injury than of having no injury to avenge" (3. 82). Madness became a way of life. Euripides in his *Orestes* shows a breakdown of the values that Plato's Socrates praised. Modern scholars like M. L. West may count the exciting action as more important than the ethical issues, but perhaps one should be conscious of just such issues.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the Gulf War was seen as an

<sup>1</sup> *Euripides. Orestes*, ed. with trans. and comm. by M. L. West, in *The Plays of Euripides*, ed. by C. Collard (Warminster 1987). West claims that Euripides "was writing for a theatre audience whose emotions he had enlisted on Orestes' side. What does the academic critic think that Orestes and Electra ought to have done? Taken their medicine like sportsmen . . . ?

exciting video event in which we sanitized our "hits" to illustrate our technological prowess, but the victims remained unseen.

Euripides' brilliant play, which is a living nightmare, defines the first instance (395–96) of conscience as a disease of the mind (neurosis?):

Menelaus: What ails you? What disease assails you?

Orestes: My conscience (σύνεσις). That *I know* (σύννοια) what terrible things I have done.

This is *mania* without the divine component, the *Eumenides* of the mind. At least this Orestes is aware that he has done wrong, but it sounds somewhat like the whining of a spoiled child. By the end of the play he seems to have forgotten even that, or at least by then it does not matter.

"It's a nightmare, really." Characters intone this phrase several times during Chuck Mee's reenactment of Euripides' *Orestes*. Mee's version illustrates the chaos of modern times by way of the ancient Greek myth. Anne Bogart's brilliant direction of Chuck Mee's play in Saratoga, Fall 1992, breaks the barriers between stage and audience: Actors and actresses freely walk in the audience area. Past violence mingles with present violence and the stage shows us victims of the Persian Gulf War in a hospital set in front of the White House. Orestes is one of the victims, and we see how suffering brutalizes. He victimizes others by the end of the play, and we see that such role-reversals are merely based on opportunity. Iraq, Bosnia, Somalia and Los Angeles come to mind, and the generalizations of Greek tragedy are often more revealing than the particulars from the six o'clock news.

Chuck Mee vividly replicates the chaos of the ancient world by drawing parallels with the modern world. He also speaks in brutally explicit language, the language of *Godfather* and *Terminator* rather than media-speak. He has made Euripides into Seneca, a drama which shocks, criticizes, rehearses trauma in a cathartic way, and keeps one riveted to the seat while delivering savage and yet satisfying blows. The nightmare is made flesh.

His drama has had two stagings before Bogart's, one by Tina Landau and another by Robert Woodruff, both early in 1992. Woodruff replicated the chaos manifested by the words and the audience had to follow multiple actions at once. The rain scene from Götz Friedrich's production of Richard Strauss' *Elektra*, in which Elektra danced herself to death, was seen at the back of the stage while other actions were going on in at least four different places on stage. The violently explicit text was expanded by the visual to

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But what a lame play that would have made . . ." (37). For a mixed view of Orestes and his actions, see C. W. Willink, *Euripides. Orestes* (Oxford 1986). D. Sansone in his review of both West's and Willink's editions of the *Orestes* quotes them to illustrate how they "avoid profound literary reflection" (Willink: "*Orestes* is a play to be enjoyed," West: "it is first-rate theatre, a rattling good play"), *CP* 85 (1990) 67.

include an anal violation of Pylades by Electra wearing a dildo. The whole work concluded with Apollo talking from multiple TV screens. People enter and leave and then repeat their actions, and loud noises punctuate the action. This production was a symphony of chaos, comparable to Schoenberg's twelve-tone system playing itself out and repeating itself. No eighteenth-century harmony here. The audience was assaulted by images and sound; nothing resembled a linear plot or even Mee's play. By eliminating most of the text, Woodruff achieved the nearly impossible: He made violence boring.

Anne Bogart's production is very different. It allows chaos to appear in a more controlled setting and performance, which makes it even more terrifying by implicating the audience in the brutal message. The audience is rarely required to sort out multiple texts, except in the trial scene, which because of its rigid formalism shows the failure of the legal process to produce justice. The suggestion seems to be that he who shouts loudest carries the day. At *Orestes* 696–703, we find one of the first instances of comparing the mob's rage to fire. This was what probably happened during meetings in the Athens of Euripides' time. The democratic restoration, following the oligarchic takeover in 411 B.C., was filled with abuses. Orestes also represents the nobility, so there is a fitting parallel in that it is a man of the people who secures his condemnation. Orestes in the play shows that mob violence can be practiced on the aristocratic scale: All he needed was a few friends to wreak havoc. References to the William Kennedy Smith trial are clear. We hear about Orestes' careless brutalities and rapes, and a modern context is suggested. Another modern parallel during the trial scene is reference to the Clarence Thomas–Anita Hill proceedings: “Well, somebody put pubic hair on my coke can.”<sup>2</sup> This absurdity is an apt illustration of modern insanities, how the private intrudes on the public sphere.

The set in the Saratoga production (Fall 1992) is simple, suggesting a hospital, with a long diagonal pipe set against a rather dismal green wall. Beds are swung around the stage, and props are provided as necessary (e.g., large pan to bathe Orestes, long table for the trial scene, table for the nurses as they play cards). The items on the set seem as disposable as the human beings.

Chuck Mee has brought the ancient myth into modern times, against a backdrop of war and its idiocies. The characters are seen as patients, interacting with a staff of nurses. Some characters are added and we are jarred by their modern names. A general comes and goes (Menelaus); we are told he is seeking a political position (to rule in Sparta) which he will hardly compromise by defending his unpopular nephew. We also see Electra, Helen and a literal doll of a Hermione. Electra and Helen are

<sup>2</sup> Charles L. Mee, Jr., unpublished script of *Orestes*, used in Saratoga production, 1992, p. 40.

dressed in Armani and Chanel, and Helen speaks of her cosmetic preparations for the day. Pylades joins this yuppie crowd in dress and morality. He is definitely upwardly mobile, willing to do anything, including murder, to get what he wants. These characters are seen as the nasty business that other scholars have noted as characterizing the Euripidean original.<sup>3</sup> Mee allows for the possibility that all the characters coming and going are hallucinations.

In the Euripidean original Pylades comes up with the idea of murdering Helen (just for the fun of vengeance) and, when Electra suggests taking Hermione hostage, she is complimented for "thinking like a man" (*Or.* 1204), an ominous compliment since her mother was also said to have "a heart which thinks like a man" (ἀνδρόβουλον κέαρ, Aesch. *Ag.* 11); Electra certainly carried on the murderous tradition and is continuing to plot, now attacking the innocent (Hermione). Mee has Pylades, instead of Electra, come up with the suggestion of taking Hermione hostage. Euripides gives a simple twist to the basic story of Electra and Orestes killing their mother in retribution for Clytemnestra's killing her husband and their father; now he shows Orestes, Electra and Pylades prepared to kill gratuitously, simply so that Menelaus will suffer the way they are suffering. After they have decided to act, they become hyped by the realization that they have reached the point of no return; like Thelma and Louise, or Michael Douglas' character in *Falling Down*, they relish their extraordinary power and freedom even more because they cannot retreat.

Orestes, in a wonderful perversion of the notion that friendship might be based on ethics, greets Pylades' suggestion of the murder of Helen with the comment that "nothing is greater than a true friend, neither wealth nor power" (*Or.* 1155-56). The Aristotle of the *Nicomachean Ethics* would shudder. The best friendship there is the friendship based on the good (over friendship for pleasure or utility) and just as Plato's view of beneficial *mania* is perverted in this play, so is beneficial friendship. Friendship here is just an alliance of thugs, comparable both to the nobles that Athens saw in

<sup>3</sup> West (above, note 1) 32 cites one of the earliest ("an ancient critic in one of the Hypotheses prefixed to the text"): "The play is one of those that enjoy success on the stage, but its ethics are dreadful: apart from Pylades everyone is bad." One wonders how this critic could exempt Pylades, who suggests murdering Helen. Does adultery merit capital punishment? Obviously this critic did not take Helen's defense in Euripides' *Trojan Women* seriously, nor other apologies, such as those put forward by the sophist Gorgias in his encomium of Helen in H. Diels and W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* II (Zurich 1969) 288-94. See also W. Burkert, "Die Absurdität der Gewalt und das Ende der Tragödie: Euripides' *Orestes*," *Antike und Abendland* 20 (1974) 97-109, and W. Arrowsmith's introduction in *Euripides* IV, ed. by D. Grene and R. Lattimore (Chicago 1958) 110: "The resolution . . . is so designed as to be merely an apparent resolution . . . The nightmare survives the magic." See also E. Rawson, who characterizes the play as "primarily an ironic and deeply unheroic commentary on the story of Orestes," who shows symptoms "of folie à trois which he shares with his two allies," "Aspects of Euripides' *Orestes*," *Arethusa* 5 (1972) 155-56.

power in 411 and to the Cleophras that succeeded them. One thinks again of Thucydides: "Even kinship became less close than comradeship because of the latter's greater readiness for daring without justification" (3. 82). Euripides' Orestes advises one to get friends, not only relatives, and quotes a proverb: "Better than ten thousand relatives is a friend who has melded himself to you by his ways" (*Or.* 804–06). Euripides shows these friends practicing the popular Hellenic idea, "Help your friends, harm your enemies," which beginning with Homer was finally corrected by Plato in the *Republic*.<sup>4</sup>

This is a myth for our time, showing us the *mania* of violence. Mee adds various characters to the play. John and William are both war victims who are haunted by the violence of their past, and Nod is one who still revels in it. There is a man whose mouth is taped, but untaped at intervals. He goes into the history of violence, beginning with Homer, ending with the messages of war written into the bodies of moderns. This character is eliminated: killed on stage, typically by Nod. He functions rather like Tiresias, a prophet who not only tells of the disasters of the future, but who shows their intimate connection with the past. He has the only poetic and hopeful lines in the text, reflecting the beneficial poetic *mania* discussed earlier: "The imagination is less a separate faculty than a quality of all our mental faculties. . . It generalizes our ideas by tracing a penumbra of remembered or intimated possibility around present or past settlements. . . By all these means it undermines the identification of the actual with the possible."<sup>5</sup> He speaks of a way of making a better future, an ethical revolution. He must be silenced.

Orestes and Pylades are clear yuppies. Orestes' vulnerability is conveyed not only through the ancient text, which showed him as a haunted neurotic, too willing to follow his criminal friends, but it is also conveyed by costuming and actions. Orestes is bathed on stage, which can remind one of rituals to prepare a victim. Then his hospital gown is exchanged for a suit (Agnes B. conservative), which functions as a double type of costume (in the play we are watching, and for Orestes as he goes to the "play" of his trial). When he hears the verdict he urinates on the stage, flooding it with his fear. Bogart has him assume a fetal position and suck his thumb. His hallucinations range from killing a date to killing his mother.

Electra's only saving grace is her loyalty to Orestes; she also discourses on the advantages of euthanasia, prostitution and terrorism with a frightening detachment. Her social ideology is typical of the armchair liberal. Although one might agree with her arguments, we have to see her comments in the context of her final actions (attempted murder, arson, kidnapping, etc.). Helen is the vain and silly creature she was in Euripides,

<sup>4</sup> See a summary and discussion of this maxim's use in M. W. Blundell, *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics* (Cambridge 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Mee (above, note 2) 45.

without a clue. Hermione in this production is even without life (she first appears as a doll on a tricycle).

Tyndareus is the legalistic pedant as in Euripides. He discourses further on language, so the letter of the law is seen as merely letter in this drama. We agree with what Tyndareus says: "And yet, one can commit murder and find the words to justify it. This is your sort of civilization, then, it speaks nicely and behaves barbarously."<sup>6</sup> It is a telling commentary on our times. Tyndareus is another prophet who comes and goes and effects nothing. The guilty verdict merely coincides with his wishes; it is not based on the points he made. This is now a world of chance and Tyndareus is an anachronism (*The Oresteia* has become *Orestes*, the general becomes all too particular). In Suzuki's *Clytemnestra*, Tyndareus appeared dressed in Meiji costume, in contrast to Orestes and Electra clad in modern shorts.

The Phrygian slave is still here, to allow Orestes a moment of brutal mental torture such as he displayed in the original. Now, as then, Orestes is the imperialist master, taunting the slave with the servility which is a means for the slave's survival. Athens' own prosperity was based on a society of slaves; Euripides' conscience routinely endorsed the underdog, whether woman, child, or slave, and this hardly won him prizes in Athens (only four compared with twenty-four and thirteen for Sophocles and Aeschylus, respectively).

In addition to the other characters who have been added, there is Farley the astrologer, the nurses, a radio voice (that announces the arrival of Menelaus) and a doctor who begins the play with a recitation of facts from an autopsy on a murdered woman. Clytemnestra has been reduced to a body with "no abdominal abnormalities or complications of the genitourinary system."<sup>7</sup>

Nurses, dressed in black, are benign furies. They discuss their love-life as Orestes' trial is going on. The personal is played against the public and neither is given priority. This seems to be a world without values and a world with no emotion. Bogart was influenced by Ken Kesey's depiction of Nurse Ratched, the Big Nurse in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Bogart duplicates the underlying current of sadism in the actions of the nurses. In both the novel and this play the nurses' reaction to minor infractions of their rules is to administer a sedative. Control is more important than cure, something our society learned early on.

The other stand-ins for the furies are Orestes' companions in the hospital:

Nod: Sluts.

Menelaus: What's this?

John: The sluts!

<sup>6</sup> Mee (above, note 2) 24.

<sup>7</sup> Mee (above, note 2) 2.

Menelaus: Who are these people?

Orestes: These are my fellows. You may speak in front of them just as you would speak to me in private.

Menelaus: So these Furies pursue you.<sup>8</sup>

These furies have their own nightmares from the tortures they have inflicted, and the tortures they have suffered. There is not only the public pain they have inflicted and suffered in the context of war and politics, but also the personal ones from madness and vengeance. John killed his sister, her husband and his nephew. Orestes killed his date. Nod tells us of the serial murderer who collected various female parts, including peeled skin that he could wear. We are back in modern times with memories of Jeffrey Dahmer and *Silence of the Lambs*, another topical drama of modern violence.

From the horror of pain, we fly into the narcotic illusion of the gods: the television talk show. Apollo comes on with a microphone like a game-show host to sort out who wins what. The prizes are as hollow and ephemeral as his own appearance. Bogart shows him as an electric robot whose batteries run down. He is carried off stage. Mee gives the following stage instructions: "Apollo's voice continues to be miked so that he can speak very quietly, Reagan-like, and his voice still fills the theatre."<sup>9</sup> The artifice that controls our life is revealed to be as hollow as the blustering Wizard of Oz. Only that nightmare ended, ours does not.

We see we are still in the hospital and what we have just seen was merely an interlude. Perhaps the whole play was a TV sit-com by Euripides. Bogart has done comparable framings, such as *On the Town* being staged as a diversion for sailors on an aircraft carrier, to allay their fears as they sail to war, or *South Pacific* staged in a rehabilitation clinic.

The play ends with William musing, "Every man must shout: 'There's a great destructive work to be done. We're doing it'." The brutalized has learned the lesson: "What we need now are some strong, straightforward actions that you'd have to be a fool not to learn the wrong lessons from it." This is nightmare and criminal *mania* urged as sane practice. The nurse urges sleep, claiming, "We're finished." William says, "Thank you."<sup>10</sup> This is the sleep of death, and at this point we can be thankful for death, if life is really like what we have just seen. Euripides ended this play with a prayer to Nike, victory, an ostensible plea for his play to win a prize. Yet his victory is as ironic as William's sleep. It anticipates the hollow victory of the Peloponnesian War, and all the victories that Euripides had witnessed, victories which are generally indictments of the victors.

Euripides has been called the greatest anti-war playwright, just as Aristotle called him the most tragic of the poets (τραγικώτατος, *Poetics*

<sup>8</sup> Mee (above, note 2) 21.

<sup>9</sup> Mee (above, note 2) 62.

<sup>10</sup> Mee (above, note 2) 65.

1453a). In play after play he has taught the lesson of the sufferer turning into the one who inflicts suffering (Medea, Hecuba, even Dionysus in the *Bacchae*). And *Orestes* shows three criminals gratuitously committing crimes just to make someone else suffer along with themselves. This is brutalizing suffering carried to the stage of absurdity. This is suffering carried into modern times. Perverted *φιλία* seems to be at the basis of the political world Euripides saw and which he portrayed in this play.

All of Chuck Mee's plays speak of pain and suffering. This play seems to make a fetish of violence, both mental and physical. It speaks of the violence that has engraved its message on the mind. We feel brutalized after seeing this and being assaulted by the language. But how can we be less assaulted by the daily news? The exponential damage our technology can effect in modern times is translated into this drama of modern victims turning victimizers.

Mee has taken the domestic violence of Greek myth and tragedy and put it in a context of collective, political atrocities, so that matricide, which traditionally has shocked us, seems tame by comparison. This shows us how far we have come.

Just as *mania* was rated and classified in Plato's *Phaedrus*, as we have mentioned, so also violence can be classified in this drama. There is divinely ordained violence, which we can attribute to Aeschylus and Sophocles, and which Euripides plays against. In having Orestes doubt the existence of Apollo, and thinking that this violence could have been a demon of his own brain (*Or.* 1168–69), Euripides takes a giant step away from the other playwrights with his making the idea of neurosis explicit.<sup>11</sup> The squalor of domestic crime is another category. Then there are the mass murders and political crimes that various characters represent. The final category is murder for the sake of murder, on both the individual and mass basis. Our categories proceed from the particular to the general, and from ethical to random killings. Perhaps we can see ethical killing as divinely inspired *mania*, and random killing as all too human. Or perhaps we can see ethical killing as an oxymoron. I think this is Mee's intent. He shows that institutionalized violence such as the Persian Gulf War and the torture of political prisoners worldwide is also not to be explained away with a simple, "My superiors made me do it." Does man like to torture, maim and rape? Recent events in Waco, Texas, illustrate the mad violence which has become a daily occurrence in our modern world. Mee confronts us and urges us to raise questions.

<sup>11</sup> Orestes uses the word *ἀλάστωρ*, which one could argue had an objective existence as a family curse, but the words *δείμα* and *δόξαμι* (1668–69) bring this clearly into the psychological world that has colored this play. Apollo has been made into a neurosis, as conscience was called a disease of the mind (*Or.* 395–96); Electra also says, "you are not sick but you imagine (*δοξάζεις*) yourself sick . . . a curse and weakness for men" (314–15).

The parallel between our modern “authorized” gangsters (soldiers) and Orestes is made problematic; both have committed crimes on orders, and both will be rehabilitated. We cannot share the enthusiasm of those commentators on Euripides who say that our sympathy is with Orestes, and that the dramatic action is what engages our approval. Our sympathy is for us, who live in a world that sanctions these crimes. I claim that Euripides and Mee are showing us a nightmare that will haunt us, not an action-packed thriller to entertain us for a moment and to be forgotten tomorrow.

Anne Bogart’s inspired rendering of both the ancient and the modern text directly implicates us, the audience. She trains her actors and actresses with a rigorous physical program that makes them acutely aware of space, the movement of their bodies and their relation to each other and the audience. As the characters wander in and out of our space we see ourselves as victims like them. The *mania* of ancient times has seeped into the present and we feel that we are in a hospital in front of the White House, listening to our nurses gossip. Have Plato and Aristotle had their mouths bandaged? Perverted *mania* can only be hospitalized, and it is only a matter of time until the inmates burn the hospital, as Orestes burned Menelaus’ palace. Perhaps soon we shall be burned in the fires we now watch.<sup>12</sup>

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