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**ORESTES BY EURIPIDES
AND MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF THRILLERS**

Orestes by Euripides is probably one of the most problematic works of the antique literature. Its problematic nature becomes evident not only in its genres, topics, text, and specific features of heroes, but also in heated debates the interpretation of every part of this text gives rise to in the contemporary scientific literature. In this study, we will concentrate on the genre of the tragedy, which has been debated back since antiquity. We will try to clarify whether it is possible to regard it in the context of modern thrillers.

There were two mutually exclusive attitudes towards *Orestes* in antiquity. On the one hand, *Orestes* is one of the most popular plays among Greek tragedies of the Euripidean and following eras. M. L. West's well-known commentaries present impressive materials to prove this.¹ The play was quite popular also in the Roman and Byzantine eras.²

On the other hand, commentators of the antique era and authors of scholia and hypotheses are not so benevolent regarding the tragedy. This seems to be a result of direct influence of Aristotle, whose works contain numerous quotations from *Orestes*.³ The philosopher mentions the drama twice in his *Poetics* and in both cases, his critical remarks are linked to

¹ Euripides, *Orestes*, ed. with translation and commentary by M. L. West, Warminster 1987, 28.

² See: Biehl W., Euripides' *Orestes*, Berlin 1965, 108-33. On the popularity of *Orestes* in the Byzantine era and late antiquity see: Euripides *Orestes*, ed. with translation and commentary by M. L. West, Warminster 1987, 33-34.

³ *Poet.*, 1454a 28-29, 1461 b19-21, EN 1169 7.8. (*Or.*; 667), *Mag. Mor.*, 1212 b 27-28, *Rhet.*, 1371 a 26-28, (*Or.*, 234). EE 1235 a 16, EN 1154 b 28-29 1405 b 20-23 (*Or.*, 1587-88). *Rhet.*, 1397 a 19-30. The latter can be a replication of lines 538-539 in *Orestes*.

Menelaus as a hero with an "unjustifiably" bad character.⁴ Aristotle regards the concrete and unchanged nature of characters as a norm for genuine tragedies, Aeschylus and Sophocles providing numerous examples to support the assumption. Given this, the inconsistency of Menelaus in *Orestes* was regarded as inappropriate for the standards of the genre.⁵

As said above, commentators of the later period, whose opinions are represented in the scholia and hypotheses of the drama, effectively follow the tradition of Aristotle and his school, focusing on the imperfect nature of the characters. The author of a hypothesis went even farther than Aristotle, noting that all characters except Pylades are inappropriate for a tragedy.⁶

As regards the genre, opinions differ. In his 3rd hypothesis, Thomas Magistrus classifies the tragedy as a tragicomedy. He relies on the authors of old hypotheses, who classified *Orestes* and *Alcestis* as a series of satirical dramas, because at a glance, the text had a happy end. The author of the scholium believes that after the Phrygian slave appears on the scene, the tragedy runs back and the dialogue between them is comic rather than tragic.⁷ The same is true of the end of the drama, which is contrary to the demand that a tragedy should definitely have an unhappy end, as *Poetics* draws a clear line between tragedy and comedy. Aristotle does not deem it possible to allow a precedent of mixing up the two types of information (although, in my opinion, they are not at all mutually exclusive).⁸

For the same reason, commentators of the Hellenistic era removed both plays from the so-called canonical lists of great tragedies. In their opinion, *Orestes* and *Alcestis* were to be represented at theatre festivals as satirical dramas. Philologists of the post-classical era concluded that the genre of *Orestes* is something new. However, they believed that this was indicative of the drama's defects rather than its positive innovative aspects. It is noteworthy that modern researchers have not advanced much in studying problems of genre either. In the 19th c. and the first half of the 20th c., philologists, like commentators of antiquity, were under the

⁴ Arist., *Poet.*, 1454 a 28-29.

⁵ In this connection see: Dale A. M., *Ethos and Dianoia: Character and Thought in Aristotle's Poetics*, AUMLA 11, 1959, 3-16.

⁶ It is noteworthy that the author of the hypothesis uses Aristotle's term φαῦλοι, which denotes a character appropriate to a comedy and is opposite in content to the term σπουδαῖος, which denotes a character appropriate to a tragedy.

⁷ Detailed review of scholia and hypotheses of *Orestes* can be found in: Porter, *Studies in Euripides Orestes*, Leiden 1995, 16-44.

⁸ Porter, *Studies in Euripides Orestes*, Leiden 1994, 15.

influence of Aristotle's views. They were mostly occupied with searching for shortcomings in the plot and concept of the drama.⁹

A new stage in the critical studies of *Orestes* started in the second half of the 20th c. The interest in the drama doubled in the aforementioned period. Fundamental studies by Reinhardt, Greenberg, and Wolf were published in the same period. These works had a major impact on the directions of and methodology for philological research in the tragedy in general. They partially resolved problems arising in the interpretation of the main plots, structure, and content of the text.

However, differences persisted regarding the genre.¹⁰ Everyone agreed that the drama was a metaphoric image that reflected the moral and socio-political problems of Sophist Athens in the late 5th c. It is the culmination of prolonged experiments by Euripides, who tried to adjust form and content. However, it is still debated what the form itself is: a tragicomedy, melodrama, pure tragedy, or thriller. Latacz was the first to point to the possible connection of the genre of *Orestes* with thrillers. The researcher deemed it possible to consider the drama in the context of a thriller.¹¹

To expand on this view, I would like to revert to the popularity of *Orestes* in antiquity. In fact, if not the element of thriller, the play couldn't achieve such level of popularity among the spectators. The genre scheme of character and action developing represents the novelty suggested by Euripides to his audience and much more important is the fact, that his genre novelty was required by the Euripides' audience itself. In fact, this is the classical example of the self-reflective nature of Ancient Greek Theatre. Within the liminal space, theatre always reflects the socio-political perturbations of its era and moral and psychological changes under way within society.¹² Voluntarily or absolutely intuitively, high-class authors offer spectators what the spectators demand from them also absolutely intuitively. Thus, *Orestes* can partially be regarded as a product ordered by the public.

⁹ Porter, *Studies in Euripides Orestes*, Leiden 1994, 17.

¹⁰ See: Vellacott Ph., *Ironic Drama: A study of Euripides' Method and Meaning*, Cambridge University Press 1975. The researcher believes that the drama is full of historic allusions. Lines 1,167-1,171 of the text describe Athens' nostalgic feelings for the heroic era of Pericles. The fatal enmity between Atreus and Thyestes is interpreted as an allegory of the confrontation between Athens and Sparta. This interpretation transforms Helen into beauty, culture, and grace destroyed by war and the grave psychological condition of Orestes reflects the depressive condition of society in general.

¹¹ Latacz J., *Einführung in die Griechische Tragödie*, Gottingen 1993, 382.

¹² Latacz J., *Op. cit.*, 376.

Paradoxically, Athens that was tired of the 20 years of Peloponnesus War wanted to see on the scene a performance, which would constantly keep it in expectation of horror. This is qualitatively the same as taking tragic pleasure in seeing one's own misfortunes on the scene. *Orestes* was popular on the scene on the one hand, due to the coincidence of the emotional conditions of spectators and protagonists, similarity between the situations around them (I mean the post-war periods, which is very difficult for the public to survive psychologically – Athens/Peloponnesus war and *Orestes/Troy* war), the insane aspiration of protagonists to resort to any method to save their own lives, which seems to reflect the pathos of Euripidean era, and on the other hand, due to the spectacular visual side of the drama.

This correspondence with the contemporary era and its so-called "thriller" aesthetics, which emerged due to absolutely concrete causes and did not exclude the text's tragic nature, proved to be completely alien to the opinions on tragedy held by Aeschylus and Sophocles. However, it was something new in genre and content, which remained partially unclear to philologists of antiquity, and is clear and acceptable to us, because there is no difference between the spectators of the Euripidean theatre and spectators of our era as regards world views and tastes. Human beings' natural inclination towards physical or psychological violence and their particular desire to observe violence on the scene and take tragic pleasure from it seems to have been inherited, together with other aesthetic categories, by the modern Western European culture from the antique era. Thrillers have proved to be the best form of showing protagonists' violence against each other and others in the literature and cinema of the 20th century.

It is quite difficult to describe thrillers within one framework of definitions. This genre is at the same time complex and devoid of any structural or stereotype frames, which provide authors with major opportunities of improvisation. It comprises both written and modern audiovisual texts. It can be defined as the unity of certain features. The most important feature of them is to give spectators the feeling of horror, constant tension, uncertainty, fear, and expectation while the story unfolds. This is achieved by means of the quick alternations and completely unexpected turnarounds of events.

Crime, murders, revenge, political conspiracies, psychological anomalies, paranoia and so forth are the main themes in thrillers. Thrillers were probably most perfectly represented in cinematography. Although the list of novelists, who worked in this genre, is quite long, Alfred Hitchcock's

films are believed to be classical examples of thrillers, as they served as models for filmmakers of the following generation such as Martin Scorsese, David Lynch, David Cronenberg, Dario Argento, Darren Aranofsky and others, who created very high-class thriller films. It is also noteworthy that one of the most high-profile films of Hitchcock – *Psycho* – is a very interesting interpretation of the Orestes story.

Greek mythology and specifically the final episode in the story of Pelopides is an excellent material for a classical thriller. The Orestes story provides an opportunity for the artistic interpretation of crime and violence as independent socio-political and psychological phenomena, while crime and psychological anomalies are major components that bring closer the Euripides theatre and the concept of modern thrillers.

I think that it would be most appropriate to study *Orestes* in its juxtaposition with psychological and criminal thrillers, which are one of the quite numerous subgroups in the genre. So what is a psychological thriller? Conflicts between protagonists in these types of narratives are rather mental and emotional in nature rather than physical. Due to absolutely accidental and predetermined circumstances, heroes find themselves in hopeless situations, which they are unable to emerge from independently. Their mind is in the constant process of searching. The search for a way out of the situation that has taken shape and the instinct of self-preservation force them to become oppressors and extremely cruel towards others and even themselves.

Like in case of thrillers in general, we cannot speak about models or patterns of plots in psychological thrillers. The general concept is that the perception of reality, its acceptance and the complicated and contradictory path to self-perception, which often lead protagonists to self-destruction, are coordinating features that unite psychological thrillers in one circle. General standards of thrillers are observed at the level of unfolding events. What is most important, psychological thrillers differ from other sub-genres in one essential feature: the supremacy of action and the nominal nature of characters are reversed in psychological thrillers. Plots are of minor importance in them. Events are to unfold in the stories, because they are to describe the psychological conditions of characters and enable them to show their features. In the meantime, the minor importance of myths is one of the features of Euripides' dramatic vision and *Orestes* is the most prominent work among such tragedies.

The essential Euripidean novelty in the seemingly exhausted Orestes problem lies precisely in the completely new vision of the mental state of the hero. *Orestes* is effectively a tragedy, where everyone and everything –

even the most insignificant detail – runs on one central problem of showing the psychological condition of a desperate person, who killed his mother, and this is achieved due to the events that unfold in an absolutely unexpected and quick manner like in thrillers. If we take a look at the tragedy from this angle, the seemingly chaotic text will become more or less ordered semantically, as Euripides wanted to present the spiritual condition of the protagonist not only statically, but also dynamically.

The change in Orestes' spiritual condition marks the beginning of an essentially new phase of the tragedy. In this case, I share Conacher's theory of dividing the tragedy into three parts: psychological, rhetorical, and "violent", although making the division, researchers mainly rely on elements of the plot rather than the hero's mental state, which prevents them from resolving the problem of inconsistency.¹³ However, if we rely on Orestes' mental state as a criterion, we will see that events unfold in the manner they should unfold in accordance with the rules of thrillers, which, in this case, are very liberal. Visually, they are as unexpected and horrific as possible and, at the same time, absolutely logical and motivated intrinsically.

Two-sided relations between the myth and ethos take shape in the tragedy. On the one hand, the plot is given and Clytemnestra is killed, which makes Orestes such as he is at the start of the drama, but later, the protagonist creates a plot himself. It is this type of relation that should take shape in any text to enable us to consider it as a psychological thriller. *Orestes* is a tragedy about a hero, who feels the crime he has committed to the full extent and makes a certain attempt to perceive this crime in a rational manner. It is not essential for Euripides to clarify whether Apollo's appeal is just or unjust. It is much more important for him to clarify how a person can bear the heavy burden of killing his mother and what changes take place in his mind against this background. Thus, it is possible to say that Euripides is a kind of paradigmatic author not only for the leaders of the post-classical drama, but also representatives of the genre, which is regarded for now as a priority of the 20th c. cinematography.

¹³ Conacher D. J., *Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme and Structure*, Toronto 1967, 234.