MENELAUS AND PELOPS IN EURIPIDES’ ORESTES

BY

POULHERIA KYRIAKOU

There is at least some irony involved in the fact that Euripides’ Orestes, traditionally viewed as a, if not the, most innovative and controversial experiment of the playwright and consequently the extant tragic corpus, can be thought to satisfy Aristotle’s strict and conservative (by modern standards) criteria for the best kind of plot: relatives, φιλοι, harm each other (Poet. 1453b19-1454a15) and a kind of recognition that entails a reversal of fortune takes place (1452a32-b8). Having committed matricide Orestes and Electra expect their uncle Menelaus to defend them before the Argive popular assembly but he refuses because his father-in-law Tyndareus threatens him with expulsion from Sparta if he helps his nephews. Menelaus is thus revealed, or “recognized”, as no φιλος to the siblings and as a consequence their fortune reaches its nadir: they are sentenced to death by the assembly. But from a straightforward Aristotelian point of view the play’s plot cannot be classified among the most successful. Although relatives, Orestes and Menelaus have no affection for each other. The protagonist Orestes does not find out that he harmed a beloved relative himself but that he is forsaken by his relative. No character dies or suffers physical harm although the threat thereof is ever-present throughout the long and tumultuous play. Finally, the reversal of fortune is quickly reversed in a bizarre manner: the newly arrived Pylades, who loyally decides to die along with his friends, proposes to Orestes to kill Helen before they die in order to punish Menelaus. Electra further proposes to capture Hermione as a means of blackmailing Menelaus. Order is restored and reconciliation achieved only with the intervention of Apollo at the end. These qualifications notwithstanding the “serious


and complete” action of the play is taken from the realm of φιλία, family relationships: the “serious and complete” action of the play is Menelaus’ willful rejection of Orestes’ justified plea for help\(^2\) rather than the condemnation of the siblings by the Argive assembly whose decision is almost certain from the outset. As Electra explains in the prologue, Menelaus arrived in Nauplia just in time to save her and Orestes since the assembly would decide on the fate of the matricides later that day (48-70). With no one else to defend or support them and the city manifestly hostile to their cause, Menelaus is the beleaguered siblings’ last hope for survival. During the long opening part of the play (1-355) Menelaus is eagerly anticipated by everyone and his arrival is probably delayed on purpose to build suspense. Since he is Agamemnon’s only surviving male relative to enjoy good fortune, Menelaus is the only one in a position to succour his relatives, or φιλία, in distress thus returning the many favors, or χάρις, his dead brother had generously granted him (243-44; cf. 640-79), even at the expense of his own family.

This is the kind of φιλία and χάρις based on which the two siblings and their friends conceptualize the appropriate attitude that they hope Menelaus will demonstrate toward his dead and surviving relatives\(^3\). It should be noted that Menelaus is not expected to

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2) Even in antiquity the character of Menelaus received the brand of criticism, most famously by Aristotle (Poet. 1454a28-29 and 1461b21). See the discussion of W. Steidle, Studien zum antiken Drama (Munich 1968), 102-05 and more recently L. Cilliers, Menelaus’ “unnecessary baseness of character” in Euripides’ Orestes, AClass 34 (1991), 21-31. Aristotle’s or peripatetic views probably gave rise to criticisms of the play found in the scholia and hypothesis. See J.R. Porter, Studies in Euripides’ Orestes (Leiden 1994), 2-4.