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Euripides and the Decline of Character: A Soap Opera Connection

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EURIPIDES AND THE DECLINE OF CHARACTER: A SOAP OPERA CONNECTION

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To the Greeks of the fifth century, the heroes and heroines of myth, the villains and villainesses—even the sorcerers and monsters—were figures from history, or at least historical legend. Surely the sophisticated Athenian of the fifth century did not believe in a literal interpretation of Scylla and Charybdis any more than we do, nor that Odysseus actually underwent every single setback and adventure retailed in the *Odyssey*. But, just as surely, he believed that there had *been* an Odysseus, just as implicitly as we believe in George Washington or Richard the Lion-Hearted. Unlike us, however, he also had an intimate knowledge of the characters of his myth-history. Whereas not many Americans today could tell you more than three salient facts about the lives of Paul Revere, Benjamin Franklin, or (God forbid!) Charlemagne, virtually every fifth-century Greek would be utterly familiar with most, or at least many, of the details (and variants on each detail) of the lives of Heracles, Agamemnon, and hundreds of others less renowned. Their emotional ties to these heroes were strong, too—partly in the same way as people of all eras feel attached to their best-loved storybook heroes and villains; but an extra dimension is added to their attachment by the fact that, before the Sophistic revolution in thought, traditional Greek education consisted to a great extent of moral admonitions to model one's life on those of the great heroes of myth, on the grounds that Virtue consists, for a boy, in being "like Achilles" or "like Orestes" (as Telemachus is told, early on, in the *Odyssey*) and, for a girl, in being "like Penelope" or "unlike Clytemnestra."

These shared figures of legend became the principal material of fifth-century Greek drama. The tragedians did not originate their characters; they borrowed them from the common pool of Greek mythic memory (and then they put them back in again, altered and increased as they were by the form in which they appeared in each tragedy). They put them on the stage knowing that each member of their audience knew just about as much about them as they did. In some ways, of course, this shared experience was clearly a boon for the dramatist. Not only could he forego filling in burdensome background material, but he could be confident that even his minor allusions would be readily understood.

On the other hand, it is often difficult for modern readers—to whom "originality" in art has become almost the *non plus ultra*—to understand the creative relationship of a playwright to characters who were not of his own making. The answer is, of course, that to a great extent they *were* of his own making; they merely had to be made up within certain prescribed limitations. Achilles cannot survive the Trojan War; Odysseus cannot be dumb; Phaedra cannot live happily ever after as a suburban housewife. But, within the neces-

sary restraints, each playwright creates his own Achilles, Odysseus, or Phaedra, choosing among mythic variants, adding innovative detail, and above all fleshing out the skeletons with personalities, emotions, motivations—all in accordance with his own artistic design.

A Jesse James analogy can capture some of the essentials. It is easy to imagine three separate movies of the bank-robber's life: a standard, romanticizing offering of a Jesse with Robin Hood affinities and a concomitant de-emphasis of actual blood-letting; a more up-to-date psychologizing version in which a basically sympathetic Jesse is seen to have fallen victim to his personal and socio-economic environment; and a third, debunking, graphically "realistic" account, in which a malodorous protagonist with the morals of a snake infects both his own legend and the audience's image of the Old West with grim sordidness. But, while this analogy is a useful one, its message is primarily to the intellect—for there are not many of us who have a true emotional stake in Jesse James—and so it cannot begin to replicate the intensely personal relationship between character and audience in Greek tragedy. And without a feel for the intimacy of that relationship, it is very difficult for a critic to apply to a reading of Greek tragedy one of the most essential tools of literary criticism: i.e., the examination into the ways in which an author exploits the relationship between character and audience, in order to manipulate the audience into seeing through *his* eyes as well as their own, into giving in (if only temporarily) to *his* world-view. That is the purpose of literature. That is why characters are made.

It is in an attempt to help the modern reader of Greek tragedy grasp something of the bipartite relation of the Athenian audience, first to the tragic heroes themselves, then (through them) to the authors of tragedy, that I suggest—with due trepidation—an analogy to soap opera.

The idea of a connection between soap opera and the Classics comes more easily to me, perhaps, than to most people, since it was as a graduate student in the Classics—way back when *One Life to Live* and *General Hospital* were only a half-hour each—that I first succumbed to the Siren lure of the soaps. I have kept up, fitfully, with Victoria Lord Riley Burke Riley Buchanan since that time, and with Steve Hardy and Jessie Brewer too. Sometimes I watch with the fervor of a devotee for a period of weeks, caught by a single particular plot line ("Will Vicky and Joe's kidnapped baby ever be found?"—"Will the evil Heather ever be exposed?"); sometimes I drift for up to a year without a peek; most often I tune in once a month or so, just to keep my hand in. I have stoically endured ridicule and vilification from relatives and colleagues—often the very same relatives and colleagues who greedily rush to view every re-run of *Hogan's Heroes* or *Get Smart* they can squeeze into their schedules but somehow miss the irony in their attacks on my taste.

At any rate, the Soap Opera Connection germinated in my mind a few years back when I began to muse upon the dynamics of personality changes in the soaps and to fantasize of going to New York to interview the authors and producers of *O.L.I.L.* and *G.H.* about their

motivations in either regenerating or degenerating a particular character's persona. For instance, what made them decide to turn charming, aristocratic Allan Quartermaine into a monomaniacal, cold-blooded wife-stalker with murder in his mind? Once they did, did they receive outraged letters from viewers who found this degeneration as repugnant as I did? Is that why (or is there some subtler reason?) he was later regenerated (by a used-to-be-sleazy, turned saccharine-sweet Susan Moore) into a rueful, but again debonair thrall of romance?

Essentially, the analogy which I will assert here is this: different as the two genres are (and let not my assertion of limited similarity obscure my very real appreciation of their manifold dissimilarities), I maintain that in certain ways they create a parallel relationship between character and audience. Both types of drama are aimed at a popular, non-esoteric audience. In both, an intimate and emotional relationship exists between character and audience: the almost innate closeness of the Greek audience to the characters of myth is approximated by the gradual build-up of intense and long-standing loyalties (or antipathies) in the soap opera enthusiast—such that many an off-duty soap actor, encountered in a restaurant or grocery store, has taken upon his or her own person the adoration or vituperation more properly directed to an on-screen persona. By themselves, these two parallels would not mean much, and I would not try to argue a close relation between soap opera and either Aeschylean or Sophoclean dramaturgy. However, three additional points of comparison make it valid to speak of a real parallelism between soap opera and specifically Euripidean tragedy. The first is that, of all the tragedians, Euripides is the one whose plots frequently partake of a melodramatic mode common to soap opera. The second is Euripides' tendency to demythologize his heroes: that is, to reduce them to the level of everyday, unheroic souls like those who people the soaps. The third is that he regularly and consciously exploits the potential of character degeneration as a tool to manipulate his audience's emotions.

Any partisan of soap operas, I should think, can attest to the indignation he or she has felt when an unwelcome change in a character's personality is in process. While miraculous changes for the better (regenerations) may be intellectually and psychologically indefensible, they are, to most people, desirable and therefore acceptable on a suspension-of-disbelief principle. Degenerations, on the other hand, bring out the refractory, the skeptical, and the downright inimical in the audience. I may keep on watching as one of these metamorphoses is foisted upon a well-loved character, but I do so in protest. Sometimes it's just such a change that prompts me to turn off my set for another six months.

For those who do not watch soap operas, I can attempt only a partial analogy to communicate the kind of indignation I am talking about. Try to imagine: how would the fans react if Hogan sold out to Hitler?—If Perry Mason got Della Street pregnant and refused to marry her?—If a wage dispute drove Flo to firebomb Mel's diner, or Mary Tyler Moore abandoned an il-

legitimate child in a garbage dump? Such radical personality changes are, of course, interdict to the sitcom or dramatic series, because they would kill the show (Euripides, by the way, has been accused of "killing" tragedy): how could we face Perry, or he us, the next week? But they are somehow supportable in soap opera, where there is no single protagonist, so that the show does not stand or fall with the fortunes and popularity of one character, and where later, gradual regenerations are possible.

Despite the intense admiration he inspired in some circles, Euripides failed to achieve true popular success in his own day—and I know why. It was, at least partly, because he meddled with people's images of their heroes. Set me in a theater, and I will normally hope for an upbeat ending; that's the way I am. On the other hand, I am broad-minded. I can accept an Albee and his grim view of the human soul—as long as he perpetrates it on characters of his own creation. But let him set his hand to a remake of *Peter Pan*, and he shall have me to deal with. There are some allowances that I will not make, even in the name of art. This sort of radical debunking, along with the effects it produced upon his audience, was a keynote of Euripidean artistry, and that is one reason why his contemporaries could not applaud him without reserve. A few examples will have to suffice.

A mythographical sketch of Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, might inform us that he was taken as a baby from his hometown of Argos at the time when his mother took a lover, Aegisthus. After Aegisthus and Clytemnestra murdered Agamemnon, Orestes grew to manhood in foreign parts; his sister Electra stayed home, an exile within the palace, praying for his return and a delayed vengeance on Aegisthus and her mother. At length, Orestes did return, and, with Electra's support, killed his mother and Aegisthus. The blood guilt of matricide brought down upon him the madness of the Furies, but eventually he was cleansed of that pollution by the Olympians, married his cousin Hermione and (presumably) lived happily ever after.

The previous has been a composite sketch; let us now retrace the same ground with attention to the character of Orestes as offered to us by the particular Greek poets. Until Euripides, they are all favorable characterizations. In the *Odyssey*, Orestes is repeatedly held up as an example of glorious young manhood and just revenge (an example for Telemachus to emulate, for instance). He is never explicitly said to have killed his mother as well as Aegisthus (though she died at the same time as her lover, we are told—without elaboration—at 3.309-10), so that there is no hint of moral ambiguity in his reported actions; nor is there mention of his madness. Orestes' matricide at the end of the *Libation Bearers* of Aeschylus is committed at the solemn behest of the god Apollo and adjudged by both Orestes and the chorus a just, though unhappy, finale. As an additional ratification, the madness visited upon him by the Furies (the traditional instruments of a mother's curse) is lifted from him in the *Eumenides* in a unique trial scene where the Athenian demos sit as jury with Pallas Athene presiding. The Clytemnestra of

Sophocles' *Electra* inspires a fleeting sympathy, as when she reacts to Orestes' falsely-reported death with saddened reflections on mother-love, but the justice of Orestes' cause (again sanctioned by Apollo) is never seriously called in question. The play ends without—or before—the onslaught of madness.

The case is very different in the two plays of Euripides which treat this same portion of the House of Atreus legend. In the *Electra*, both sister and brother have degenerated into warped and pathological Freudian case-studies. Vengeance is wrought with singularly repellent deceit, first on a genial (regenerated) Aegisthus, then on a Clytemnestra whose rueful and resigned solicitude for her rebellious daughter will strike familiar chords in many blue-jeaned daughters of respectable mothers (verses 1102-10, trans. Vermeule, in Grene and Lattimore, 1959):

My child, from birth you always have adored
your father.
This is part of life. Some children always love
the male, some turn more closely to their mother
than him.
I know you and forgive you. I am not so happy
either, child, with what I have done or with
myself.
How poorly you look. Have you not washed?
Your clothes are bad.
...O god, how miserably my plans have all
turned out!
Perhaps I drove my hate too hard against my
husband.

The madness which besets Electra as well as Orestes (a typically Euripidean twist) after their mother's murder clearly comes from *internal* Furies, when they realize abruptly what they have done. As Vermeule has said: "With the confused thinking characteristic of obsessive neurotics, they believe that killing their mother will somehow make her love them again, so that they can settle down and be happy. Their surprise at the results is more disturbing than their pain" (in Grene and Lattimore, 1959, 4-5). Euripides' inversion of the myth's traditional "moral" is complete: the simple justice of vengeance for a father's murder is lost in the face of the neurotic confusion of Electra's and Orestes' motives. And, in sharp contrast with Aeschylus' upbeat ending, Euripides' version ends with an indictment not only of the "heroes," but of their sanctioning god as well: "As for Phoebus, Phoebus—yet he is my lord, / silence. He knows the truth but his oracles were lies" (1244-46, Vermeule).

Euripides' *Electra* is outdone by his *Orestes*, a play of "howling spiritual lunacy" (see Arrowsmith, in Grene and Lattimore, 1958, 106), one of the playwright's latest plays and perhaps his most nihilistic. In a bitterly ironic inversion of the trial scene in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, Orestes and Electra are tried for murder by the Argives, found palpably guilty and sentenced to death. Thereupon, in a bizarre and grotesque attempt to escape execution of their sentence, they set murderously upon Helen, take their cousin Hermione hostage to win themselves safe passage from the country, and prepare to torch the ancestral palace of Atreus. This

grim tangle of events can only be unravelled by the intervention of a *deus ex machina*, whose task is—in effect—to tell the players to reassume the orderly progression of traditional mythological history. His bland assertion of a happy ending might satisfy a Peter-Pan-inclined audience for the moment, but creeping suspicions of its plausibility were bound to afflict them later.

How often does this sort of degeneration occur in Euripidean drama? His *Medea* was probably the first in mythographical history deliberately to murder her own children; she plays opposite an opportunistic and sophisticated Jason. The Phaedra of his first *Hippolytus* was so utterly morally repellent that negative audience reaction apparently goaded him into writing a less extreme second version (our extant play). His Pentheus is a timeless stereotype of machismo, but with a warped overlay of proclivities to Peeping Tom-ism and cross-dressing. By an outlandish reshuffling of the mythic traditions, the Orestes of his *Andromache* only wins his destined bride Hermione by ambushing her first husband, Neoptolemus—after Hermione herself has come within an inch of perpetrating the vicious and unwarranted execution of an enslaved Andromache. Other examples abound.

Sophocles was not a total stranger, at least in his late plays, to the technique of consciously debasing a mythic character. The Odysseus of his *Philoctetes* is as degenerate as any of Euripides' heroes, and the Creon of his *Oedipus at Colonus* is clearly a worse villain than his earlier characterizations in *Antigone* or *Oedipus the King*. In each of these cases, however, the degenerated character is placed in confrontation with a stalwart embodiment of old-fashioned virtue (Neoptolemus, Theseus), and it is the latter cause which wins. The overall effect is the polar opposite of the moral chaos which affects the end of Euripides' *Electra* and *Orestes*.

What was the Athenian populace to think of this moral chaos and of Euripides' demythologized, utterly degenerated "heroes"? It is my contention that something of their repulsion can be replicated by the reader who, as a soap opera fan, has been forced to witness the degeneration of—if not a hero—at least a well-liked, congenial character. The sense of loss, the moral repugnance, the outrage: these all arise, as they must have in Euripides' audience, from the viewer's ingrained reluctance to abandon the sanguine certainty of his own set assessment of a familiar personality and, concomitantly, from his indignant resistance to being manipulated by the author into acceptance, willy-nilly, of a world-view which asserts that the loveable can become unloveable and the good bad, or—even more essentially—that the seemingly true can prove false. The plight of the Euripidean audience, on the other hand, must be considered worse, for these newly degenerate characters were not only beloved fictional friends (as soap opera characters are) but also the staples of the Greeks' early history and their prime educational models.

The phenomenon, or technique, of purposeful character degeneration is, then, common to Euripides and soap opera. But there the analogy must end, for I have no intention of equating the two genres in respect to the profundity of the issues treated on stage, to

merit, or to artistic motivation. In fact, I will not venture to inquire into the motivation of the soap opera creators at all. I have never taken my fantasized trip to New York, so I have never asked them, and I hesitate to apply my critical skills to authors who can talk back and whose strivings must be largely to keep their audience on the hook through future weeks. As to content and merit, soap operas, while both addictive and well acted, clearly are satisfied to concern themselves with the mundane affairs of daily living and do not strive for the status of high art.

Euripides, on the other hand, was one of the great dramatists, dealing in his plays with questions which cut to the essence of the human condition. His conscious degeneration of mythic characters is but one of a multitude of recurrent techniques contributing to his dramatic voice; it is one means by which he aimed to engender in his audience a sense of profound unease, unrest, and uncertainty. His purpose in this endeavor was to communicate his own vivid perception of the dark and creepy possibilities lurking in the human soul, to challenge his audience's complacencies, to twist and turn them away from their own view of the world and toward his. It was not a gentle process. His audience's reaction to these grim and unorthodox plays must—at least at times—have been to want to swat this irritating poetic horsefly, so they could round out their days in a state of undisturbed mental and moral slumber.

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- Grene, David, and Richmond Lattimore, eds. *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Euripides V*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1959.



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AMERICAN PHILOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION: GREEK AND LATIN TEXTBOOK SURVEY

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In spring, 1982, the American Philological Association (APA) Editorial Board for Textbooks undertook a survey, the purposes of which were (1) to determine what textbooks were being used in Greek and Latin courses at all levels in the colleges and universities, (2) to elicit comments on the format and quality of textbooks currently in print, (3) to collect information on problems encountered in ordering textbooks that are listed as currently available, and (4) to solicit suggestions of textbooks that should be reprinted and of new textbooks that are desired. About 1,500 questionnaires were sent to chairmen of departments of Classics in the United States and Canada; 120 were returned. The following summary is based on that small sampling, but there is sufficient consistency among the responses to suggest that the findings reported here are fairly representative; for the sake of convenience, the present tense is used throughout.

Textbooks Currently in Use

Twenty-three different textbooks are cited as being used in elementary Greek courses. *Reading Greek*, the course sponsored by the Joint Association of Classical Teachers (JACT) and published by Cambridge University Press, appears to be the most widely employed, being cited 34 times. Chase and Phillips, *A New Introduction to Greek* (Harvard) is cited 18 times; Crosby and Schaeffer, *An Introduction to Greek* (Allyn and Bacon), 17 times; Luschnig, *An Introduction to Ancient Greek* (Scribners), 14 times. These are the clear leaders in the field; most of the other textbooks are cited as being used at only one of the responding institutions.

At the intermediate level in Greek, 55 different books are cited. Plato's *Apology* and Homer's *Iliad* are the most widely read texts, both being cited at 28 institutions. Next comes the *Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies), cited at 18 institutions. For the *Iliad*, Benner's *Selections from Homer's Iliad* (Irvington) is cited at 22 institutions. Dyer and Seymour's *Plato: Apology and Crito* (Caratzas) is cited at 14. Barbour's *Selections from Herodotus* (Oklahoma) is used at 9 institutions; Mather and Hewitt's *Xenophon's Anabasis: Books I-IV* (Oklahoma), at 8. Burnet's edition of Plato's *Euthyphro, Apology, and Crito* (Oxford) is also employed at 8 institutions. The JACT intermediate materials titled *A World of Heroes* and *The Intellectual Revolution* (Cambridge) are used much less widely than the beginning JACT materials, being cited at 7 and 6 institutions respectively. Stanford's *Odyssey* (St. Martin's) is read at 5 of the responding institutions.

At the advanced undergraduate and graduate levels