

UC Berkeley

Cabinet of the Muses: Rosenmeyer Festschrift

Title

Euripides and Apatê

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1wj8j0n9>

Author

Scodel, Ruth

Publication Date

1990-04-01

Peer reviewed

EURIPIDES AND *APATĒ*

Ruth Scodel

The University of Michigan



According to Aristotle's *Poetics* 51a36-38, the poet's business is the kind of thing that could happen and is possible according to probability and necessity, and the poets mostly use the traditional stories because what has happened is possible and therefore credible. Everything in the plot, and the actions of the characters, should be necessary or probable, but credibility is everything: it is better to have plausible impossibilities than actions which are possible, yet not believable. And Aristotle twice states with much emphasis that *aloga*, "irrationalities," are to be avoided, if possible completely (54b6-8, 61b19-25). If they cannot be avoided as part of the underlying story, they should at least be *ἔξω τοῦ δράματος*, "outside the play proper," like Oedipus' somehow never having learned how Laius died before *Oedipus Rex* begins. Irrationalities and impossibilities are, though closely related, not identical, but they have the same effect, that of destroying belief in the poet's imitation. Although they constitute a flaw, they are allowable when they lead to an effect of wonder, the *θαυμαστόν*, but this is easier in epic, where the audience does not see the irrationality before them. Epic is read or heard, but Aristotle presumes performance in his discussions of tragedy, even though he allots small importance to *ὄψις*, "spectacle," the element which (along with melody) is lost when a play is merely read. Yet while the different media force different limits on their poets, for Aristotle, as for Plato before him, they do not make fundamentally different demands in logic or propriety. Aristotle avoids the word *apatē*, "deceit," for the state of mind of the audience involved with a successful poetic imitation, probably because of its negative connotations, but it was well established by his time, going back at least to Gorgias' famous paradox that in tragedy the deceiver is juster than the non-deceiver, the deceived wiser than the not-deceived (B23 DK).

Dramatic deceit can be maintained only if the actions represented are possible within the audience's vision of reality.¹ This reality, however, is natural, social, and psychological at once, and literary reality depends on conventions which are determined by both culture and genre. Under the pressure of cultural change and generic development, an oddity may become an accepted convention, while a convention can come to seem stiff and unlikelike. When Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs* (1056-58) criticizes Aeschylean diction as incomprehensible and too remote from ordinary speech, we can see that a

Cabinet of the Muses, ed. M. Griffith and D. J. Mastronarde, pp. 75-87

© 1990 Scholars Press, ©2005 Dept. of Classics, Univ. of California, Berkeley

tragic convention is no longer taken for granted, though it does not occur to anyone to point out that even Euripidean trimeter is not much like the language of the [76]Athenian on the street. On the other hand, Euripides as his career progresses seems less meticulous in motivating his introductory prologues, as if both he and his audience have with time grown accustomed to this convention.²

Recent scholarship on tragedy has been much concerned with conventions, particularly those of the stage, but very little with verisimilitude; indeed, there sometimes seems to be an assumption that the conventions of the Greek theater precluded an attempt to make tragedy lifelike.³ Yet the identification of tragedy as *apatê* and *mimêsis* implies that the ancient audience was not distanced by the conventions, but profoundly involved. Equally, there has been much emphasis on performance, and very little interest in tragedies as texts by authors who read and who expected to be read. Yet Aristophanes' joke on Euripides' diet for Tragedy indicates that Euripides was perceived as a literate poet (*Frogs* 943), as does Dionysus' reading of *Andromache* on shipboard (*Frogs* 52). Euripides himself offers the famous chorus from *Erechtheus* in which reading is, with song, the pleasure imagined as coming with longed-for peace (fr. 60 Austin = 369 N²). Sophistic discussions of literary works do not presuppose the presence of a written text, but they demand an audience which has the work precisely memorized (cf. Plato *Protag.* 339B) and memory, from *Prometheus* at least, is imagined as a writing tablet (789); possession of papyri of some kind identifies the audience as critically acute at *Frogs* 1114. The issue is not really reading as such, but the treatment of poems as texts, read or remembered, to be analyzed outside performance and compared to other texts. I am inclined to believe that the "orality" of archaic and early classical culture has been exaggerated.⁴ But in any case, by the late fifth century, not just knowledge of poetry, but being *deinos* ("expert") about it was a mark of culture and part of the sophistic curriculum (*Protag.* 338E). Since the poet must contend with an audience extending far beyond the original performance, verisimilitude is more than a set of conventions which define what a poet can expect his audience to accept during performance, but a potential standard for criticism and an area of confrontation with tradition, especially as the fictionality of tragedy comes to be frankly admitted.⁵

Aristotle does not define irrationalities and impossibilities, except to distinguish those which derive from the poet's ignorance of scientific facts, such as thinking female deer have antlers, from those which belong properly to the poet's task of imitation. Aristotle's examples of flaws include Oedipus' failure, already mentioned, to know how Laius died; Telephus' traveling from Tegea to Mysia without speaking; and the report of Orestes' death in the Pythian Games in Sophocles' *Electra*, apparently because of the anachronism. Other passages to which he objects illustrate some of the complexities of the issue. Characters should be self-consistent, and he criticizes Iphigenia's change from fearful girl to resolute self-sacrificer in Euripides' *IA*. They should also be good, if possible—Menelaus in Euripides' *Orestes* is an example of

unnecessary badness—and appropriate: Odysseus' laments in Timotheus' dithyramb *Scylla* and Melanippe's philosophizing in Euripides' *Wise Melanippe* are both criticized, the first presumably as unsuitable for the hero, the second for a woman. While the excessive nastiness of Menelaus, whether it is an aesthetic flaw or not, does not damage the play's illusion, Iphigenia clearly presents a [77]problem of credibility, and the examples of inappropriateness might be relevant. Melanippe, after all, begins her speech with an explanation that attempts to mitigate the impropriety—she learned her philosophical doctrines from her mother, Chiron's daughter (fr. 484 N²). Evidently, the depiction not only of events which violate natural law or historical fact, but also of those which deviate without good cause from social norms, breaks verisimilitude. So do violations either of the common patterns of human behavior or of the pattern of behavior established for a particular character. Other inconsistencies and slips, or too much dependence on coincidence, can endanger the reader's absorption—these are violations of Aristotle's general rule of probability and necessity. Aristotle does not discuss the scale of violations, but its importance seems obvious. The success of a more or less realistic work depends on verisimilitude on a large scale—a meaningful plot and characters who do not act without motivation, while small inconsistencies or errors of fact are generally no more than minor blemishes.

Verisimilitude on a large scale is established and maintained by the dominance of cause and effect. Paradoxically, literature becomes believable as an imitation of life by being far more tightly organized and understandable than life usually is. Serious Greek literature has a high level of coherence, is "well-made" in a way that creates its own rules of likelihood. Already in Homer, perhaps the most obvious goal of the author is the construction of a plot which is not entirely predictable yet seems almost inevitable as it unfolds, and this inevitability depends on the audience's co-operation in following indications of what the rules demand. We expect oracles to be fulfilled and irreverent behavior towards gods to be punished, and so these events seem plausible when they occur. The cause-effect nexus is very tight. Exceptions do occur. In the *Iliad*, for instance, a speech by Dione reminds Aphrodite and us that those who fight with gods come to bad ends, but Diomedes does not suffer for his presumption. Asius in Book 13 insists on keeping his horses as he crosses the ditch, an act we know—since the seer Polydamas has advised against it—is foolish. He is killed, but his death does not result from his folly, as the reader who demands no loose ends might desire. But most modern readers—some Analysts, of course, disagree—see a high level of coherence. Aristotle himself seems to have found the Achilles of Book 24 inconsistent with the earlier Achilles (fr. 168 Rose), but few today find any incompatibility between the two.

Tragedy, like Homer, demands a high level of coherence. Of course its conventions govern what constitutes a flaw; it is, for instance, normal for the ethos of single characters to be subordinate to that of the whole in a way that

can seem profoundly unrealistic to moderns. Where a tragedian cannot avoid a flaw, he has a repertory of devices for mitigating the difficulty. It would be impossible to have significant women's roles if the female characters obeyed the social norms requiring that women remain indoors; sometimes the tragedians ignore the outdoor setting, sometimes they exploit the difficulty thematically by marking the women as anomalous.⁶ Dramatic economy demands that actors often appear conveniently just when they are needed. Aeschylus already employs the "Talk of the devil" entrance:⁷ when an entrance is particularly opportune, the coincidence is remarked on, so that an event which might distract [78]an audience by its unlikelihood is internalized and made a vehicle of realism—tragic characters, like real people, are impressed by coincidence. This device of drawing attention to unlikelihood as a way of mitigating it is an obvious precedent for Euripides' recurrent apologies. But while such attention to verisimilitude is evident in Homer and in the earliest surviving tragedies, Euripides shows clear signs of positive fascination with problems of verisimilitude and frequently draws attention to them, both in his own work and in that of his predecessors. Indeed, by drawing attention, almost metatheatrically, to issues of verisimilitude his works become concerned with a canon of verisimilitude which is no longer in the service of illusion. It is generally accepted that in Aristophanes' *Frogs* Euripides appropriates contemporary critical terminology when he accuses Aeschylus of "deceiving" the audience (909-10), while he treats his own "realism" as encouraging critical reflection (959-61); but if Aristophanes was correct here, Euripidean "realism" does not aim at a "realistic" effect.⁸

It is a commonplace of criticism that Euripides was concerned with establishing plausibility in the details of his plots. A typical case is *Heracles* 593-98. Amphytyo urges caution on Heracles, since he must have been seen entering the city, so that his enemies will be ready for him. Heracles replies that he would not care if they were, but in fact, having seen an ill-omened bird as he approached Thebes, he entered the city secretly (595-98):

μέλει μὲν οὐδὲν εἴ με πᾶσ' εἶδεν πόλις·
 ὄρνιν δ' ἰδὼν τιν' οὐκ ἐν αἰσίοις ἔδραις
 ἔγνω πόνου τιν' ἐς δόμους πεπτωκότα,
 ὥστ' ἐκ προνοίας κρύφιος εἰσῆλθον χθόνα.

Bond comments *ad loc.*, "Euripides' interest in realistic plotting has led him to deal with the improbability of Heracles' arriving unnoticed. His solution, the omen, is unconvincing and in fact draws attention to the improbability, which Sophocles would doubtless have ignored."⁹ Bond thus rather naively assumes that Euripides desired an illusion, that Euripides' "realism" is straightforward. This seems inherently implausible, for surely he could have contrived a more "realistic" stop-gap than this convenient omen. The issue has evidently been raised only in order to be settled, yet the settlement itself is perfunctory—or perhaps literary; epic heroes, after all, are constantly the recipients of bird-omens. Even the need to motivate a cautious entry home is not so much realistic as self-consciously literary. Even Odysseus, most crafty of heroes, is

warned to return home secretly, so that the less subtle Heracles would not be expected to take precautions automatically. Euripides' technique might be compared to *Od.* 15.513ff. Here Telemachus advises Theoclymenus to go to Eurymachus', since he himself will not be returning directly home and so cannot ensure his proper treatment. But his speech concludes with a wish for a speedy end to the suitors, and in reply a bird-omen appears, which Theoclymenus interprets favorably, whereupon Telemachus sends him off with Peraeus to stay until his return. Homer creates the problem—Telemachus' original decision—in order to allow for the omen and his change of mind. Similarly, Euripides raises an issue, namely the manner of Heracles' entry, in order that the omen may remove the problem; but Euripides' passage is [79]striking, as Homer's is not, because instead of a narrator who reports events as they occur, we have a dialogue about the past; since within the fiction the problem has been solved already, the audience is invited to remark that it is introduced only to be dismissed.

Even if the omen could be considered to "solve" the problem of Heracles' secret entry, it creates a further problem for the plot as a whole, since Heracles' shocked surprise when he sees his family in so strange and desperate a situation (525) is not consistent with a divine warning that something is amiss. Here, however, the presentation of the omen after the fact serves to conceal the contradiction for the theatrical audience, at least: only after the emotional impact of Heracles' discovery of the threat to his family has been exploited is the warning omen mentioned, and a spectator is unlikely to have thought back on the unlikelihood that Heracles should have made so unworried an entrance. But for a reader who reconstructs the story from the narrative, the omen solves one problem only to create another. One might compare the presentiment of encountering a wild man that inspires Odysseus at *Od.* 9.212-15 to bring wine from Ismarus on his exploration of the Cyclops' island: if he expects to meet such a man, why then does he linger in the cave in the hope of gifts (228-30)? Homer's audience perhaps forgave the poet easily, instinctively knowing that well-loved traditional stories demand acceptance of certain mechanisms, like the many myths and *Märchen* which begin with an almost unimaginably stupid failure to propitiate an important power (e.g., Oeneus' "forgetting" Artemis at *Il.* 9.434-37). The story can work only if Odysseus brings the wine, yet lingers in the cave.¹⁰ Euripides' plot, however, does not require that Heracles seem quite unprepared for the desperate situation of his family. Perhaps Euripides was careless, or relied on the difficulty's not being noticed; but the *post eventum* mention of the omen seems to invite consideration of its function within the whole play, not to seek to conceal it. It is more likely that the Homeric model is actively felt, and the omen, rather than serving as a realistic explanation which would bring the world of the play closer to reality, marks its simultaneous remoteness from reality. The omen defines the play as occurring within a world defined as much by Homeric narrative conventions as by reality.

It is currently the fashion to try to treat passages in Euripides which were once regarded as polemical, especially against Aeschylus, as meaningful within

their own context.¹¹ This is valuable and a needed correction to the earlier tendency to describe them as irrelevant, but it leads to neglect of Euripides' genuine critical interventions. The three standard passages at issue are *Supplices* 846-56, *Phoenissae* 751, and *Electra* 527-44. But the comparison of the three Philoctetes-plays given by Dio Chrysostom 52 (supplemented by his paraphrase of Euripides' prologue in 59) gives perhaps the best starting-point. In the Aeschylean presentation, Odysseus was unrecognized by Philoctetes without explanation, presumably through simple lapse of time. The chorus was formed of Lemnians, who had never before visited Philoctetes but did so now, and made no comment on this fact. Euripides produced his *Philoctetes* in 438. His Odysseus explained in the prologue that Athena had promised to alter his appearance so that he would be unrecognized; indeed, the Odysseus of Dio 59 says that she has promised to change not only his appearance but his voice.¹² [80]Euripides' chorus apologized for never having visited Philoctetes before. The implicit criticism of Aeschylus' lack of verisimilitude has been noticed, and is particularly hard to argue away, especially the chorus' apology.¹³ But concern for verisimilitude, once again, is by no means realism. Euripides may not be willing to allow his Odysseus simply to go unrecognized by his old enemy, but he is far less "realistic" than Sophocles, preferring a standard epic mechanism, the divinely provided disguise, to anything from the everyday world. Euripidean verisimilitude is literary convention. Even the apology has epic precedent: the exchanges between Zeus and Athena in the divine councils of *Odyssey* 1 and 5 acknowledge the poet's discomfort at instigating divine intervention after such long neglect. It is essential to the plot of the *Odyssey* that the hero not be saved by the gods before he has his adventures, and to *Philoctetes* that the lonely outcast not regularly have been comforted by a friendly chorus (though Euripides gave him one friend), but this necessity makes it tricky to introduce gods and chorus. Homer's Zeus, like Euripides' chorus, expresses the author's unease with the necessities of the plot as a character's embarrassment. Homer is similarly unhappy with Athena's failure to help Odysseus during the adventures, and has her offer a less-than-adequate excuse (13.341-43). Euripides replaces Aeschylus' solution to problems of verisimilitude—suppressing them—with another.

The Trojan embassy which attempted to win over Philoctetes in Euripides' version further illustrates the Euripidean notion of plausibility. In the epic and other tragic versions, Helenus' prophecy about the importance of Philoctetes apparently came to the Greeks only, delivered to Odysseus, or the army as a whole, after Helenus' capture. Presumably Helenus offered the information in the hope that his life would be spared. But would he not previously have told his own people so important a piece of knowledge? Unless the role of Philoctetes became known to Helenus only after his capture, he would surely have told the Trojans, as in Euripides' play he did.¹⁴ And the Trojan response, surely, would have been to try to forestall Greek appropriation of the hero. Once again, verisimilitude is not realism. The poet does not hesitate to base his play on the literary convention which makes prophecies

unerrant, but he does insist on a certain logic in human actions. Here too there may be an implied criticism of earlier poets, who apparently never considered this question.

It is difficult to discuss the relationship between Aeschylus' *Electra* and Euripides' without also introducing Sophocles; the two later tragedians both respond to problems of verisimilitude presented by *Choephoroi*.¹⁵ In *Choephoroi*, the possibility that Clytemnestra may recognize her son and his plan thereby fail is not raised. We are carefully led away from imagining that Clytemnestra might herself come to the door. When she does so, and thus receives the false report of Orestes from him, the issue of recognition is kept from destroying the illusion by the high emotional tension of the scene. We are too surprised and anxious to question her failure to look closely at her own son. This is *ekplêxis*, the attainment of credibility by emotionally overwhelming the audience, the kind of thing Aristotle regards as justified if the flaw allows the poet to attain his goal. The recognition between Electra and Orestes, managed through the famous tokens, shows some similarity in technique. Orestes recognizes Electra [81]immediately, although she cannot recognize him by sight. Electra has seen the lock of hair on the tomb, and compared it to her own, and she has stepped in the footprints which match her own. Orestes reveals himself promptly when her tracking reaches him, and convinces Electra of his identity by reminding her of the signs she has just tested for herself and by showing her a piece of cloth she wove herself, probably something he is actually wearing. The poet is obviously not concerned with the practical facts of how far the hair and feet of siblings resemble each other, nor even with why Orestes waits for Electra to follow his track before emerging from hiding; the emotional tension of the mounting evidence induces the audience not to worry about the practical details.

Both Sophocles and Euripides are concerned with problems of verisimilitude in Aeschylus' play. One problem with the opening section of *Choephoroi* is the wild implausibility that Clytemnestra would have entrusted the hostile Electra with the libations (even assuming that the slaves of the chorus have hidden from her the feelings which they make so clear to the audience). One might wonder, in fact, why Aegisthus and Clytemnestra would have kept this enemy underfoot. Euripides, with Electra's marriage to the farmer, not only wins a new and interesting setting, but eliminates this problem completely. Sophocles here works less radically, but clearly sees the difficulty, for his Aegisthus is in fact planning to get rid of Electra—the poet has thematized the difficulty. His Clytemnestra gives the grave offerings to the more co-operative Chrysothemis. The use of the Paedagogue gives plausibility to her failure to recognize Orestes by ensuring that she is convinced of his death before he appears; the point is explicitly raised and settled by the Paedagogue just before Orestes goes in (1340-42). The old man's failure to be recognized is prepared for at 40-42, where Orestes expresses his confidence that he will not be remembered.

Euripides apparently assumes that Clytemnestra would recognize her son immediately, and therefore avoids having them confront each other until the very moment of the murder. His Orestes knows the identity of Electra only after eavesdropping on her. The poet is careful to have Electra say that she would not recognize her brother if she saw him (284), since he left when she was very young, though this comes only after the two have been together for 70 lines, as if Euripides wanted his audience to question her failure to recognize him. Orestes does not, however, reveal himself, but lies to her, for reasons that are not fully clear. At 272 he questions the loyalty of the chorus, about which she reassures him; the revelation of his doubts on this score could justify his reserve thus far. When he asks at 274 what she would expect of Orestes, it may be that her ruthlessness frightens him off. Orestes' reluctance to reveal himself, like so much in Euripides, is probably Homeric in origin, based on Odysseus' failure to reveal himself to Penelope until after the slaying of the suitors, and on his teasing of Laertes.¹⁶

The scene in which Electra rejects the Aeschylean signs of Orestes' nearness is infamous. The old man has passed the tomb of Agamemnon, and seen the lock of hair. He suggests that Electra go to the tomb and compare it with her own; she replies that Orestes would be too brave to sneak into the country, and that in any case his hair would not resemble hers. The old man [82] suggests that she look for a footprint, and she answers that the ground is too hard, and men have bigger feet than women; he asks whether Orestes could have something she had woven, and she points out that she was too young to weave when he left and in any case he would not be wearing it since clothes do not grow. Electra is, of course, wrong about the essential fact—the lock does indicate Orestes' presence; but she has good reason to be sceptical, since the messengers of Orestes she has just spoken to have said nothing about the lock. Her objections to the probative value of the Aeschylean tokens are reasonable. They are of two kinds. The difference between men's and women's hair and feet, or the likelihood of Orestes' still wearing (or carrying around with him) a garment made for him as a child, is a matter of everyday reality, which the passage implies Aeschylus ignored. The other objections—the hard ground, the youth of Electra when Orestes fled—are rather objections to Aeschylus' manipulations; for these tokens to exist, the author has had to imagine events in a perhaps somewhat unlikely way. Euripides' play, we learn from these objections, has not adopted these convenient preconceptions. Mythology demands that Electra be still of childbearing age at Orestes' return, so she cannot have been too old when he fled. It was convenient to imagine the ground near Agamemnon's tomb as soft enough to take a footprint, but one could hardly expect it. The criticism may be valid within the play, but it is not a legitimate objection to Aeschylus; rather it is a comment on the necessity for dramatic contrivance: the poet creates the weather he needs.

The claim that Orestes would not enter the land secretly is absurd within the play itself, and it is an interesting parallel to *Heracles* 595-98, where without an omen it would not have occurred to Heracles to act clandestinely,

and he comments that he would not care if his enemies *were* prepared for him. While in the other criticisms it is Electra who rejects the Aeschylean world, here it is Euripides who marks the difference of his play from Aeschylus'. Aeschylus' Orestes is highly confident; he replies to the chorus' warning to be quiet lest someone betray him to the rulers by announcing his trust in Apollo (264-70), and is not especially cautious, like Heracles—that is, like an implausibly perfect hero. Euripides', on the other hand, is nervous and has come to the frontier not only to find Electra but to be ready to scamper back over the border. Electra's unrealistic expectations come from the Aeschylean world she elsewhere rejects. Whether through Electra or by irony directed against her, Euripides' attention to Aeschylus' lack of verisimilitude is a comment on the contrived nature of theatrical plots. His own play does not use the romantic devices of Aeschylus'; he does not need the tokens, for his Electra is not going to recognize Orestes herself and does not need emotional preparation. Yet his own work is not necessarily more plausible. Though he nowhere ignores the laws of nature, he is as much a contriver as his predecessor. His contrivances, however, are not only less romantic, but less concealed by emotional effects.

The recognition is actually effected by the old man, who confirms it through a scar Orestes received as a child while chasing a fawn. Clearly, this is Odysseus' scar revisited and domesticated; and the resemblance to *Philoctetes* is evident. The scar meets Electra's first type of objection, being a reliable [83]method of identification, but it depends on as much contrivance as any token in Aeschylus. As the ground in *Choephoroi* is conveniently damp enough to receive a footprint, Orestes conveniently possesses an unusual scar. Once again, Euripides raises an issue of verisimilitude against a background of alternative models. While pointing out the contrivances of Aeschylus, he himself selects the equally contrived Homeric cliché. Furthermore, once the play of allusion makes dramatic contrivance visible, the meticulous planning of the old man's role becomes yet another mechanism: Electra has told Orestes at 285-87 that only the old Paedagogue could recognize him. In the theater, the lines could slip past easily and serve to maintain deception by keeping the plot comprehensible. But once the play is read or re-seen, the unnaturalness of this preparation helps show that Euripides too contrives. The poet does not try at all costs to achieve realism, but seems to think that the inevitable machinery should announce itself as an element of literary tradition.

Sophocles' Electra, like Euripides', hears evidence that Orestes has come, and does not believe it when Chrysothemis reports on the offerings, including the lock of hair, she has seen at Agamemnon's tomb. Electra's disbelief here is more strongly motivated than that of Euripides' Electra: she already knows that her brother is dead, and his death, indeed, serves to explain the mysterious offering. The motif is similar, but here there is no polemic against the Aeschylean signs, which have been omitted except for the offering itself: since Electra already knows of Orestes' death, she is not about to look for footprints or compare the lock of hair with her own. Sophocles' concern for

verisimilitude centers on motivating Electra's scepticism, not on the details of Aeschylus' recognition scene; Euripides had a good motive in the presence of the messengers, but does not emphasize it. Similarly, Orestes enters with the urn and allows Electra to lament over it because he realizes that she must be someone who cares for him; but it is only the content of the lament that makes her identity clear, and he reveals himself, proving his identity by his possession of Agamemnon's signet. It is noteworthy that Orestes tries to calm Electra as she sings in joy, and the Paedagogue scolds them both for making so much noise and says that he has distracted those inside from hearing. Here Sophocles improves on Aeschylus, who raised the issue by having the chorus enjoin silence on Orestes and Electra, but having Orestes answer confidently and ignore the warning—not perhaps quite credibly, for divine help surely does not justify careless intrigue. Aeschylus has used the technique of having characters in the text mark the action as unusual, while Sophocles gives a human explanation of why the characters' carelessness is not injurious. But the situation is different enough from Aeschylus' that there is no polemic note.

Whereas Sophocles seems genuinely concerned to avoid violating illusion, and therefore avoids the kind of confrontation with Aeschylus which would turn the spectators into self-conscious critics, for Euripides, obsession with verisimilitude indicates the opposite of a desire to achieve *apatê*. In *Supplices*, the messenger is not asked to give details of individual merit in the battle; nobody has the opportunity to observe such matters (846-56). The polemic has generally been supposed to be directed at either the *Septem* or the *Eleusinians*, though the most recent commentary sees it as a comment on tragic conventions [84] in general.¹⁷ Homer is well aware that no participant in a battle could evaluate it, and so refers to an imaginary observer who could function as a critic because Pallas Athena guided him through the battle under her protection (*Il.* 4.539-42). Characters on the Homeric battlefield are regularly represented as not knowing what is happening elsewhere. The Homeric narrator, however, has complete information from the Muses, and so has no difficulty; but the tragic messenger-speech falls short of Homeric standards because the messenger is not an omniscient narrator. Euripides has himself had a conventional messenger-speech not long before his rejection of the type, but has carefully identified his messenger as an earlier captive of the Thebans, with the opportunity to watch the battle from a tower at the city-gate (651-52). The model is, of course, the *Iliad*, where the gates of Troy provide a vantage-point. Euripides imitates the *teichoskopia* again in *Phoenissae*, again carefully motivating the Paedagogue's knowledge of the opposing army by having him explain that he visited the camp as an ambassador (95-98).

In *Phoenissae* (751-52), Eteocles emphatically declines to waste the time to enumerate the champions he will appoint at such a moment of crisis:

ὄνομα δ' ἐκάστου διατριβὴ πολλὴ λέγειν
ἐχθρῶν ὑπ' αὐτοῖς τείχεσιν καθημένων.

He thus stands in obvious contrast to the Eteocles of Aeschylus, who delivers long speeches though the enemy is at the gates. Only slightly less pointed is the

careful explanation of the messenger in the same play at 1139-40 of how, in going around the army, he had the opportunity to examine the enemies' shields, and so can describe them; Euripides has evidently objected to the detail in the report of the spy of *Septem* as unlikely. No Homeric models are implied here; the Homeric narrator, like Aeschylus, does not allow the action to move so quickly as to force his characters into brevity.

There is, then, no excuse for minimizing the polemic in Euripides against Aeschylean neglect of verisimilitude. It recurs in a number of plays from different periods, and belongs to a larger group of passages which reflect Euripides' fascination with the issue. But this interest is not a desire for the kind of realism that keeps the audience unaware of the dramatic deception. In many passages where Euripides shows such interest, there is a distinct note of polemic, particularly against Aeschylus; in others, there is a Homeric model. Sometimes he has both: the scar in *Electra* and the disguised Odysseus of *Philoctetes* are outstanding examples. Within a single tragedy, he will insert passages in which deception is apparently carefully maintained by details which explain matters that might threaten verisimilitude, even while he elsewhere points out the incongruities of his own plot. In *Hippolytus*, for instance, he carefully motivates Theseus' ignorance of Phaedra's illness by having the Nurse inform the chorus that Phaedra has kept it a secret, and that recently Theseus has been away and has had no opportunity to notice (278-81). The device is not subtle, but it can easily be taken as a genuine attempt to make the plot make sense. Yet later in the same play Hippolytus, ignorant of his father's curse, expresses his confusion that Theseus has chosen to exile rather than kill him, forcing Theseus to claim that exile is a better punishment (1041-49). The lines draw attention to the poet's manipulation of events, by which he manages to [85] have an *agôn* between Theseus and Hippolytus while leaving Hippolytus ignorant of the death awaiting him. The incongruity otherwise would probably pass unnoticed. Secretiveness, of course, is a theme of the play, but Theseus' unmotivated concealment of the truth draws attention to the drama's artificiality, the plot mechanics which create Hippolytus' ignorance, and makes Theseus' earlier absence, which allows Phaedra to keep her secret, seem less innocent; there is a parallel between the characters and the dramatist. Euripides here seems to be commenting on his own manipulateness, as he elsewhere comments on Aeschylus'. His polemic then does not express a crude literary rivalry. I would like to suggest that Euripidean tragedy is not just a new kind of writing, but reflects a new kind of reading, an approach which was to create the *problēmata* and *zêtēmata* of later criticism.

In partial contrast to their obvious concern for the general rules of probability and necessity, in detail the Homeric poems are less concerned with accuracy than with pseudo-realism, and nobody needs to be told that the epics are riddled with inconsistencies and improbabilities. In *Iliad* 3, no explanation is offered of how Priam could reach the ninth year of the war and not yet know by sight the major Greek heroes, even Odysseus, who, as we learn in this very scene, came to Troy on an embassy. The scholia here suggest that he had rarely

seen the Greeks, who were busy with their booty raids, or that he had seen them only heavily armored, and so not learned to recognize them, or that he had been too worried to bother. The passage is still problematic to a modern reader, who, however, typically deals with it analytically, by seeing the passage as belonging originally to an earlier part of the war.¹⁸

By the late fifth century, Homer's conventions were no longer self-explanatory, and Homeric criticism was a flourishing business. Sophistic criticism had as at least one of its goals the self-aggrandizement of the critic, and one sure way to achieve this effect was to discover a flaw in an earlier authority, with Homer as an obvious choice, or to defend the poet by explaining the apparent error.¹⁹ The sophists treated the poets as their own predecessors, and treated their works with the debaters' logic they used among themselves. The astuteness in discussing poetry which Protagoras regarded as a mark of education consisted of this ability to find fault and defend against faults found by others. The use of Homer, and the extreme self-consciousness, often polemical, of Euripides, can hardly be divorced from this new and self-conscious manner of reading. Unfortunately, we know relatively little about non-allegorical Homeric criticism before Aristotle. But the scraps we have are very suggestive. For instance, Stesimbrotus of Thasos is cited in the Schol. Porph. on *Il.* 11.636 for his views on the controversy surrounding Nestor's cup: how could the old man lift a cup too heavy for three other heroes? Stesimbrotus suggested that the line was intended to justify Nestor's life span of three generations—as he was three times as strong as most, so he likewise lived three times longer. Antisthenes, on the other hand, explained the passage as an emphatic way of indicating that Nestor was sober, since he could still manage this great weight (Schol. Porph. on *Il.* 11.683, p. 168.10 Schrader).²⁰ The line was obviously a *problēma* by the early fourth century. One of Aristotle's problems concerns Helen's ignorance of the death of her brothers at *Il.* 3.236. He proposes that she had had no [86]information because Alexander had kept her from talking to Greek prisoners, who could have given her the news—these prisoners appear also in Porphyry's explanation of how Idomeneus knows of Othryoneus' marriage plans in *Iliad* 13. The problem belongs to the same pattern of thought that led Euripides to imagine a Helenus who would surely have told the Trojans of the importance of Philoctetes—it imagines the Trojan War as a "real" war, with prisoners as sources of information, and the characters as "real" people, whose knowledge or ignorance of events should make sense. We see the same rationalizing tendency and familiarity with the concerns of contemporary Homeric criticism in Herodotus' discussion of Helen: she could not have been in Troy, or the Trojans would certainly have surrendered her (2.120).

The interest in verisimilitude itself can be linked to a number of causes—the discovery of fictionality, the cult of probability in the courts, the general rationality of the period. But Euripidean verisimilitude is linked very clearly to critical reading; his works seem composed not so much according to a standard of verisimilitude as with regular allusion to such a standard. Euripides seems

more interested in marking his own difficulties, preferences, and place within poetic tradition than in actually inducing an audience, through verisimilitude, into being deceived. A general rule may easily be derived from Euripides' practice: when the poet is constrained to ignore natural plausibility, it is better to use an artificial device which, in effect, acknowledges the problem than to ignore it, and it is better to follow Homer than to invent freely. This suggests that Euripides' style and that of Homeric criticism are not both independent products of the *Zeitgeist*, nor did this type of Homeric criticism arise from tastes formed by Euripidean tragedy: rather, Euripides wrote as he read. Homer had been shown to present various difficulties, some easily soluble by the critic, some not. Yet his work continued to exercise unparalleled authority for both the general public and the sophisticatedly-minded elite. Euripides therefore made it his second-order reality, as it were, the proper object of imitation where he could not imitate reality itself. Probably the naive spectator could often be untroubled by the Euripidean habit of pointing to difficulties, for Homeric allusions re-established the deception. The sophisticated reader, on the other hand, may not have been entirely satisfied, but it would have been difficult for him to prove himself clever at Euripides' expense; the poet had already seen the problem such readers loved to find, and cited his authority for his solution. If Homer himself was imperfect, poetry perhaps has inherent limitations, but it could not be said that Euripides did not understand his *technê*. Criticism has often had a complex relationship to and influence on the literature of its time. I would like to suggest that in the use of Homer by Euripides we have the first evidence for a literature influenced not by other poets, but by professors.



NOTES

1. In the words of T. G. Rosenmeyer, "Gorgias, Aeschylus, and *Apatê*," *AJP* 76 (1955) 240, the author must "permit the audience to persist in its excitement, instead of turning to a more reasoned appraisal of some of the inherent *paradoxa*."
2. See W. Schadewaldt, *Monolog und Selbstgespräch: Untersuchungen zur Formgeschichte der griechischen Tragödie (Neue Philologische Untersuchungen 2, Berlin 1926)* 6. R. Flickinger, *The Greek Theater and its Drama*² (Chicago 1922) 308, comments on the prologue of *Medea*: "Euripides, I am sure, felt self-conscious in utilizing a device so threadbare and patent."
3. See, for instance, the opening pages of J. Gould, "Dramatic character and 'human intelligibility' in Greek tragedy," *PCPS* 24 (1978) 43-67.
4. I thus differ with E. A. Havelock, *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Consequences* (Princeton 1982); he does, however, point to the literate qualities of Euripides (283-92).
5. See W. Rösler, "Die Entdeckung der Fiktionalität in der Antike," *Poetica* 12 (1980) 280-319 (again, in my opinion, too concerned with early orality).
6. M. Shaw, "The Female Intruder: Women in Fifth-century Drama," *CP* 70 (1975) 255-66.
7. See O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford 1977) 137-38, 146-47, 300.
8. M. Pohlenz, "Die Anfänge der griechischen Poetik," *NGG* (1920) 142-78.
9. G. W. Bond, *Euripides: Heracles* (Oxford 1981).
10. See D. L. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford 1955) 7-8.
11. See, for example, J. Halporn, "The Skeptical Electra," *HSCP* 87 (1983) 101-18, and the extensive bibliography cited there; note also C. Collard (*infra* n. 17).
12. Sophocles seems to have noticed this improvement on Homeric divine disguises; he twice has Philoctetes recognize Odysseus by his voice alone, before he has seen his old enemy (976, 1295-96).
13. See, for instance, T. B. L. Webster, *Sophocles: Philoctetes* (Cambridge 1970) 4.
14. See the hypothesis of the play, *POxy.* 2455 fr. 17.
15. Obviously, I believe in the authenticity of both the Aeschylean recognition scene and *Electra* 527-44.
16. J. Dingel, "Der 24. Gesang der *Odyssee* und die *Elektra* des Euripides," *RhM* 112 (1969) 103-109; he points out also some other Odyssean borrowings in Euripides.
17. C. Collard, *Euripides: Supplices* (Groningen 1975) 321.
18. W. Leaf, *Homer: the Iliad* (London 1900-1902, repr. Amsterdam 1971) 117-18.
19. See N. J. Richardson, "Homeric Professors in the Age of the Sophists," *PCPS* 21 (1975) 65-81; G. W. Most, "Sophistique et Herméneutique," in *Positions de la Sophistique*, ed. B. Cassin (Paris 1986); R. Scodel, "Literary Interpretation in Plato's *Protagoras*," *Ancient Philosophy* 6 (1987) 25-37.
20. For Stesimbrotus and Antisthenes, see G. Lanata, *Poetica pre-platonica* (Florence 1963) 242.