

Enter a Phrygian (Euripides Orestes 1369)

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THE START of the penultimate scene of *Orestes* is one of the most astonishing moments in Greek tragedy. Inside the palace, unseen by the audience, Orestes and Pylades have been carrying out their plan to murder Helen and her servants. Death-cries (or what sound like death-cries) have just been heard: what will happen next? The normal conventions of the genre, together with the chorus' expectation that they will "see the bloodied corpse *within the house*" (1357–1358), lead us to expect the gruesome display of Helen's body on the *ekkyklema*. Instead of this, we are presented with the surprise entrance (1369) of a Phrygian slave, who bursts onto the scene and delivers a sort of messenger-speech in the form of an elaborate operatic aria.

As has been observed before, there are a number of ways in which this scene confounds the audience's expectations: the fact that "the wrong" character enters; the tantalizing postponement of the news about Helen's fate; the ludicrous, even quasi-comical, characterization of the Phrygian; and the jarringly modern sound of the aria, composed in the style of the "New Music."¹ However, there is some confusion regarding the precise manner in which the Phrygian made his entrance. Both ancient and modern commentators have tried to deal with this problem, usually by making alterations to the transmitted text, but their attempts have not entirely cleared up the confusion. In what follows I propose a new solution to the

¹ On all these matters see the commentaries of C. W. Willink, *Euripides Orestes* (Oxford 1986) 305–306, and M. L. West, *Euripides Orestes* (Warminster 1987) 275–276. On Euripides' penchant for surprise tactics in general, cf. W. G. Arnott, "Euripides and the Unexpected," *G&R* 20 (1973) 49–63.

problem (which does not involve excision or emendation). I suggest that Euripides staged the entrance in a way that not only enhanced the effect of surprise and *bizarrierie* but also (and more significantly) contributed thematically to the play and its meaning.

Immediately following the chorus' strophic song at 1353–1365 are three lines spoken by the coryphaeus (1366–1368):

ἀλλὰ κτυπεῖ γὰρ κλήθρα βασιλείων δόμων,
σιγήσατ' ἔξω γὰρ τις ἐκβαίνει Φρυγῶν,
οὐ πευσόμεσθα τὰν δόμοις ὅπως ἔχει.

But the bars of the palace doors are rattling! Be quiet! One of the Phrygians is coming outside: we will discover from him what is going on in the house.

These lines seem to prepare us for an entrance from the central doors of the palace;² but a few lines later the Phrygian sings that he has escaped over the cedar-wood timbers and the Doric triglyphs of the roof (κεδρωτὰ παστάδων / ὑπὲρ τέραμνα Δωρικίας τε τριγλύφους, 1371–1372). As the commentators point out, there is a seeming contradiction here. How did the Phrygian enter? Was it through the *skene* doors, or from the *skene* roof? If the latter, how did he descend from the roof to ground level?

The scholiast on 1366 proposed that the actor playing the Phrygian made his entrance by *leaping* down from the roof, and that lines 1366–1368 constituted an interpolation by a later actor who, lacking in acrobatic skills, made his entrance through the doors instead.³ Following this ancient scholar, several modern editors have deleted 1366–1368.⁴ But even if the lines were deleted, that would not entirely solve the problem, since, as Willink and West both point out, an entirely unheralded entrance would be abnormal, and something (at least) is required to separate the Phrygian's aria from the choral ode. However, there is no need at all to doubt, or alter, the trans-

² Cf. *Hel.* 859–860, *Ion* 515.

³ E. Schwartz, *Scholia in Euripidem* I (Berlin 1887) 217.

⁴ W. Biehl, *Textprobleme in Euripides' Orestes* (Göttingen 1955) 79–81; M. Reeve, "Interpolation in Greek Tragedy (i)," *GRBS* 13 (1972) 247–265, at 263–264. West (ad loc.) suggests that 1366 alone may be interpolated.

mitted text if we understand 1366–1368 as a deliberate, and highly effective, piece of audience misdirection (a technique which is used elsewhere in *Orestes*).⁵ That is, Euripides is drawing our attention to the *skene* doors in order to make the actual entry, from a different part of the stage, more of a surprise. Lines 1371–1372 clearly imply that the entrance was made from on high.⁶

But, in any case, the scholiast was surely wrong to believe that the actor leapt from the roof: such a movement would have been (perhaps suicidally) dangerous, even if the *skene* was comparatively low.⁷ Alternative solutions have been proposed: for instance, Verrall imagined that the actor's fall would have been broken by the bed on which Orestes was lying at the beginning of the prologue, while West has suggested that the actor may have lowered himself from the battlements gradually, using his hands or perhaps a rope.⁸ Of course it *could* have been managed like this. However, I believe that in fact the Phrygian made a more spectacular entrance by means of the mechanical crane (*mechane*).

The *mechane* is well attested for fifth-century drama, and even though it is hard to prove just how often, or in just which

⁵ E.g. *Or.* 71, 1214–1215, 1269–1270.

⁶ A. M. Dale, "Seen and Unseen on the Greek Stage: A Study in Scenic Conventions," *WS* 59 (1956) 96–106, at 103 [= *Collected Papers* (Cambridge 1967) 126–127], believed that the Phrygian in 1371–1372 "is of course explaining the imagined interior scene, when he scrambled out of the women's quarters, before reaching the visible outer doors through which he has just walked in the ordinary way." However, this explanation will not do, since, as West (ad loc.) points out, triglyphs (1371) are *external* features (carved beam-ends) and would have been visible to the audience: cf. *IT* 113, *Bacch.* 1214. Furthermore, it seems pointless for the Phrygian to go to the trouble of saying that he has escaped by climbing over the roof, if his entry is actually made, unremarkably, at ground level.

⁷ Thus Willink 306: "The eight-foot-high *skene* postulated by P. Arnott (accepted by West, *JHS* 1979, 137) is an unhappy compromise: an implausibly low stage-building, but already perilously high for a jump down on to a hard surface."

⁸ A. W. Verrall, *Essays on Four Plays of Euripides* (Cambridge 1905) 248; West (n.1) 276.

scenes, it was used,⁹ the Aristophanic parodies (in *Peace* and *Thesmophoriazusae*) demonstrate that Euripides was particularly fond of the device. There is no ancient account of the *mechane* (in its fifth-century form) which fully describes its workings, nor any surviving depictions or archaeological remains.¹⁰ Thus it is difficult to picture the device in exact detail; but it is obvious that it could be used for swinging actors into view and *either* keeping them airborne *or* depositing them safely at ground level, where they could detach themselves without much ado from the apparatus and walk around freely. This is demonstrated by the opening scene of Aristophanes' *Peace* (79–179), which is also valuable evidence for other aspects of the crane's operation.

The actor playing the part of the Phrygian would have soared into view at 1369 before being lowered to ground level and detached from the harness at some point during the following lines. An acrobatic entry (as suggested by the scholiast) would have been extraordinary, but a *flying* entry would have been even more striking (and also safer). The fact that there is no exact parallel for such an entry need not worry us too much (in a play which is otherwise full of unparalleled, extraordinary, or incongruous effects). However we look at it, the Phrygian's scene is unique—and so a unique mode of entry seems entirely fitting.

If the crane was used, it would in itself have created a powerful visual effect, but Euripides can also be seen here as having designed the production in order to give physical expression to what is elsewhere a common verbal metaphor. Characters *in extremis*, particularly in Euripides, very often give voice to escape-fantasies in the form of wishes to fly, to become like smoke, to join the birds of the air, to soar up into the ether—

⁹ See O. P. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford 1977) 434–451, for an extremely judicious discussion of the evidence.

¹⁰ The best modern account, which examines a number of previous theories (with valuable illustrations) is C. Ashby, *Classical Greek Theatre: New Views of an Old Subject* (Iowa City 1999) 81–87. Ashby (who has actually built a working *mechane*) concludes that the device took the form of a simple counterweighted pole and harness.

and so on.¹¹ The verses here in which the Phrygian sings about his desperate flight from the murderers, and his wish to fly up to the bright ether (πολιὸν αἰθέρ' ἀμπάμενος, 1377–1378), would take on an unusual extra level of significance if they were actually delivered from the air.

All of this may, of course, provoke the response: “So what?” It is easy enough to show that the crane *could* be used in this scene, as in many others, and it is easy to argue that its use would not be simply gratuitous. So I could happily go ahead and stage the scene like this in my own production if I wanted to. However, my own views on stagecraft will not be of interest to the readers of this journal, who are (or ought to be) more concerned with finding out, if possible, how Euripides himself staged the scene. And there are, I think, two particular reasons for believing that Euripides’ own production of *Orestes* probably did use the crane at 1369 (and that it makes a difference).

The first reason is connected to the play’s intellectual themes. As several scholars have pointed out, *Orestes* contains a large number of references to the cosmological theories of Empedocles and Anaxagoras, and (in particular) to objects, or persons, being *whirled around* in space.¹² Both in the prologue (4–10) and in the lyric *kommos* (982–987) Electra refers to her ancestor Tantalus, who is said to be in a state of perpetual suspension in mid-air, doomed to spend eternity zooming about over Mount Olympus, alongside (or underneath) a rock that is also attached to Olympus by golden chains. However bizarre this image may seem to us, it must be said that Euripides’ cosmological description of the world and its whirlings-around seems to bear an uncanny resemblance to the operation and appearance of

¹¹ E.g. *Andr.* 861–864; *Hel.* 1451; *Hipp.* 732–735; *Ion* 746; *IT* 1089, 1138; Aesch. *Suppl.* 777; Soph. *OC* 1081. R. Padel, “‘Imagery of the Elsewhere’: Two Choral Odes of Euripides,” *CQ* 24 (1974) 227–241, discusses this use of the “εἶθε γενοίμην theme”; cf. M. E. Wright, *Euripides’ Escape-Tragedies: A Study of Helen, Andromeda, and Iphigenia among the Taurians* (Oxford 2005) 219–222.

¹² R. Scodel, “Tantalus and Anaxagoras,” *HSCP* 88 (1984) 13–24; E. M. Hall, “Political and Cosmic Turbulence in Euripides’ *Orestes*,” in A. H. Sommerstein et al. (eds.), *Tragedy, Comedy and the Polis* (Bari 1993) 263–285.

the *mechane*. This similarity has been noted by David Wiles in his study of the “vertical axis” in the Greek theatre. Wiles does not discuss the Phrygian’s scene, but he shows, very effectively, that Electra’s descriptions of Tantalus and the cosmos in *Orestes* anticipate the use of the *mechane* by the actor playing Apollo in the final scene (1631–1690).¹³

It can often seem that the *mechane* existed simply to provide a degree of visual panache (albeit of a rather creaky sort); but clearly it could also be used in a conceptually more ambitious way, in order to give a symbolic meaning to theatrical space. In *Orestes*, the whirlings of the crane come to reflect, in a sense, the whirlings of the cosmos. A very similar association of theatrical space with intellectual meaning—this time rather more exaggerated and ludicrous—is seen in Aristophanes’ *Clouds* (217–273). The “Socrates” character there is also propelled about the stage by the *mechane* as he expounds his crazy ideas about modern science and technology, saying that he is “walking on air” (ἀεροβατῶ καὶ περιφρονῶ τὸν ἥλιον, 225). Thus in comedy the *mechane* (in a further extension of meaning) is used to represent the wispy meanderings of a philosopher’s thoughts, as well as the actual object of those thoughts.¹⁴

There is a second, perhaps even more compelling, reason to think that the *mechane* would be highly appropriate for the Phrygian’s entry. As before, this explanation reflects the thematic concerns of the play as a whole, but this time, it can be linked to Euripides’ well-known taste for literary allusiveness and self-referentiality.¹⁵ My solution makes sense of an otherwise odd-sounding exchange (1519–1521) which occurs during

¹³ D. Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning* (Cambridge 1997) 183: “the use of the crane in *Electra* and *Orestes* ... reflects concerns with the cosmos and with the reliability of visual perception.”

¹⁴ Cf. Plato *Ap.* 19C, where Socrates complains about his depiction in *Clouds* as someone who is whirled about the stage (περιφερόμενον) talking nonsense. In both *Orestes* and *Clouds* reference is made to the quasi-technical term δίνη, a “buzz-word” of contemporary cosmology, which was used of the motion of heavenly bodies through the ether. See K. J. Dover, *Aristophanes Clouds* (Oxford 1968) 150 (Δίνος).

¹⁵ On which see F. I. Zeitlin, “The Closet of Masks: Role-Playing and Myth-Making in Euripides’ *Orestes*,” *Ramus* 9 (1980) 51–77.

the dialogue between Orestes and the Phrygian at the end of the aria. Here Orestes has been threatening the Phrygian with his sword:

ΦΡ. ἄπεχε φάσγανον· πέλας γὰρ δεινὸν ἀνταυγεί φόνον.

ΟΡ. μὴ πέτρος γένη δέδοικας, ὥστε Γοργόν' εἰσιδών;

ΦΡ. μὴ μὲν οὖν νεκρός· τὸ Γοργοῦς δ' οὐ κάποιδ' ἐγὼ κάρα.

Phrygian: Keep your sword away from me: at this range it has a terrible, murderous glint.

Orestes: Surely you aren't afraid of turning into stone, as if you had glimpsed the Gorgon?

Phrygian: No, I'm afraid of turning into a corpse: I've never heard of the Gorgon's head.

This is by any standard a peculiar exchange, but especially so if one judges it by the standards of tragedy: it is hard to interpret except as a sort of joke. But what sort of joke, precisely? And, more curiously still, why does the Phrygian say τὸ Γοργοῦς ... κάρα? (Orestes never specifically mentioned a *head*.) Clearly we cannot take the Phrygian's professed ignorance at face value: it sounds as if he *has* indeed heard of the Gorgon's head. But in any case, it is surprising that the Gorgon should have been mentioned at all here: Medusa has no obvious relevance in the current context, and the conversation quickly changes direction at 1522 ff., as if these odd lines had not been spoken.

What, then, is the point of these lines? It seems probable to me that their incongruity is entirely deliberate, and that in fact they constitute a self-conscious reference to *Andromeda*, one of Euripides' own tragedies, performed at the Dionysia in 412, four years before *Orestes*. In this earlier play, Perseus arrived in Ethiopia fresh from slaying the Gorgon, carrying the severed head in his satchel (fr.123 Kannicht), and it may well be that the plot of this lost tragedy involved one of the characters' being turned to stone (or, at least, the threat of petrification).¹⁶ Now *Orestes* is notoriously full of allusions, quotations, and intertextual references to works by Euripides himself and others (including, significantly, a large number of allusions to *Helen*,

¹⁶ See Wright, *Euripides' Escape-Tragedies* 121–124; cf. C. Collard, M. J. Cropp, and J. Gibert, *Euripides: Selected Fragmentary Plays II* (Oxford 2005) 133–143.

one of the other tragedies staged alongside *Andromeda* in 412),¹⁷ which means that a reference to *Andromeda* in our scene would not be at all out of place. Nevertheless, the allusion or “joke” (or what you will) would make more sense if there was something *specific* about the Phrygian’s scene here that recalled some *specific* detail of *Andromeda*. I suggest that the resemblance between the scenes in question was primarily visual and performative.

One of the most striking scenes in *Andromeda* was the initial entry of Perseus, who was imagined as flying on winged sandals, “planting my foot on high, cutting a path through the midst of the ether” (διὰ μέσου γὰρ αἰθέρος / τέμνων κέλευθον πόδα τίθημι’ ὑπόπτερον, fr.124 Kannicht). This scene made such a powerful impression on the audience that Aristophanes parodied it in his *Thesmophoriazusae* (1008–1132); and Euripides himself even made what looks like a parodic self-allusion to the scene at *Cyclops* 222–227.¹⁸ It is obvious that this scene was firmly established in the memory of those who had seen it. What the Aristophanic parody demonstrates, crucially, is that Perseus’ entry was made on high, using the *mechane*, and that this mode of entry was perceived as extraordinary.¹⁹ If the entry of the Phrygian in *Orestes* was stage-managed in precisely the same way, it would immediately and unmistakably have recalled the earlier scene (via the Aristophanic version).²⁰ In that case, the point of the reference to the Gorgon at *Or.* 1520–1521 is that it verbally reinforces the intertextual allusion that has already been made on a visual level.

¹⁷ See M. E. Wright, “*Orestes*, A Euripidean Sequel,” *CQ* 56 (2006) 33–47.

¹⁸ See R. Seaford, *Euripides: Cyclops* (Oxford 1984) 49.

¹⁹ On the staging of the scenes in *Thesm.* and *Andromeda*, see A. H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes: Thesmophoriazusae* (Warminster 1994) 222–223, and D. J. Mastronarde, *Contact and Discontinuity: Some Conventions of Speech and Action on the Greek Tragic Stage* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1990) 280.

²⁰ It may even be that *Or.* featured members of the same cast who had appeared in *Andromeda* (a play which, like *Or.*, demands at least one highly versatile and “operatic” monodist). On the increasing professionalism of specialized singing actors in the last years of the fifth century, see E. M. Hall, “Actor’s Song in Tragedy,” in S. Goldhill and R. Osborne (eds.), *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge 1999) 96–122.

In conclusion, then, I believe that the *mechane* provides the solution to the difficulty of the Phrygian's entrance in *Orestes*. Now it may be thought that anyone who claims to have the "solution" to any problem in ancient drama is insanely overconfident, since so little is known for certain about the ancient theatre and its stage-machinery. But my proposed solution can be shown to fit in with the thematic and intellectual preoccupations of the play and with what we know of Euripides' technique as a dramatist. As I have tried to show, the management of the Phrygian's entrance can be seen as exemplifying Euripides' dazzling cleverness, his penchant for the unexpected, his combination of verbal and visual motifs, his ludic self-allusion, his use of the language and imagery of contemporary science, and the fact that (as so often) acting and spectacle are linked to the meaning. It is worth revisiting what may seem to be small or trivial questions of staging, because in Greek tragedy almost no detail is superfluous. Even if our questions cannot be definitely answered, the act of posing them can perhaps bring us a little closer to understanding what Euripides might have been trying to do.

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