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ARTICLE

The enemies of the People in Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War: Euripides' *Orestes* and the rifts among the aristocrats

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Abstract: This article integrates theoretical concepts not typically associated with ancient history, including generation, elite theory, and the horizon of expectation. It examines how political tensions in ancient Athens are culturally expressed in theatre, focusing on Euripides' *Orestes*. Through the lens of historical consciousness and

memory, the study explores how historical meaning is attributed and how existential temporality influences the interpretation of the past and present. The paper addresses whether rhetorical positions defending antidemocratic policies can be discerned in theatrical performances, identifying threats to democratic governance and the political arenas where crucial decisions are made. By analyzing Euripides' *Orestes* (lines 682–775), the article aims to uncover the city's response to political crises during the Peloponnesian War.

Keywords: *Orestes*, generation, Euripides, Peloponnesian War.

Introduction

The framework of this text integrates concepts derived from a theoretical background not commonly encountered in the crafting of an article about ancient history.[1] These encompass ideas of generation, insights from elite theory, and the notion of the horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*). The latter, though initially appearing more intricate, accentuates the ontological manifestation of memory within a historical context, especially that experienced by Euripides during the composition of his *Orestes*[2] (Koselleck, 2006; Ricoeur, 2000).Collective understanding of individuals can be

[1] I would like to acknowledge the deep and illuminating morning conversations I had with Reuben Shultz during the Montréal winter of 2023. Thank you for generously spending your time debating ideas about both ancient and modern democracy with me. Naturally, any errors that remain in the text are my own responsibility. An initial draft of this text was presented at the "XIX Seminário Internacional Archai: Democracia Antiga Revisitada" in Brasília, 2022. I would like to express my gratitude to Gabriele Cornelli for the invitation to participate in this seminar. This research is supported by FAPERJ – Jovem Cientista do Nosso Estado and the Prociência scholarship from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ).

[2] All translations of the analyzed play fragments were done by the author of the article, based on the Orestes Greek text available in the Perseus Digital Library. Other consulted translations are listed in the references or explicitly mentioned when used.

facilitated through the concept of generation. This notion enables us to grasp the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), which does not encompass the entirety of the world but rather encapsulates what humans carry in their experiences (Weberman, 2008). This concerns to what they project through acts of historical consciousness (*Geschichtsbewusstsein*). In its cognitive processes, historical consciousness shapes a horizon of expectation—indicating what is to come or, at the very least, is anticipated through the exercise of consciousness—and involves the attribution of historical meaning (*Historische Sinnbildung*) (Assis, 2010; Rüsen, 2001, 2020).[3] Crossing between these ideas, this article seeks to comprehend how political tensions can find cultural expression in the theatre of ancient Athens.

François Bédarida, recalling his relationship with Arnaldo Momigliano, pointed out that his Italian friend was averse to any distinction between research and life, between the investigation of remote times and the contemporary life experience (Bédarida, 2006, p. 220). Alike Bédarida, we must remember that the historiographical operation, as conceptualized by Michel de Certeau (Certeau, 2011), is inscribed, above all, in the dynamic of looking at historical time from one's own experience (Marincola, 2012; Momigliano, 2012). Herodotus and Thucydides are interesting examples of this *Erwartungshorizont*, because even though they were "pairs affirmed by their own antagonism (…) there is no protagonism without antagonists"[4] (Brandão, 2016, p. 19), as will be seen later in the dispute between Aeschylus and Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. This theoretical framework is important not only for understanding the generation as a social phenomenon in the work of historians but

[3] The debates concerning the issue of historical consciousness are part of a long philosophical trajectory impossible to summarize here. It is important to emphasize, however, a certain caution when presupposing exercises of consciousness as something transcendental or universal. Conversely, the prudence here is not to impose upon the ancient Greeks or any other cultures a temporal relationship that would be alien to them.

[4] All texts originally written in a modern language other than English were translated by the article's author.

also for those who transform life into metaphor, performing in the Sanctuary of Dionysus in Euripides' Athens.

Far from delving into the entire debate on the mutations of history in modernity, we interrupt our reflection here. We are only interested in contemplating what Ricoeur called the ontology of existence (2000, p. 358).[5] Temporality is "the existential precondition of the reference of memory and history to the past" (Ricoeur, 2000, p. 184). Understanding the historical condition of Euripides is, in some way, comprehending the possibilities of studying the past (and the present) that he expresses in his broken mirrors, as Pierre Vidal-Naquet observed (2002, p. 118), regarding pasts that referred to their horizons of expectation, to experiences mediated by his historical consciousness.

A central question guides the scope of this paper: Is it possible to discern the rhetorical stances of certain tragic characters used to defend antidemocratic government policies in theatrical performances? This article aims to examine these rhetorical stances at the textual level, while also allowing for some speculation regarding audience reception during the reenactments that typically characterize tragic narratives performed at the religious Athenian festival dedicated to Dionysos.

Furthermore, we intend to address more specific questions in the course of this text, such as: Who threatens the government of the people and when does it occur? In which political arenas do characters and collective entities, like the people, make their decisions? What tensions can be identified through a careful analysis of passages dealing with political themes? How does the city respond to political issues in times of crisis? Thus, this article aims to discuss these questions through the analysis of a passage from Euripides'

[5] "(…) une question qui dépasse les ressources de l'épistémologie de l'historiographie et se tient au seuil d'une ontologie de l'existence en histoire ; à celle-ci je réserve le vocable de condition historique" (Ricœur, 2000, p. 358).

Orestes (v. 682–803), a tragedy staged in the final years of the Peloponnesian War, likely in 408 BC.

Some Theoretical Nexus

The concept of generation serves as a heuristic tool, enabling the articulation and interpretation of various historical processes and social actions. Traditionally, it structures the progression of human life and its intergenerational relationships. However, these connections do not preclude the existence of divergent and conflicting scenarios and ideas. It is a misconception to assume that belonging to the same generation implies immersion in an environment of consensus and cohesion. This misleading impression is often encountered in the common sense when discussing the generations of the 1980s, 90s, and so forth. In this way, the idea of generation can remain both unclear and vague. Nevertheless, it remains intriguing from a heuristic standpoint when the application of the concept aligns with the appropriate empirical reality (Portuondo, 1981).

Some time ago, Ron Eyerman and Bryan Turner associated this concept with that of *habitus*, as expressed in Bourdieu's sociology (Bourdieu, 1989). According to them, it is important to understand how certain dispositions are incorporated by individuals or groups, influencing their practices and social interactions within a spatiotemporal context (Eyerman; Turner, 1998, p. 99). Generation is a bio-social concept, presupposing a life span to which all human beings are inexorably bound. Nevertheless, the forms of interaction depend on sociocultural elements that all societies develop as a fundamental means of ensuring their continuity over time.

In essence, the concept of generation not only aids in contemplating Euripides' tragic repertoire but also facilitates the inference of social dynamics, including the social structures and circumstances that could have influenced the author's choice of certain plot directions over others. Put more directly, our objective is to explore how Euripides communicates not only his perspective on

specific events but also the tensions between the narrative world of the play and his own horizon of expectations. This horizon is derived from a generation contending with the uncertainties of the conclusion of a fratricidal war.

The context in which the portrayal of *Orestes*, along with all other Attic tragedies until at least the conclusion of the Classical period, is embedded is a religious performance ritual that has been extensively debated (Calame, 2017; Moerbeck, 2017; Sourvinou-Inwood, 2003). While this discourse has been thoroughly explored elsewhere, we wish to underscore not only that Athens was a society that highly valued performance across its various dimensions but also that tragedy constituted a component of a city festival that heightened the *agon*, enthusiastically welcoming the mighty god, Dionysus, from the borders of Attica.[6]

The formulation of the concept of "social drama" by Victor Turner is crucial in establishing a connection between theatrical expression and moments of social or political crisis (Turner, 1982, p. 9–11). Few instances in the history of Athens were as emblematic as the *stasis* during the final period of the Peloponnesian War. By concentrating on the ritual dynamics, metaphors, and symbolic elements of tragic writing, one can delve into its social and political impact. Furthermore, symbols in theatre possess the ability to communicate and prompt reflection beyond what is explicitly presented on the stage. It is worth contemplating how (Moerbeck, 2017, p. 50.)

Regarding the concept of social drama, our primary focus is to comprehend the fractures within the Athenian elites and how they interplay with the authority of the people, the assembly, and their

[6] It is always good to recall the fate of Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae* to get an idea of how Dionysus could be dangerous to human audacity.

decisions in the Argos of *Orestes*. However, this study will not explore the well-known passage that depicts the debate into the assembly, but specifically, it will concentrate on the preamble to the meeting in the Argos' *Ecclesia*. More precisely, the excerpt from verses 683 to 807, where Orestes endeavours to persuade his uncle, Menelaus, to align with his cause and support him, even employing force, if necessary, against the people of Argos.

Our focus lies in the actions concerning Orestes's adversaries within the elite, particularly Menelaus and Tyndareus, who is Clytemnestra's father. In this regard, a few insights from Vilfredo Pareto's theory of elites become relevant, especially when he asserted in 1902 that aristocracies are impermanent, and "history represents a theatre of continuous struggle between one aristocracy and another" (Bobbio, 1998, p. 386). While we don't intend to adopt Pareto's view of political power as an ongoing struggle between aristocracies in history, it is thought-provoking to contemplate the internal conflicts within aristocratic factions, the ἑταιρείας. Thus, rather than oversimplifying it as a dichotomy between the *demos* and the *aristoi* debate (Trabulsi, 2001, p. 107-8; Gallego, 2021, p. 38-9; Moerbeck, 2014, p. 36) — as seen in the *Old Oligarch* pamphlet (*Ps. Xen. Const. Ath.*) attributing characteristics such as "licentiousness (*akolasía*), injustice (*adikía*), and disorder (*ataxía*)" to democracy (Gallego, 2018, p. 134) — it is crucial to heed the ambiguities within the elite discourse.

The play seen from above, through the semiotics of the semantic structures of the theatrical text.

The process of organizing the play's text for study adhered to the semiotic analysis of discourse outlined by Algirdas Greimas and adapted for historiographical reasoning by Ciro Flamarion Cardoso.[7] Put simply, this method involves:

[7] "[…] isotopic reading […] allows one to resolve ambiguities present in the text (semantic ambiguities) by guiding the search for a single interpretation (that is, oriented by the identified isotopies) " (Cardoso, 1997, p. 17).

The thematic level (network): This pertains to speeches and narratives within the discourse.

The figurative level: This involves elements perceivable through the five senses, derived from visual and auditory perceptions.

The axiological level: This concerns the systems of values expressed within the text itself, delving into what is considered positive or negative based on moral judgments (Moerbeck; Desjardins, 2022, p. 160).

The primary narrative of *Orestes* is rather straightforward, yet the plot unfolds unexpectedly and eventfully, diverging from older myth traditions, including those of preceding tragedies like *Electra* and the *Oresteia* trilogy by Sophocles and Aeschylus, respectively. It revolves around the aftermath of the deaths of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, orchestrated by the siblings Orestes and Electra, with the involvement of Orestes's best friend, Pylades.

The focal point of the narrative is the debates among certain characters (Orestes, Pylades, Menelaus, and Tyndareus) concerning the trial for Clytemnestra's death, set to be conducted by the assembled people. After an extended period of anticipation and deliberation, the assembly decides to condemn the siblings to death. Despite the assembly's verdict, a series of actions, injecting notable pace into the play, leads the siblings and Pylades into a conspiracy to assassinate Helen, Hermione, Menelaus, and anyone obstructing Orestes's path.

Reaching the climax, on the verge of bloodshed and the paroxysm of the play, the god Apollo intervenes to adjudicate the conflicts. He issues commands to each of the involved characters, including the people of Argos, assigning different tasks that ultimately reconcile the antagonisms. Some of Apollo's words foreshadow another tragedy by the same author, *Andromache*, while also recalling the diverse resolutions presented by Aeschylus in his *Oresteia*, performed fifty years before *Orestes*, in 458 BC.

In considering a historical setting for the assembly's decisions and the debates within Euripides's sphere of experiences, it is

noteworthy to emphasize that *Orestes* was written during the interlude between two *stasis* events, namely the oligarchic coup d'état of 411 and 404. Julián Gallego highlights that "no privilege for the aristocracy seems to survive after the coup of the Four Hundred since they must submit to the will of the people and their leaders within the framework of an assembly device that decides everything" (Gallego, 2021, p. 40).

A substantial portion of the play engages with the axiological level, involving moral and ethical judgments among the characters and their actions, both past and awaited. However, it is feasible to delineate some of these thematic networks with a degree of clarity. The first one centres on the dichotomy of justice versus injustice and guilt versus innocence. The second is intertwined with interpersonal dynamics and judgments, wherein a notable portion of the axiological elements comes to the fore.

Several noteworthy markers in the plot merit attention. The opening scene unfolds six days after Clytemnestra's demise, with Electra discovered beside an unconscious Orestes. In the play's denouement, Apollo's discourse spares Helen, directing Orestes to depart for Arcadia and then proceed to Athens after a year for judgment. Apollo dictates that Orestes must marry Hermione, a woman he had just threatened to kill. The god assumes full responsibility for Clytemnestra's death. Notably, Peace, the cherished goddess, makes an appearance towards the play's conclusion, perhaps symbolizing a much-needed respite for Athens, which has long been deprived of the soothing influence of peace (v. 1625ff).

Another several figurative elements hold significance in understanding the play as well, especially concerning Electra, Orestes, Pylades, Helen, and the god Apollo. The shedding of the mother's blood is intricately linked to Orestes's mental and physical state, prompting contemplation on the symbolism of familial blood contamination (v. 46–53; 402; 529-31).

The Tragedy of Orestes in Argos

Moving on to the analysis of the passage in *Orestes* that interests us, a first noteworthy aspect appears in verses 718 to 728. In these ten verses, Orestes occupies himself with cursing Menelaus, a common practice among the characters in this play, after asking for his help but not receiving it. Menelaus had already warned him that he wouldn't engage in helping him by force of arms, but only through persuasion (v. 682 ff.). First, Agamemnon's brother reveals his own powerlessness, for "he had been left with friends who were weak in battle" (σμικρᾷ σὺν ἀλκῇ τῶν λελειμμένων φίλων) (v. 690).

This already means that nothing would be resolved forcefully. Was it Menelaus' conviction or contingent pragmatism? Undoubtedly, the latter sounds true, but it doesn't invalidate considering one counterfactual example: what if Menelaus had the necessary strength (ἀλκῇ), would his attitude had been different? Initially, one should remember that the gates of Argos were closed, and there was no easy way out for Orestes's situation (Holzhausen, p. 26). Let us also recall that, just before, Menelaus himself had said, "If the god grants the power, to be killed and to murder enemies" (δύναμιν ἢν διδῷ θεός …) (v. 685), (…). Note that δύναμιν ἢν διδῷ θεός is a clause that conditions that action to the need for divine assistance, in this case, to intervene in favour of "the relatives" (τῶν ὁμαιμόνων) (v.684).

It seems relevant to comprehend whether this dialogue express the effective Menelaus' lack of power, even though transparently encompasses a talk on carefully chosen words, or if it involves an attempt to mask his lack of will, justifying himself through the absence of means to act. Regardless, the solution presented by Menelaus follows promptly. One must resort to "smooth speeches" (μαλθακοῖς λόγοις v. 692), employing gentle discourse towards the people of Argos. In another reading, it can be interpreted as cowardly words. Further along, he adds, "It is necessary to save you, I say nothing else, through wisdom, not through violence in the face of those who are stronger" (δεῖ δέ μ᾽ — οὐκ ἄλλως λέγω — σῴζειν σε

σοφίᾳ, μὴ βίᾳ τῶν κρεισσόνων) (v. 710-11). Firstly, it's important to question, who were the stronger?[8]

In examining this passage, a pertinent question arises: Is Menelaus referring solely to a select group of Argos citizens or to the entire "populace"? Precision in this determination proves challenging, but one key issue demands attention. The significance of the term ἡβᾷ implies a connection to youth, specifically the vigour associated with it. Menelaus discredits the people and their decisions, attributing it to their excessive tendencies, reminiscent of youthful exuberance. However, could this not be the same literary *topos* that propels cities into wars, often driven by the unrestrained actions of aristocratic youth? This recurrent pattern becomes ritualized as a social drama on various occasions, as evidenced in the *Suppliants*, where the youth led Adrastus into a war against Thebes, entangling himself in the misfortune of the Labdacids. It is crucial to emphasize that this tragedy was performed during a period of strained relations within the Athenian elite. On one front, Nicias advocated for a truce, while on the opposing side, Alcibiades exerted significant influence over the Sicilian expedition (Moerbeck, 2017; 2019).

Menelaus appears uninterested in actively supporting the people's cause against Orestes, nor does he emerge as a steadfast ally of Orestes. The Agamemnon's brother subtly alludes to the existing fractures within the noble and virtuous household, which become

[8] This passage has received similar interpretations. Augusta Fernanda de Oliveira e Silva (1999) translates it as "(…) slip into anger and become furious," while Martin West (1990) renders it as "(…) the people become angry and uncontrollable." David Kovacs (2002) translates the same passage as "the common people fall into a rage."Were the people who, as translated by Augusta Fernanda de Oliveira e Silva (1999), "(…) slip into anger and become furious"; or as preferred by Martin West (1990), "When the people become angry and uncontrollable"; the same passage by David Kovacs (2002) "When the common people fall into a rage"?

more apparent in a subsequent speech where Orestes asserts that "the familial connection he [Menelaus] prioritizes surpasses the one with [my] father" (τὸ τοῦδε κῆδος μᾶλλον εἴλετ᾽ ἢ πατρός) (v. 753). Ultimately, in the concluding remarks of his discourse, whether driven by resignation or cunning, Menelaus submits to fate, chance, and *týché*.

It's noteworthy, as Louise Cilliers (1991, p. 21) aptly pointed out, that the burden on Menelaus' shoulders is substantial, especially considering that his brother, Agamemnon, rallied all the Achaeans for a decade-long war in Troy. Additionally, reaching the Phrygian city required the Greek leader to sacrifice his own daughter, Iphigenia, to secure favourable winds, a sacrifice made in Aulis, in the region of Boeotia, to facilitate the journey to the coast of Asia Minor.

There is little doubt that Orestes anticipate a resolution through force and arms, as he vehemently expresses, humiliating Menelaus with biting words: "Oh, to sail because of a woman and command an army in vain; oh, [you are] the most unscrupulous in honouring friends, you turn your back on me and flee". (ὦ πλὴν γυναικὸς οὕνεκα στρατηλατεῖν τἄλλ᾽ οὐδέν, ὦ κάκιστε τιμωρεῖν φίλοις, φεύγεις ἀποστραφείς με) (v. 718-20). Furthermore, addressing Pylades, he declares, "Menelaus is the worst towards me and my sister" (Μενέλεως κάκιστος ἐς ἐμὲ καὶ κασιγνήτην ἐμήν) (v. 736). Additionally, Agamemnon's brother would have assumed a cautious and discreet stance (εὐλαβεῖθ᾽ v. 748), prudence similarly depicted negatively by Thucydides in the events preceding the Peloponnesian War (Moerbeck, 2017, p. 293; Taylor, 2010, p. 4; 188–223) and by Euripides himself in the *Suppliants*, concerning Thebes (v. 321-5). This caution, in this context, raises suspicions about the true intentions behind the actions taken; furthermore, in this literature, caution is linked with the intrigues of oligarchy.

In the narrative, Menelaus is distinctly characterized as wicked and cowardly, contrasting sharply with the portrayal of Pylades as the constant and loyal friend who unwaveringly supports Orestes. Nevertheless, it is revealed that Pylades had been expelled from his

home by his father upon discovering that his son had assisted Orestes (v. 765). Orestes's transgression extends beyond the confines of city laws; it holds a broader cultural significance, exemplified by the reaction of Strophius, Pylades' father. Consequently, the issue transcends mere legal considerations and evolves into a matter of cultural acknowledgment.

The animosity directed towards Menelaus takes on a transformative quality, an unrestrained madness. This perspective partially elucidates the tumultuous conclusion of the play and Orestes' pursuit of familial revenge against Helen.[9] The narrative swiftly pivots to a negative portrayal of Helen, labelling her as "wicked woman" (κακῆς γυναικὸ)[10] (v. 737), "and the most treacherous wife," (καὶ δάμαρτα τὴν κακίστην) (v. 741), "Where is that woman who caused the destruction of the majority of the Achaeans?" (ποῦ "στιν ἣ πλείστους Ἀχαιῶν ὤλεσεν γυνὴ μία;) (v. 743).

Concerning the issue at hand, who holds the authority to determine Orestes's fate? Orestes asserts, "as for us, the citizens, vote will determine what is necessary regarding the murder"[11] (ψῆφον ἀμφ᾽ ἡμῶν πολίτας ἐπὶ φόνῳ θέσθαι χρεών) (v. 756). While reiterating his standpoint, Orestes subtly critiques the people, stating, "terrible are the masses when they have wicked leaders," (δεινὸν οἱ πολλοί, κακούργους ὅταν ἔχωσι προστάτας) (v. 772). The emphasis on the plural suggests a broad perspective, encompassing the masses

[9] Death by stoning—revenge for a greater evil, against the matricides, against Helen who caused so many young men to witness death: (v. 63–72; 1181–1190; 1200-01; 1333-42; 1393-97; 1659). "The violent punishments of stoning or beheading, which were unusual in Athens, alone indicate the character of the popular emotions" (Holzhausen, 2003, p. 34).

[10] It is not only about Helen's position but also about the elite's view of women in society. The position of women (v. 43–44; v. 624-5); Electra as the unmarried one (v. 84–85); Helen asks Electra (an unmarried woman) to pour libations in her place, denying that her daughter (Hermione) should go for the same reason—an unmarried woman (v. 120–121).

[11] The translations of this passage are quite varied; I align much more with Martin West's.

or the people irrespective of the city. Choosing a singular translation with a plural connotation, like "the multitude" or "the people," might slightly dilute the unrestricted sense Orestes aims to convey. Contrastingly, according to his friend Pylades, "but when they have good [advice], they always take it" (ἀλλ᾽ ὅταν χρηστοὺς λάβωσι, χρηστὰ βουλεύουσ᾽ ἀεί) (v. 773). It's essential to note the straightforward correlation between virtuous leaders and the imperative for rational guidance for the masses to make prudent decisions.

Can one deduce that the masses require competent leaders as a form of guidance to prevent hasty and naive decision-making, akin to the common tendencies observed in youth? Are the people comparable to a young *ephēbos* in need of tutelage? Undoubtedly, Euripides prompts the Athenian audience to contemplate various political and historical complexities, introducing a social drama that challenges perspectives in the midst of onstage crises, with relevance extending to society itself. Could this be the reasoning behind Aristophanes consigning Euripides, known for his sincere discourse, remain in Hades? Are we exploring the issue of misology?

It is essential to note that *isegoria* is presupposed in Orestes's speech to Pylades. In the subsequent lines (v.775ff.), their discussion revolves around the prospect of Orestes addressing the assembly of Argos in his defence. He contemplates the potential acceptance of his arguments, stating, "if he should be fortunate," (εἰ τύχοι, γένοιτ᾽ ἄν) (v. 780). As Orestes reaffirms the justness of his cause, Pylades employs terms familiar in Greek literature concerning forensic rhetoric, particularly the verb *dokéō*. Pylades implores that Orestes's speech is deemed truthful by the people of Argos (v. 782). This touches upon the nuanced boundary between what is true and what appears to be true, echoing the well-known debate between Theaetetus and the Foreigner in Plato's *Sophist*, a discourse that inspired Pierre Vidal-Naquet to craft one of the most impactful passages in his book, *Les assassins de la mémoire* (2005).

According to Holzhausen,

> Euripides indicates that the will to kill the citizen is triggered by factors other than the objective facts of matricide, in the People's Assembly is being tried, where the Palamedes case naturally has no place. It is the multitude of reasons and factors, both justified and unjustified, that constitute the danger of popular anger (Holzhausen, 2003, p. 29).

If Orestes possessed knowledge of the justice behind his actions, should he not be concerned with presenting himself as truthful to the assembly? Given the performative dynamics inherent in the forensic routines of fifth and fourth centuries BC Athens, it is imperative that he do so. Orestes must conscientiously consider the manner of his presentation in the city's court/assembly. Moreover, the role of emotions in the political arena must not be diminished, as emotions have been established as a crucial determinant in politics (Nussbaum, 2013). The emotions of the crowd become particularly perilous when exploited by an individual (Holzhausen, 2003, p. 29). During the expedition to Sicily, two emotions, distrust and fear, profoundly influenced the *demos*, ultimately culminating in an oligarchic coup, as highlighted by Thucydides (Paiaro, 2019, p. 168). Euripides, in the *Phoenician Women*, shared concerns about the unrestrained pursuit of power, amalgamating decisions in moments of distress, underlining that the outcomes of political decisions are often intertwined with rhetorical prowess (Gallego, 2003; Holzhausen 2003; Moerbeck, 2014; 2017).

The challenge posed by Orestes extends beyond being responsible to justice in Argos; it also implicates a divine dimension (Polinskaia, 2013). Orestes, as depicted in Mateus Dagios's work (2015), grapples with his illness, foreseeing the encroaching madness of ancestral murderers and contemplating the discomfort of coexisting with a sick individual. The theme of illness, even when construed metaphorically, disrupts communicability among the characters. According to Dagios, "the notion of illness (*nósos*) is a frequently employed metaphor in Greek tragedies (…) [and] lead to the breakdown of communicability, (…), isolating him [Orestes]

within the polis" (Dagios, 2015, 131; 33). Orestes's contamination, progressively driving him towards insanity, stems from the pollution caused by the shedding of blood—a well-established motif in tragedies, serving as a thematic link (Meinel, 2015, p. 2). Instances such as Oedipus becoming a *pharmākos* when leaving Thebes for Colonus in Sophocles's narratives (Vernant; Vidal-Naquet, 1999) demonstrate this concept. Orestes follows a similar symbolic path by heading to Athens but not without first sowing chaos in Euripides' tragedy. Additionally, the communicability highlighted by Dagios appears to foster political implications, as the fratricidal brothers are silenced in adherence to the Argives' decree (Meinel, 2015, p. 178).

Following the political upheaval in 411, democracy is reinstated in Athens, accompanied by retribution and trials for the oligarchs implicated in the uprising. "Athens was caught in a deadly ideological battle that found political expression in the courts" (Hall, 1993, p. 265). Notably, Edith Hall observes that Orestes shares certain traits with Antiphon, an oligarch recently tried and sentenced to death (Thuc. 8.91.1; 8.68). The haunting question is: was it a dispute among the *hetairiai*, as suggested by Hall? Such a possibility remains open. More recently, Perczyk (2018) stresses the use of the term *hetairos*—comrade, companion—at the end of the second episode, emphasizing the significance of companionship even over family ties[12] (p. 6). Could this be indicative of Athens at the conclusion of the Peloponnesian War, where bonds within the *hetairia* extended beyond familial connection?[13] Consider the conclusion of the play, where, even with his daughter Hermione's life threatened by Orestes's sword, Menelaus remains impassive in his plea to the people of Argos on behalf of his nephew (Cilliers, 1991, p. 23).

Could one interpret Euripides as exposing Menelaus and his questionable character, alongside warning about the demagogic

[12] See: (v. 804).

[13] See note 31 in (Perczyk, 2018, p. 14) See Tuc. 3.82.6.

influence of sophists in the ecclesia and political opportunism?[14] Possibly, these issues are intertwined (Cilliers, 1991, p. 25-6). Falkner (1983) also highlights this aspect, linking it to Menelaus's meticulous actions and speaking style (p. 295). While I hesitate to address all these questions collectively, it's evident that Euripides is concerned with the issue of *philotimia* (the love of honour), as evident in the *Phoenician Women*, and with the perils of decision-making, as portrayed in the *Suppliants*. The challenge lies in establishing direct associations within an ideological framework. Care must be taken not to mistakenly align with the views of Aristophanes, asserting that Socrates was an unscrupulous sophist or preoccupied with irrelevant matters, as depicted in the *Clouds*. The peril is losing the analytical thread in the shadows of the ideological disputes of that era. However, it is certain, as emphasized from the outset, that the fractures within the elite are more of a consistent observation than necessarily an exception. This should dissuade us from solely focusing the analysis on the dichotomy of the people versus the elite.[15]

I am even less persuaded by Hall's arguments, primarily because of her use of oppositional pairs, somewhat akin to a structuralist approach, in perceiving a conflict between *eris* and *philia* in the play. While *philia* in the context of Greek thought may indeed be a *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1989; 1996), forming a framework that structures and establishes "a series of obligations and reciprocal duties between individuals" (Perczyk, 2018, p. 2), it is crucial to recall that the most emblematic friendship in the play, articulated by Pylades to Orestes, also indicates that "the fully dedicated friendship of these figures

[14] Cillers' discussion takes as its starting point Aristotle's own reflections in the Poetics (1454a, 1461b).

[15] Although it must be emphasized that this is a *topos* established in sources from the fifth century BC, it is within a markedly ideological environment. See Thucydides, 6.53.2: *hoi poneroí* contrasted with *hoi khrestoí*; Also see: *Orestes* (v. 772–773, v. 902–930: *hoi polloí* (the majority) confronted with hoi *khrestoí* (when the people are led by bad leaders, *kakoûrgoi*); Aristophanes, *Frogs*, v. 718–735 "*hoi khrestoí* (also *kaloì k'agathoí*, *eugeneîs*, etc.) facing *poneroí k'ak ponerôn* (also *xénoi kaì pyrríai*, etc.)" (Gallego, 2018, p. 235).

leads them to forget the ethical dimension in the pursuit of securing the happiness of the friend" (Lourenço, 2022, p. 142). Similarly, one should examine the Phrygian slave's depiction of Pylades as a "malicious one, a murderous serpent, a wicked person" (v. 1403-1407). This resonates with Tyndareus, who had long before identifying Orestes as a 'matricidal serpent '(v. 479).

Like Sophocles' portrayal in *Philoctetes*, the play encapsulates a conflict between the young and the old. Notably, Neoptolemus's actions are consistently guided by persuasion, whereas Orestes resorts to violence, singularly driven by the pursuit of his own salvation. In this quest, "Orestes (…) in the course of the play ceases to speak in terms of justice but rationalizes his hatred and vengeance in terms of his betrayal by Menelaus" (Falkner, 1983, p. 295). Could we contemplate these generational divisions as reflective of the leadership dynamics within the Athenian army during the Peloponnesian War? Is this yet another facet of the social drama presented in the play?

Conclusion

Instead of a definitive and traditional academic essay conclusion, I present questions that propel me towards further exploration, not only of additional fragments within this play but also beyond.

Athens, a city that had already faced the unfortunate endeavour of trying to conquer Syracuse in 415 BC, ostensibly to disrupt grain supplies to the Peloponnese, as documented by Thucydides (8.45-98), and underwent an oligarchic coup in 411 BC. At the time of the play's performance, Athens was navigating a course through deepening crises, marked by the defeat in the Peloponnesian War and the ascension of the Thirty Tyrants' regime in 404 BC, events chronicled by Xenophon in the *Hellenica* (2.3-4). Undoubtedly, this period signifies one of the most tumultuous eras in ancient Athenian history of which we have knowledge. It represents a moment of *stasis* and *metabolai*, posing a severe threat to the social structure. Indeed, the span from 411 to 403 BC can be perceived as "an open civil war

in which the systematic use of violence prevails" (Gallego, 2021, p. 30).

To what extent does the internal division within the elite pose a significant problem, particularly in the context of Alcibiades' Athens and the Sicilian expedition?

Delving into the research on the shattering of these elites across associations linked to the governance of the people may offer insights into the more nuanced aspects of the political scene and its less apparent dynamics, thus facilitating an understanding of the ideological bias and the *habitus* of democracy. Drawing connections between authors from the same generation, such as Euripides and Sophocles, and specifically considering *Oedipus at Colonus* (in exile) can contribute to this exploration. As Sarah Forsdyke (2005) once remarked, "(…) elites engaged in violent competition for power and frequently expelled one another from their poleis. I label this form of political conflict the "politics of exile" (p. 1–2). If the play can't be reduced to their political context, it would be imprudent to say that it can be explained without it (Sebastiani, 2018a; 2018b; Peczyk, 2019).

Numerous scholars, each with their own nuanced perspectives, underscore the political dimension of Euripides, the last of the great Athenian tragedians. This perception of Euripides was also evident among his contemporaries in ancient Athens. A notable instance is portrayed in Aristophanes' play *Frogs*, where the decision is to be made regarding which of the two poets, Aeschylus, or Euripides, should depart Hades and return to the struggling Athens. Ultimately, Aristophanes chooses to grant this privilege to Aeschylus. In this narrative, Aristophanes highlights one of Euripides's most emblematic characteristics. According to the comedian writer, Euripides consistently provided a voice to multiple characters with diverse backgrounds, openly expressing their perspectives in their plots. This embodiment of the concept of *parrhēsia* (Baker, 2011, p. 145-146) is considered one of the most relevant aspects associated with democratic discourse (*Ran*. v. 948-52).

> EURIPIDES: So, **from the very first lines** (ἀπὸ τῶν πρώτων ἐπῶν), no one was overlooked, for, to me, women had a voice, and so did the slave, as well as the master, the maiden, the old woman.
>
> AESCHYLUS: Well, really, was it necessary to kill you for such audacity?
>
> EURIPIDES: No, by Apollo, for what I did is democratic.

According to Elton Baker (2015), *parrhēsia* introduces the possibility of fostering dissenting opinions, thus establishing distinct levels of frank speech within various performative frameworks. Since each tragedy unfolds as an ephemeral event within the religious ritual of the polis, any inferences drawn from it within the sanctuary of Dionysus should be viewed as an act of speech that encompasses both its symbolic dimensions and social positioning. In other words, it aligns with what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as an "economy of linguistic exchanges" (Bourdieu, 2020) and can be analytically approached through a more laboratory-like examination, such as that performed by Claude Calame (1995) using the semiotics of discourse. Among the various approaches to analyzing this matter, those tied to the Anthropology of Performance, as presented by Richard Schechner and Victor Turner, are particularly stimulating, as the concept of social drama envisaged in this article (Schechner, 2020, Turner, 1982).

Indeed, speaking frankly, as suggested by the character of Aeschylus, could be perilous not only in ancient democracy but in a broader sense. According to Francis Dunn (1996), the tragedy *Orestes* is "the first work to portray this freedom of speech as a dangerous and negative license," as seen in the verse 905 (Dunn, 1996, p. 163). Dunn highlights the perils of *parrhēsia*, especially when it is in the mouth of an *idiṓtēs*, whose interests, seemingly aligned with the majority, may not be genuinely so. In this light, Orestes can be likened to the ridicule directed at Pisistratus in Aristophanes' *Birds*. However, akin to the observations frequently made by Julian Gallego (2003) and me a few years ago (Moerbeck,

2017), we have emphasized the hazards and ambiguities of demagogic speeches for democracy, particularly when propelled by *philotimia* (Wilson, 2003).

Revisiting the problem posed in the introduction, the political maneuvers orchestrated by figures clearly aligned with oligarchic tendencies, such as the *chrestoi* from the house of Atreus, involve agreements made in small groups or conspiracies not solely against the decisions of the people but also emphasising the fractures within their own ranks. If Menelaus is perceived as a potential sophist or a demagogic politician, his opportunism leads him to abstain from speaking in the assembly, opting instead to let others expose themselves to the inquiry of the people.

The generation of Euripides had to grapple not only with the omnipresence of war but also with a complexity and depth without precedents, except perhaps against the Persians or in the legendary Troy. However, the intricate dimension of the latter war was already part of a cultural imaginary and the education of the youth in their formation as citizens. The generational aspect proposed in the introduction, along with the conceptual framework emphasizing the dimension of human experience, may not assist us directly in the challenging task of reconstructing these extensive contexts through such fragmented and metaphorical means as classical drama. However, it sharpens our perspective, encouraging in the understanding of what becomes embedded as practice, ideology, *habitus*, and the elements that reveal themselves as innovative, sometimes transgressing the most established and socially respected norms.

While it remains a challenging endeavour to categorize Euripides as a disruptor tragedian, he was innovative without any doubt, inspired by the challenging dimensions of Athens and its democracy. Nonetheless, it is interesting that the play chaos was remedied only in the end, by the *deus ex machina* Apollo, a deity, and that the entire narrative of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* took surprising directions. Although Euripides did not witness the days of restored democracy in Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War, his horizon of

expectations is crystal clear, the relations between past, present and future, aptly reflect the social moment he lived in, especially concerning rhetorical positions employed in defence of antidemocratic government, as we have mentioned before. Thus, the sanctuary of Dionysus was not spared from being occupied by a social drama and the examination of the people.

Data Availability

Not applicable.

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