CHAPTER III

MELODRAMAS WITHOUT MESSAGE:

EURIPIDES' 'ELECTRA' AND 'ORESTES'
By the time of Euripides, Greeks had reached the peak of their scepticism and humanism. Anyone could question the beliefs and practices regarding gods, religion and faith and easily get away with it. The myths, which were for them the deeds of gods and heroes, were ever more under fire. It is with this spirit of attack that the poet approaches the myth and so he disagrees with the earlier dramatizations. But in a world of half faith and half scepticism, where drama was still performed as part of the religious festivals connected with Dionysus, he could not steer the issues he raised, to their natural conclusion. To solve the problems he developed in the plays, the dramatist introduces gods in the end, which unfortunately proves the undoing of whatever he has created diligently in the highly humanised versions of the myth. Anyhow, Euripides appears to be more faithful to the audience and to the drama than to the myth.

The setting of the Electra itself is quite startling in a Greek theatre. At a time when the background was almost invariably the imposing front of a palace or rarely
a shrine, Euripides uses a peasant’s hut as the setting of the play. By this change alone, one can tell the intention of the playwright – he is not going to present on the stage a tragedy of kings and queens. The playwright is set out to stage ordinary mortals and their sorrows. But commonfolk were not yet allowed in tragedies! How to portray his awesome insight about the universality of human nature must have been a great strain on the dramatic genius. He does not make ordinary men and women the heroes and heroines, for he recognized the limits of his freedom. He brings down perhaps the greatest hero and heroine on tragic stage from the god-like stature, giving them human traits and ordinary situations. The most prominent and evident symbol of this modification is the facade of the cottage, before which the entire action takes place. The cottage, ever present at the back of the stage, is an objective correlative of the starvation and misery of Electra which is difficult to express except through words, and that Euripides must have felt inadequate, with a palace there. The setting is an attempt at providing a total impression with the help of 'spectacle.'

In the beginning of the play itself we meet the peasant whom Electra has married under the compulsion of Aegisthus to prevent a revenge from her children. The marriage of Electra is beyond all the limits of the transformations and humanizations of the myth and Euripides is well aware
of it. The peasant allows Electra, who is to be given to Pylades at the end of the play, to remain as a virgin:

But never I — Kypris my witness is —
Have shamed her couch: a virgin is she yet.¹

This shows the concept of the playwright's time that a bride should be virgin. In the mythical time virginity was never a must and Electra remained virgin only because she was denied nuptial happiness due to Aegisthus' fear of revenge. Having to live alone with a peasant in the countryside constantly threatens Electra with the fear of rape though the peasant is good at heart.

The sorrow of the rich fallen on ill-days is what Euripides wants to depict through Electra's life in the cottage. In this our age, a rich person without finding the meaning of his existence may go to a country hut and live there away from the madding crowd. But for the ancient Greeks whose meaning itself was good life, this denial is a great deal painful. Electra cries:

In a poor hovel I abide,
An exile from my father's door,
Wasting my soul with tears outwelling.²

² Ibid., 11, 207-9.
It is the feeling that this suffering is undue, that she
deserves more, that torments Electra than her poverty. What
a life she had at Mycenae as the child of the richest Greek
king! What has it come to?

Look at mine hair, its glory shorn,
The disarray of mine attire:
Say, if a princess this beseemeth,
Daughter to Agamemnon born. 3

Aeschylus and Sophocles did not go so far as to mar the
appearance or so to say the character of Electra. They did
not exaggerate at all. But Euripides, not satisfied with
marrying her to a peasant and bringing her to a hovel even
shears her head so as to intensify her woes. Again Electra
volunteers to do the menial jobs, arranging the hut, cooking
and bringing water from the distant river. These she does
because she believes that suffering is fruitful, that it will
bring retribution on the wrong doers and deliverance to her.
If the Electra of Euripides is in no position to vex the
ruling mother and her paramour she does the equivalent:

Wherein, this pitcher poised upon mine head
I bear, to bring the river's fountain - flow, -
Not that of constraint I am bowed to this,
But to show Heaven Aegisthus' tyranny,
And wail to the broad welkin for my sire. 4

3. Ibid., ll. 183-6.
4. Ibid., ll. 55-9.
The purpose of the presentation of the peasant who has wedded Electra, and his hut is not to aggravate her sufferings alone, but also to illustrate the poet's theory that human nature is not dependent on wealth. The peasant who is not even named in the play, for fear of breaking too many conventions, is given a solid share in the first half of the play. We cannot forget that Euripides was severely criticized by his contemporaries for introducing paupers and figures from low life on the tragic stage. The peasant allows Electra to continue as a virgin and insists that she should not engage in housekeeping. Electra is full of respect for the man who though low born is noble in nature:

Kind I account thee even as the Gods,
Who in mine ills hast not insulted me. 5

When Orestes learns about the good offices of this man to Electra, at first he cannot believe it. He thinks that it is the fear of his revenge that keeps the man away from defiling the couch of Electra. But seeing the man and being welcomed to his house, Orestes waxes eloquent in his new awareness that a poor man can possess a great heart:

Lo, there is no sure test for manhood's worth;
For mortal natures are confusion - fraught.
I have seen ere how a noble father's son
Proved nothing-worth, seen good sons of ill sires,

5. Ibid., ll. 67-8.
Starved leanness in a rich man's very soul,
And in a poor man's body a great heart.

This nobility of soul in the peasant is not demonstrated as unusual among the poor, but as unrelated to the status of man. It is not a quality that he possesses without his awareness; he is only more than conscious of it. When Electra rebukes him for inviting the high born guests without having enough good food he replies:

How? - an they be of high birth, as they seem, will they content them with little or much?

If they are really noble as they appear to be, will not they satisfy themselves with the available food? Or is nobility a love for comforts and good food in large quantity? Electra does not answer. Nobody will be able to answer this clear mockery of the so called nobility. Though Euripides has almost established his point, he is not satisfied with it. Electra asks the peasant to go to a shepherd, faithful to Agamemnon, and get enough meat for the strangers. He blurts out almost in a soliloquy:

I mark what mighty vantage substance hath,
To give to guests, to medicine the body
In sickness: but for needs of daily food

6. Ibid., II. 367-72.
Not far it reacheth. Each man, rich and poor,
Can be but filled, when hunger is appeased. 8

It is only on such occasions when he has to entertain guests
that the peasant comes to know of the worth and usefulness of
substance. Otherwise he is more than satisfied with what he
is and what he has and such moments as to make him feel
insecure and poor are rare. The poet does not want the idea,
that a rich man can be evil and a poor man good, to die easily.
The Old Man who brings provision speaks to himself in an aside
after seeing Orestes and Pylades:

High-born of Mien: - yet false the coin may be;
For many nobly born be knaves in grain. 9

The Old Man brings Electra a suckling lamb, cheese and
choice wine for her to entertain the noble guests. But the
more valuable thing he brings is a surprising news. He had
stopped at the grave of Agamemnon on his way to offer a drink
offering and to crown the desolate tomb with myrtle sprays.
On the grave the old man could find a recent sacrifice, locks
of hair and remnants of libations, which he believes to have
been done by Orestes:

-- on the grave a black-fleeced ram I saw
New-slain, and blood but short time since outpoured,

8. Ibid., ll. 427-31.
9. Ibid., ll. 549-50.
And severed locks thereby of golden hair.¹⁰

The passage that follows is a deliberate attempt at proving that the methods of recognition adopted by Aeschylus are all wrong. The old man asks Electra to compare the locks with her own hair to learn whether there is any similarity by which they can conclude that the locks are of Orestes. Electra rejects any possibility of his coming outrightly, and rejects the method proposed by the old man as foolish.

... how should tress be matched with tress of hair—
That, a young noble's trained in athlete-strife,
This, womanlike comb-sleeked? It cannot be.
Sooth, many shouldst thou find of hair like—hued,
Though of the same blood, ancient, never born.¹¹

Electra says that the libations must have been poured by some strangers who must have taken pity on the abandoned grave of Agamemnon. Next the old man suggests that she could measure the footprints with her own feet, the second device used by Aeschylus. Here Electra dismisses the possibility of footprints on the stony plain and she says that even if there are footprints it cannot be measured so, for a woman's feet are far shorter than that of a man's. When it comes to the question of identifying the man by means of a cloak, woven by Electra for Orestes, this disproving by Euripides becomes sheer mockery of Aeschylus:

¹⁰. Ibid., ll. 513-15.
¹¹. Ibid., ll. 527-31.
Know'st thou not, when Orestes fled the land,
I was a child?—yea had I woven vests,
How should that lad the same cloak wear to-day,
Except, as waxed the body, vestures grew?¹²

It is clear that these lines are meant to mock the earlier poet, for there is not any man suspected to be Orestes in the vicinity, as far as the old man is concerned, for him to ask Electra to identify him from the dress. Euripides is exhibiting his better commonsense and greater knowledge of the human anatomy. And we have to grant that Euripides has commonsense. But, whatever be the sign used, recognition there must be, and the foundling should be owned because that is a structural necessity. Euripides with all his commonsense cannot trespass it. He finds a new method, abandoning even the ring used by Sophocles, for he feels that there should be novelty. The old man examines the strangers and recognizes Orestes with the help of a scar on the brow. To make the recognition dramatically plausible Euripides couples the role of the foster-father who rescued Orestes from the hands of Aegisthus with that of the old man who recognizes him. It is to be noted that in the myth and in the earlier dramatic versions, both these acts were attributed to Electra.

The fact that Euripides who takes so much care in presenting the recognition in reasonable terms, has contra-

¹² Ibid., 11, 543-6.
dicted himself in the play on several occasions, should not escape our attention. First of all let us take the statements about the burial of Agamemnon. Electra in her invokation of Agamemnon says:

... not hailing
With chaplets! - nor with wreaths arrayed
West thou; but with the falchion's blade
She made thee Aegisthus' sport, ...

From this prayer it is clear that Agamemnon was not given the proper burial ceremonies, instead his body was mutilated and thrown out of the halls to become the food of vultures. This idea is once again repeated in Electra's answer to a question asked by Orestes to this effect:

Or. And thy dead father - hath he found a tomb?
El. Such a tomb as he hath found, flung forth his halls.

Now we have to come back to the statement of the old man that he found libations and locks on the tomb of Agamemnon where he himself claims to have made drink-offering. Orestes, in line ninety of the play, says that on the previous night he had been to the grave of his father to offer sheep's blood and shorn hair. Again, Electra refers to the tomb when she speaks about the cruelties of Aegisthus:

13. Ibid., Il. 163-6.
Yea, with wine drunken, doth my mother's spouse —
The glorious, as men say — leap on the grave,
And pelt with stones my father's monument.¹⁵

This is nothing less than self contradiction and perhaps more
important than the mode of recognition. It is surprising
how he could do this, being a man of theatre as Euripides is.

Another self-contradiction is about the rulers of the
land. In the beginning of the play it is made clear that it
was Aegisthus who killed Agamemnon with the help of
Glytaemnestra's cunning, and it is he who rules Mycenae. The
speech is made by no one other than the upright and lovable
peasant:

Died by his own wife Klytomenestra's guile,
And Aegisthus' hand, Thyestes' son,
So, leaving Tantalus' ancient sceptre, he
Is gone and o'er the realm Aegisthus reigns.¹⁶

Where all the other dramatists firmly take the side of
Crestes and portray Aegisthus as a vile character Euripides
makes him not only the reigning King but also a successful
and famous one. This may be justified as an impartial
approach to all the characters from the part of the poet.
The messenger who reports the murder of Aegisthus says:

¹⁵, Ibid., ll. 326-8.
¹⁶, Ibid., ll. 9-12.
The highway chariot - rutted entered we,
Where journeyed this renowned Mycenian King.\textsuperscript{17}

If the poet leaves the things here it is to be appreciated, But no, he wants to make him a weakling, and Clytaemnestra the ruler. Amidst the narration of her woes to Orestes who is in disguise Electra says:

\begin{quote}
. . . . . mid Phrygian spoils upon a throne
\textit{Sitteth my mother; at her footstool stand}
Bondmaids of Asia, captives of my sire.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

When Electra abuses Aegisthus over his corpse, she further elaborates the idea that Clytaemnestra is ruling:

\begin{quote}
And through all Argos this was still thy name -
'That woman's husband': none said 'That man's wife.'
Yet shame is this, when foremost in the home
If wife, not husband.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

We have found this kind of inconsistencies in Sophocles also, though of less consequence. Where, in Aeschylus each word, each image and symbol takes its position in a larger scheme and acquires a greater significance, in the plays of the later tragedians the loosely knit words and incidents contradict themselves. There certainly is a deterioration in form as well as in meaning when the plays move away from the rituals in spirit, thought and time.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., ll. 775-6.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., ll. 314-6.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., ll. 930-33.
In the *Electra* of Euripides, even the curse on the house of Atreus is unclear. There is reference to the competition between Atreus and Thyestes prompted by Pan and the treachery of Thyestes, deceit of Aegrope and the theft of the strange horned ram with golden fleece. But who cursed, why and when are not made clear. Probably the poet chose to be silent on an issue, too wellknown to the audience. Euripides even expresses doubt about the existence of a curse, in a way he alone can do. The chorus after detailing the curse in their song say:

Yet it may be the tale liveth, soul - affraying,
To bow us to Godward in lowly obeying. 20

It is not the denial of a particular curse that we see here as some may imagine. To understand the seriousness of this statement fully we have to comprehend the extent to which a curse was dreaded and revered in ancient times. A curse was considered irrevocable, the working of it uncontrollable even by the gods. The denial of a curse or its effect is as good as denying the oracles and gods themselves. In Sophocles we can see a little doubt, though expressed very rarely, of the gods that Aeschylus so fanatically justifies. Euripides almost waves them aside.

Though as a structural necessity Euripides maintains gods in his plays they are limited to mere functionaires. 20. Ibid., ll. 742-3.
They don't interfere in the action of the play, directly or indirectly and the salvation of each character rests in his own hands. Besides the propagation of this idea through the entire action of the two plays, more than one character is made to voice it. It is interesting to note that those who speak such things are characters who are apparently wise and who have the reputation of being so. Thus the old man advises Orestes in these words:

... . . . . -- be assured of me,
In thine own hand and fortune is thine all
For winning father's house and city again. 21

The young peasant is not less clear about the inevitability to depend on oneself and the uselessness of prayer when he speaks to Electra in the beginning of the play:

None idle -- though his lips aye prate of Gods --
Can gather without toil a livelihood. 22

There are two ways to explain away the scepticism expressed by these characters. The first is to presume that Euripides is giving a true picture of his sceptic contemporary society. The other is to think that the poet is arguing the gods out

21. Ibid., ll. 609-11.
22. Ibid., ll. 80-81.
of existence. At any cost we cannot buy the idea of mythical characters thinking and speaking in the terms dictated to them by Euripides.

Yet the gods are not completely dismissed from the play as I have already mentioned. It is Apollo who initiates the action by asking Orestes to avenge his father as declared by Orestes soon after coming to Argos.

At Phoebus' oracle-hest I come

To Argos' soil, none privy thereunto,
To pay my father's murderers murder-wage.  

Anyhow, the oracle is not given the credit of the scheme. It is to the old man that Orestes turns for a plan of action:

But, ancient — for in season hast thou come, —
Say how shall I requite my father's slayer,
And her that shares his guilty couch, my mother?  

The old man informs Orestes that he has no friend in his misfortune and that he has to do it alone. He parts with the information of the proposed sacrifice held by Aegisthus out in the field and sketches a plot to gain access to the king. Then he takes for himself the task of bringing Clytemnestra to Electra's hovel through deceit.

23. Ibid., ll. 87-9.
24. Ibid., ll. 598-600.
The arrival of a messenger with report of the murder that cannot take place on the stage is a device, the Greeks often revert to. From the messenger's report we gather a fuller picture of the event with all its details. Walking beside the sacrificial ground Orestes and Pylades get invited to the sacrifice. Mid sacrifice Orestes takes the Phthian knife used to cleave the breast-bone and strikes:

Aegisthus grasped the inwards,
Parted and gazed. Even as he bowed his head,
Thy brother strained himself full height, and smote
Down on his spine, and through his backbone's joints
Crashed. Shuddered all his frame from head to foot,
Convulsed in throes of agony dying hard. 25

No first hand report can be more vivid and dreadful than this. Instead of the bull-calf Aegisthus is sacrificed. Aegisthus had prepared everything for the sacrifice without knowing that he himself will be the victim. But if we take the Greek morality into account, Orestes has sinned in the murder in two ways. The first, of course, is the murder for which he has at least the excuse of a revenge motive and a god's command. The other which is equally important is that he deceived his host. Will the gods who destroyed the entire Ilium for Paris’ treachery to his host Menelaus, forgive Orestes? Or can it be taken for granted that any means can be adopted for revenge? Euripides is silent on this.

25. Ibid., 11. 838-43.
One thing is made clear beyond any doubt by Euripides that the murder of Aegisthus is a victory. Soon after the murder, the thralls rush at him with spears and the young prince reveals his identity commanding obedience. They recognize the victory of Orestes and rejoice as we learn from the messenger's report to Electra:

Straightway a wreath upon thy brother's head
They set, with shouts rejoicing. 26

When he comes to Electra with the prize, the corpse of Aegisthus, there is joy only and no guilty conscience in the murder. Instead Electra gloats over the corpse in a long speech full of abuses to the dead, which is rather repulsive.

From the words of Electra we learn that her enmity to Aegisthus is rather of a personal nature. Euripides' Electra does not show any sign of that godly creature who endures a life of sorrow for her murdered father and a dear brother in exile. In Euripides, she is obsessed with self-pity. She offers to kill her mother, to Orestes, but later warns him that his failure to kill Aegisthus will mean death for her. She is not confident enough to dare the fate like Sophocles' Electra. Again, she showers abuses on Aegisthus only when he is a corpse. Anyway, Electra shows remarkable will power in goading the revolting Orestes to the matricide.

26. Ibid., 11, 854-5.
After the murder of Aegisthus comes a curious turning point in the play. Orestes retracts from his decision to kill his mother listing it as a crime, most foul and unnatural. He even rebukes the gods who commanded it saying that it was a folly of Phoebus to have asked him to do it. The god who asked him to kill his mother may be a fiend, not a god. Even if that is a god he is not worthy of faith and obedience:

I dare not trust this oracle's utter faith.\(^2^7\)

We cannot miss the scepticism in these words and in the preceding lines where Orestes questions the god's intention and justice. This is perhaps most revolutionary of all the Greeks and even of the modern dramatists who deal with the same myth. But more significant is the affirmation that matricide is unjust in any circumstance.

Though a strong case is made against Clytaemnestra as in other plays, she is comparatively better as a mother and less in stature. It is she who saves Electra from the murderous hands of Aegisthus as we see in the beginning:

He would have slain her; yet, how cruel soe'er,
Her mother saved her from Aegusthus' hand; —

27. Ibid., I. 981.
A plea she had for murder of her lord,
But feared to be abhorred for children's blood.  

Similarly the Clytaemnestra who appears in the end is a disillusioned and regretful woman. She is weak and unwilling to argue with Electra. She even exhibits a certain amount of insight and understanding of human nature, even though there is a complete failure in understanding her mistake:

Child, still thy nature bids thee love thy sire.
So likewise to the man some sons will cleave:
Some, more the mothers than the father love.
I pardon thee. In sooth, not all so glad
Am I, my child, for deeds that I have done.

The murder of such a woman seem unwanted and some sort of an outrage to an ordinary spectator. That is precisely what Euripides demands from the audience. He wants to take away the glory from the act of killing such a weak old woman, the glory other dramatists have attributed to it.

Euripides has made even the murder of Clytaemnestra, a sacrifice. Mythically only the males could be sacrificed and to the other poets Agamemnon's murder alone is sacrifice and that too because Clytaemnestra claims so. Euripides has already made Aegisthus a sacrificial bull. Now, after murdering Clytaemnestra, Orestes says:

28. Ibid., ll. 27-30.
29. Ibid., ll. 1102-6.
I cast my mantle before mine eyes,
And my sword began that sacrifice,
Through the throat of my mother cleaving, cleaving! 30

We have to assume that either the dreadful past of the culture
was unknown to him or that he did not care for the meaning but
the spectacle of the theatre.

After the murder of Clytaemnestra the pity and horror
are raised to the maximum. The chorus all the while was
singing the cruelties of Clytaemnestra and her wrongs to
Agamemnon suddenly veer round and take the side of the murdered
mother:

Alas for thy lot! Their mother wast thou,
And horrors and anguish no words may tell
At thy children's hands thou hast suffered now! 31

Conscience starts working in Orestes and he cowers under the
burden of the guilt. The memory of that scene of murder and
the last words of the dying mother haunt him:

Didst thou mark, how the hapless, clinging,
To my mantle, bared her bosom in dying -
Woe's me! and even to the earth bowed low
The limbs that bare me, mine heart strings wringing? 32

30. Ibid., ll. 1221-3.
31. Ibid., ll. 1186-8.
32. Ibid., ll. 1206-8.
When the horror of the matricide reaches a maddening pitch as in a melodrama, when it seem there is no salvation for the children who committed it, there come the notorious 'deus ex machina.' Kastor and Pollux, the twin brothers of Clytaemnestra, but sons of Zeus and thus demigods appear on the roof-top to solve the problems created by men. They say that Apollo's "response" was given in "unwisdom" and that matricide is wrong. But they will hold Phoebus guilty since it was he who ordered the matricide:

She hath but justice; - yet not just thine act.
Phoebus is Phoebus: since he is my king, I am dumb. He is wise: - not wise his best for thee! -
We must needs say 'Tis well.'

33. Ibid., ll. 1244-7.

Kastor and Pollux warn Orestes that the dread "Weird Sisters" may hound him. He has to rush to Athens and there clasp the image of Pallas Athena. There a tribunal will try him and with the help of Loxias he will be acquitted. Now the emotion prevailing over Orestes is the sorrow for leaving Electra, that is out of all proportion and unnatural immediately after their brief meeting and the matricide.
What is the message of the **Electra**? Orestes is wrong because matricide in any circumstance is wrong. The god is unwise to have asked Orestes to kill his mother, but since a god has wished it so, it is well. It is nothing less than utter confusion.

II

The **Orestes** is a melodrama drawn out of absolute nothingness. It begins from the finale of the **Electra** and both the plays end practically at the same place in the myth. In between these two points which are more or less the same, we have a series of incidents unheard of in the myth, legend or in the epics. Infact, Euripides even contradicts the epics authored by Homer, in an unprecedented way. In the **Odyssey** we see Telemachus visiting Menelaus and Helen in Argos, almost ten years after the Trojan war and the incidents recorded in this play. But in this play Orestes attempts the murder of Helen from which she is rescued and placed among the Pleiades in the sky after being converted into a star by Apollo. This play illustrates the licence with which Euripides handled his myths.

The elaborate introduction in the beginning of the play testifies that it is not part of a trilogy with the **Electra** but is an independent play altogether. Electra traces the
history of the five generations of the family descended from Zeus, and introduces to us the untoward happenings that have occurred. This is a point of dissent between Euripides and Aeschylus who goes back only upto Atreus to compare Orestes with Zeus and make him the savior.

When the play opens Orestes lies asleep, tired after fits of frenzy inflicted by the Eumenides. The excessive suffering he is subjected to, is made vivid with every detail by the playwright. Raving made now and then, crying and sometimes laughing at the imaginary figures of the Eumenides, restless when lying on the ground as well as when lifted by Electra, Orestes reveals the extent of physical and mental torture he is undergoing. There is a notable modification in this agony, made by Euripides, that he has mentalized the Furies as we learn from Electra's request to him:

Give ear unto me now, 0 brother mine,  
While yet the Fiends unclouded leave thy brain. 34

To the man of reason as Euripides was, the dog-headed, bat-winged and serpent-haired figures were no longer presentable on the stage. So the objective and visible Furies of Aeschylus are converted into frenzies invisible for others that attack

the sinner as we grasp from the conversation between Electra and Orestes:

Or. Mother! - 'beseech thee, hark not thou on me
Yon maidens gory - eyed and snaky - haired!
Lo there! - lo there! - they are nigh - they leap
on me!

El. Stay, hapless one, unshuddering on thy couch:
Nought of thy vivid vision seest thou. 35

Orestes himself is aware of the fact that there are no creatures like the Furies and it is his own knowledge of the right and wrong that troubles him. When he is sane, to the question of Menelaus what ails him, he answers that it is the guilty conscience, the knowledge of the fearful deed that torments him.

Electra tells us of a blockade implemented by the Argives to impede their flight and about the imminent judgment of the citizens by vote on the mode of death to be awarded to Electra and Orestes. This again is an alteration of the mythical narrative in which the people were glad at the end of Aegisthus' tyranny and welcomed Orestes. A city council to try and judge on crimes should be a thing that Euripides introduces into the play from his contemporary Athens for there was no democracy in ancient Argos and certainly no council or even "citizens."

A thorough understanding of the nature of women is exhibited by the playwright in the portraiture of Helen's character. We have to remember that none of the characters of Euripides is a heavenly creature; they all think and act like ordinary human beings. It is extremely interesting to note how Helen quips at Electra's misfortune pretending to be sympathetic:

Electra, maid a weary while unwed,
Hapless, how fare ye, thou and the stricken one
Thy brother Orestes, who his mother slew?  

A little later when Hermione has been sent to the grave of Clytemnestra with libations and locks of hair from Helen, Electra remarks:

Mark, of her hair she shore the tips alone,
Sparing its beauty - still the Helen of old!

In this play which portrays Orestes himself as more or less a psychopath Helen is not the only one brought to shame. No mythical character who is handy for Euripides is spared by him. Tyndareus, thus, speaks in a senseless way that when Agamemnon was killed, the culprits should have been brought to the court of justice:

36. Ibid., ll. 72-4.
37. Ibid., ll. 128-9.
When Agamemnon yielded up the ghost,
His head in sunder by my daughter cleft, —
A deed most foul, which ne'er will I commend, —
He ought to have impleaded her for blood
In lawful vengeance, and cast forth the home. 38

Even if we grant his contention that there was law and a court to try the case, how could that have been done by the infant whose life itself was threatened, and head carried a price? Either Euripides is contradicting his own statements in the Electra or making Tyndareus an old lunatic. The latter appears more plausible.

Menelaus, similarly, is presented to us as a vicious politician who learns, by and by, the situations from Orestes and others and takes a position favourable for himself, regardless of any sense of right and wrong. He asks Orestes, "Doth Argos let thee keep thy father's sceptre?", in which case he will support him, 39 Orestes' reply that he has no support, that he is surrounded by brazen arms, alienates him from the weak. Tyndareus' words are only an incentive to his already formed decision.

Pylades who is prepared to go through life and death with Orestes, who is exiled from his country by his father

38. Ibid., 11. 496-500
39. Ibid., 1. 437.
for his share in the twin murder is a fit contrast to
Menelaus who refuses to repay his debts to Agamemnon in the
form of a favour to his brother's son. The messenger who
brings the news of death sentence from the city council and
introduces himself as, "A poor man, yet true—hearted to his
friends," is also used to contrast with Menelaus on whose
infidelity the play is based. 40

The motif that matricide is wrong is repeated through­
out the play and reassured. It appears to be one of the
central themes of the play. Naturally there is a corollary
to this argument that the gods who ordered it are wrong. It
is Electra who airs this view of the things, first in the
play:

Wrongful was he who uttered that wrongful rede
When Loxias, throned on the tripod of Themis, decreed
the death of my mother, a foul unnatural deed. 41

Nowhere else in the Greek tragedies can we see such direct
attack on the actions and motives of the gods and the asser­
tion of their wrongfulness. The change from Aeschylian piety
to this Euripidean scepticism in a short span of time is
remarkable. From the fact that these sceptic plays were
accepted by the audience, it is clear that it was the thought

40. Ibid., I. 870.
41. Ibid., ll. 163-7.
of the age, not a peculiarity of the playwright. Again, it is to be noted that what we see in Euripides is not a total denial of gods but a criticism of their deeds as in the following words of Electra:

Phoebus for victims hath sealed us twain
Who decreed that we spill a mother's blood
For a father's — a deed without a name! 42

We want gods to blame for our faults and entrust them with the responsibility of our actions. The contention that Electra and Orestes were "sealed" or marked for a certain deed is a kind of fatalism, which is an indirect way of accepting gods. This same idea is repeated by Orestes a little later:

Loxias I blame,
Who thrust me on to most accursed deed,
And cheered me still with words, but not with deeds. 43

Menelaus' opinion of the command of Phoebus is not different, though he does not remove the responsibility of the deed from Orestes. Tyndareus does not blame the gods directly but says that there is a law, "By exile justify, not blood for blood," which amounts to saying that the gods were not just in ordering Orestes to act against the law. 44

42. Ibid., 11, 191-3.
43. Ibid., 11, 285-7.
44. Ibid., 1, 515.
balance between the will of gods and the will of man in an action, is disturbed. The coherence between man and god is lost. Now, either man is responsible or the god, not both.

The problem lies mainly with the language of interpretation. When we say, that Gods were not just in sending someone to punishment, we use the human language which is rational while the action of gods may not be rational at all. But the human interpretation of the divine action is inevitable for the human growth since the process of growth - even biological growth - involves the separation and nostalgia.

A vague idea of the passing off from matriarchy and the rescuing of Greece from the grip of evil women is seen in Orestes' justification before Tyndareus:

Hear, how I rendered service to all Greece:
If wives to this bold recklessness shall come,
To slay their husbands, and find refuge then
With sons, entrapping pity with bared breasts,
Then shall they count it nought to slay their lords,
On whatso plea may chance. 45

Another argument of Orestes in his defence is that the father is more important in the reproduction than the mother and so he commands more love and loyalty. This argument and the

45. Ibid., ll. 565-70.
consequent assertion of the superiority of the father over the mother is a technique used by Apollo in defence of Orestes, in the *Eumenides* by Aeschylus. Here Orestes himself uses the argument to justify the matricide to Tyndareus:

> My sire begat me, thy child gave me birth -
> The field that from another gat the seed,
> Without the father, might no offspring be. 46

Euripides alone of all the playwrights begin the story from Tantalus, the direct descendant from Zeus, and that too in this play. Electra, after having been informed by the messenger that Orestes and herself are doomed to die by their own hands, sing the sad story of the family. Tantalus is swinging on golden chain from mount Olympus for insulting the god and his father Zeus. His son Pelops dashed Myrtilus down into the sea from his flying chariot and earned a curse in return. Thyestes' treachery was rewarded by Atreus in a banquet where the former had to eat the cooked flesh of his own children. Another curse fell on the family thus in the next generation. Arteus' son Agamemnon was to meet with an unnatural death at the hands of his wife and her paramour Thyestes:

> And treason! - the consummation came
> Of all, upon me and my father descending

46. Ibid., 11, 552-4.
In our houses affliction foredoomed in heaven. 47

It is not the reckless crimes committed by the five genera
tions of people in the family that are responsible for their
affliction. Nor is the curse given any credit for the contin-
uation of bloody sins and the consequent suffering in the
family. It is the gods, who foredoom everything in the
heaven, who are at fault. What a nice and comfortable idea
for those who suffer from guilty conscience or moral decay.
Everything is foredecided and man is only a puppet in the
hands of gods to enact their wishes. Of all the Greeks
Euripides alone can cook up such an idea.

Euripides' power to efficiently exploit the sentiments
of the audience is exhibited throughout the two plays. In the
Electra, in the poverty and suffering of Electra, and in the
last scene in the sorrow of the parting brother and sister
we have seen enough of it. Now the scene where Orestes,
Electra and Pylades prepare to die after the condemnation of
the first two by the Argives is one, past melodrama. The
sister compelling her brother to kill her and the final appoint-
ment of a revery to see that both Electra and Orestes strike
themselves on the neck at the same time, raises the pity and
horror to an unbearable height. All these show that
Euripides is a pure man of the theatre. The sudden dramatic

47. Ibid., II, 1010-12.
turn comes when Pylades suggests another revenge, a split second before Electra and Orestes strike and kill themselves.

Pylades' suggestion is to punish the ungrateful Menelaus who refused to help Orestes out of the death sentence by depriving him of the prize he wrested back from Paris after the decade long war. By killing Helen they will be punishing her for all the blood of Greeks that was shed in Troyland for her and at the same time having a personal revenge on Menelaus according to Pylades:

But she shall for all Hellas' sake be punished,
Whose sires she slew, whose children she destroyed,
Whose brides she widowed of their yokefellows.\(^48\)

To this Electra adds a plan of taking Hermione as a hostage, so that they can buy deliverance forcefully, even after murdering Helen, failing which Hermione dies. This will be doubling the punishment of Menelaus if they fail to achieve their goal.

The people who were in a state of repentence and were tormented by guilty conscience after the murder of their mother are suddenly transformed into blood-thirsty psychopaths who want to kill innocents like Helen and Hermione. A tendency

\(^{48}\) Ibid., ll. 1134-6.
to turn against the state and its laws, if there are such things is morbid and unhealthy in any individual. If it is by the establishment of an Argive city council above the king or prince that Euripides separates the individual tragedy from that of the state and makes him an ordinary man, depriving his fate from the power to affect the state, it is by his tendency to turn against the city and its laws, and to kill innocents that Orestes is converted into an antisocial.

It is curious to find that Euripides has employed even the modern dramatic techniques like suspense and the tragic relief generally believed to be a peculiarity of Shakespeare. Electra and the chorus keep watch outside the palace when Orestes and Pylades go in to execute Helen. When they see imaginary figures out of fear, the audience are filled with a thrilled suspense together with those on the stage. The Phrygian presents a comic interlude, strange in Greek tragedy, whose otherwise function is to report the attempt of Orestes and Pylades to sacrifice Helen at the hearthstone-altar and her consequent vanishing.

Everything seem to end in a catastrophe when Menelaus refuses to yield to the pressure and orders an attack on Orestes and Pylades. Orestes asks Electra to set fire to the halls below and Pylades to fire the parapets, with his sword
at the throat of Hermione. Suddenly there appears Apollo with Helen in the air "on pulleys."

Apollo asks Menelaus to give up attack on Orestes and to pledge his daughter Hermione to the young prince. He asks Orestes to bestow the hands of Electra to Pylades and to go to Athens for the trial in which he will be acquitted with the help of Apollo. All welcome the proposals and Orestes says:

Truce with woes I make

Menelaus and thine oracle Loxias. 49

God is a woe for man just as other men, symbolized here by Menelaus, and one has to come into terms with both.

The striking feature of the two plays of Euripides is the scepticism that he advocates through them. He appears to propose that deliverance of each individual rests with himself, in the Orestes. But these two ideas are brought to nothing by bringing gods to end the problems created by man, and the whole-hearted submission of all the characters to them. The matricide which is an act of self-sacrifice from the part of the deer, which is the most positive of all acts for other playwrights, is not recognized as a noble act by

49. Ibid., ll. 1680-81.
Euripides. As a result the *Electra* and the *Orestes* remain as mere theatre pieces with many dramatic moments, revenge, bloodshed and meaningless suffering. We can say that they are melodramas without message.

These melodramas without a positive message, although artistic failures, are, in a sense, symptomatic of the imperceptible rise of humanism. Slowly but gradually the responsibility of the gods for human affairs begins to lose in importance and the dialectics between the divine and the human responsibilities adds a new dimension to the dialectics of tragedy as a form of drama.