

THE FORCE OF TRADITION: THE ACHILLES ODE IN EURIPIDES' *ELECTRA*

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We can be inspired to action by stories of the past because poets hand them down to us artfully shaped. Homer's artful shaping of Achilles' role in the Trojan War resulted in a song that was often taken—by people and poets who ignored the complex balance of his vision—as a glorification of war and therefore as a model for achieving fame. Euripides, too, rejects the Homeric balance of brilliance and horror, but in his poetry the imbalance expresses the unacceptability of such a model. In two of his tragedies (*Hecuba*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*) he presents versions of Homer's Achilles that debase the wrathful hero's demand for honor to a monstrous egoism and to petty vanity. What Euripides does with Achilles in the *Electra* is different, but has the same general effect of turning his audience emotionally away from the heroic/Homeric ethos.

The *Electra* dramatizes the traditional story of the vengeance Agamemnon's children visited upon their father's murderers. The traditional milieu of that vengeance, however, is gone. Neither setting nor psychology is in any way grand or heroic. A shrill and self-pitying Electra¹ and an overcautious and conceited Orestes plot and carry out the slaughter of their mother and her lover in a setting as impoverished as their souls. Fields and a farmer's humble dwelling replace the palace and courtyard of Aeschylus' and Sophocles' staging. The mood of the play is one of "stern realism," as J. D. Denniston puts it, and to create this mood and to increase the horror

¹The most devastating description of Electra is to be found in H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy* (New York 1950) 352. Froma Zeitlin offers a more sympathetic view in "The Argive Festival of Hera and Euripides' *Electra*," TAPA 101 (1979) 645–69. Zeitlin convincingly argues for the physical and spiritual hardships Electra must endure (pp. 649–51). But Zeitlin too agrees that Electra's behavior is "sordid" (p. 653).

of matricide Euripides has removed the action “from heroic surroundings” and placed it “in an environment of everyday life.”²

Traditional heroism is not entirely absent from this world, however. Agamemnon’s sacking of Troy is ever present in the memory of Euripides’ unheroic characters. It is consistently portrayed as a prime factor in the hate felt for Clytemnestra and Aegisthus (2–10, 161–62, 186–89, 314–16, 916–17). Orestes’ predicted and then actual victory over Aegisthus is seen by Electra as the natural result of his conqueror-father’s genes (336–38, 880–81). And when, in an abbreviated version of the *kommós* in *Choephoroe*, Orestes and Electra rouse themselves to murder, they call their father to help, asking him to bring with him as allies “all the host of the dead,/ the ones who with you wasted Troy with the spear” (680–81). Euripides thus makes the traditional heroism of the Trojan War function as an exemplary model and necessary source of potency for the bloody desires of his prosaic protagonists.³

The description in the first stasimon of Achilles, Trojan War hero *par excellence*, functions in the same way.⁴ The Chorus of peasant women sings this magnificent ode in the interlude between Orestes’ and Electra’s first encounter and the arrival of the old servant who will effect their reunion and set their murderous plot in motion. The most obvious purpose of the ode’s beautiful lyrics is to heighten the stature of Agamemnon and thus make more awful, more deserving of vengeance, Clytemnestra’s crime: she murdered a great king, the “king of such warriors” as Achilles (479–80). In a sense, the ode is merely a more developed and vivid version of lines 2–10 of the prologue in which the Farmer first describes Agamemnon’s victory at Troy (complete with the slaying of Priam and taking of spoils) and then his murder by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. But, there is another, deeper connection with the plot in addition to this obvious one. As often happens in Greek tragedy, the Chorus here is saying more than it intends. If we read the ode as carefully as we would a

²J. D. Denniston, “Introduction,” *Electra* (Oxford 1939, repr. 1968) xii–xiii.

³This link between the heroics of the Trojan War and the murder of Agamemnon’s murderers becomes clearer when we compare Euripides’ *Electra* with Sophocles’. Electra’s passion in Sophocles’ play stems only from grief for a beloved father. In all her mentions of him she never refers to his role at Troy. Neither does Orestes. Other characters allude briefly to this role three times—1 (Paedagogus), 482 (Chorus), 695–96 (Messenger)—but it does not function as a motivation to action.

⁴The text quoted throughout is that of Gilbert Murray (Oxford 1913) as emended by J. D. Denniston. The translations are my own.

lyric poem, paying the careful attention that Shirley Barlow has argued Euripidean poetry demands to “the smallest details” which “establish the precise shade of tone and mood,”⁵ we will see that Euripides has put into the mouths of the Chorus a song that is far from being merely a celebration of the supreme warrior of the Trojan War.

The ode plunges into the “romantic past,” painting the Trojan War as a “gallant exploit of heroic times.” So says Denniston,⁶ and the vibrant poetry that sends Achilles on his way to Troy in the first strophe and antistrophe would appear to confirm this view. But though we have been taken into the romantic past,⁷ we do not remain there. Strophe and antistrophe *B* describe the ornamentation on Achilles’ armor. The images of violence and horror here create an entirely different mood and have prompted another scholar to an entirely different interpretation of the ode’s function in the play. Michael J. O’Brien notes that “the portrayal on the armor of a variety of terrors . . . corresponds, in its general effect, to the prevailing mood of the play, fear.”⁸ This “symbolic expression of conflict and of dread” foreshadows the violence that is to come and presents mythical paradigms (namely, young heroes killing female monsters) for what Orestes is going to do.⁹

⁵Shirley A. Barlow, *The Imagery of Euripides: A Study in the Dramatic Use of Pictorial Language* (London 1971) 18–19. Barlow unfortunately does not apply her attention to this ode, but subscribes to the view that it is “the classic case of pictorial irrelevance” (p. 20).

⁶Denniston xxxii.

⁷By “romantic” I mean that mode of storytelling which focuses on the supernatural powers of heroes and which, more importantly, evidences “an untragic attitude towards mortality.” The quoted words are from Jasper Griffin’s general characterization of the Epic Cycle as opposed to the *Iliad* at the conclusion of his article, “The Epic Cycle and the Uniqueness of Homer,” *JHS* 97 (1977) 39–53. Griffin himself lists three categories: “the fantastic, the miraculous, and the romantic” (p. 40), though he does not define the last. I am grouping all of these together under the term “romantic.” Pindar’s *Nemean* 3 offers an example of a romantic treatment of Achilles: the child Achilles kills lions, drags boars home, and outruns deer (43–52).

⁸Michael J. O’Brien, “Orestes and the Gorgon: Euripides’ *Elektra*,” *AJP* 85 (1964) 17–18.

⁹O’Brien 22–24. See also G. M. A. Grube, *The Drama of Euripides* (London 1941) 304–05. G. B. Walsh, whose important article, “The first stasimon of Euripides’ *Electra*,” *YCS* 25 (1977) 277–91, was published after this essay had been put into nearly final form, tends to de-emphasize the fearsome aspect of the images within the ode. Though he says that Orestes’ and Electra’s subsequent action reveal “horrors” and “darker warnings” hidden beneath the ode’s charm (p. 288), he concentrates

Denniston's "gallant exploit" is valid for one half of the ode, O'Brien's "fear" for the other. Each must be recognized and given full value if we are to understand what the ode is doing with and to the traditional conception of Achilles. The relief produced by the high romantic tone at the beginning acts as a lure, drawing us out of the squabbling, pedestrian concerns of the protagonists and taking us into the more potent heroic world that Achilles and Troy represent. Once we are there, enchanted by the beauty of dancing ships, Nereids, dolphins, mountain peaks and groves that support and nourish the goddess's son, Euripides moves us in for a closer, less pleasant view: we learn that with Achilles on that gay ship bound for heroic glory were monstrosities of traditional mythology, Gorgon, Sphinx, Chimaera. If the enchantment of the opening stanzas has not bewitched our sensibilities totally, we realize that the motive power in this alluring world is, in fact, not the seeming beneficence of the natural realm but an awful force of unnatural monsters and ruthless killing, a force that gathers momentum towards the end of the ode and erupts, bloodthirsty, from the ordinary throats of nice peasant women to drive a visionary sword into the neck of the "monster" Clytemnestra. This force represents the inhuman reality behind the seductive *beaux gestes* of romance.¹⁰ The only fully human reality in such a context, Euripides suggests, is the reality of the victim—fear and death. This reality emerges not merely through the abandonment of the initial gay tone for one of horror, but through careful shifts in movement, point-of-view, and imagery that transform utterly the romantic context of Achilles' heroism. The subtly-worked transformation shows that the violence in the ode does not merely foreshadow the violence that is to come but represents an organic danger inseparable from the initial seduction.

κλειναὶ νᾶες, αἵ ποτ' ἔβατε Τροίαν
 τοῖς ἀμετρήτοις ἐρετμοῖς
 πέμπουσai χοροὺς μετὰ Νηρηΐδων,
 ἔν' ὁ φίλανυλος ἔπαλλε δελ-
 φὶς πρῶραις κυανεμβόλοι-
 σιν εἰλισσόμενος,
 πορεύων τὸν τᾶς Θέτιδος

mostly on the ode's function as heroic foil to the protagonists' behavior, adducing many themes shared between lyric song and dramatic action.

¹⁰That Euripides was exposing "Legend" as "obscene" was suggested but not developed by S. M. Adams in a brief description of this ode that concludes his remarks on "Two Plays by Euripides," *CR* 49 (1935) 118–22.

κούφον ἄλμα ποδῶν Ἀχιλῆ
 σὺν Ἀγαμέμνονι Τρωίας
 ἐπὶ Σιμουντίδας ἀκτάς.

Famous ships who travelled once to Troy
 with innumerable oars
 moving in dancing procession with sea nymphs
 where the flute-loving dolphin leapt
 rolling about the dark-blue prows,
 conveying Achilles, light-springing
 son of Thetis,
 with Agamemnon to the coasts of
 Troy, where the Simoeis flows. (432–41)

The most remarkable feature of the lyrics that introduce Achilles into the tattered world of Electra and Orestes is their ebullience. The ships that bear the great hero to war do not proceed on a stately or solemn course. Instead they “move in dancing procession with sea nymphs” (*pempousai chorous meta Nêrêidôn*).¹¹ A hint of merry music to accompany their dance is supplied by the flute-loving (*philaulos*) dolphin who cavorts (*epalle . . . heilissomenos*) about their dark-blue prows. Achilles, as buoyant as his escorts, is called the “light-springing” (*kouphon halma podôn*) son of Thetis. These images of quick and fluid movement have the effect, paradoxically, of slowing down any felt progress towards Troy. The circular motion implicit in *chorous* (dancing) and *heilissomenos* (rolling) dilutes the forward thrust of *pempousai* (moving in procession) and *poreuôn* (conveying). In this context *epalle* (leaped) and *kouphon halma podôn* (light-springing) imply a bouncing upward rather than forward. The emphasis here is on process not goal, on movement for the sheer joy of moving. When a Trojan goal is reached in the last lines of the strophe, it is one softened to harmonize with this wondrous water world—the Trojan coast is designated not as the site of Priam’s city but as the place where the river Simoeis meets the sea. The exuberant fluid beauty of this world admits no hint of evil; it is totally removed from the hard realities of life. For this reason it is utterly bewitching.

The antistrophe, which depicts the sea nymphs bringing Achilles his

¹¹LSJ take *χορούς* as an internal accusative and therefore as part of the motion of the ships. Denniston suggests that it may instead refer to the dance of the Nereids and adds, “Probably Euripides thought of ships, Nereids, and dolphins as all dancing in concert” (p. 102).

weapons of war before he embarked on the ships, comes subtly closer to those hard realities. As it moves backward in time, it also moves from the sea to the land:

Νηρηῆδες δ' Εὐβοῖδας ἄκρας λιπούσαι
 μόχθους ἀσπιστὰς ἀκμόνων
 Ἥφαίστου χρυσέων ἔφερον τευχέων,
 ἀνά τε Πήλιον ἀνά τ' ἔρυ-
 μνᾶς Ὀσσας ἱερὰς νάπας
 Νυμφαίας σκοπιὰς
 ματεῦσαι κόρον, ἔνθα πατήρ¹²
 ἱππότης τρέφεν Ἑλλάδι φῶς
 Θέτιδος εἰνάλιον γόνον
 ταχύπορον πόδ' Ἀτρείδαις.

Nereids, leaving the cliffs of Euboa
 bore the shield-toils, golden¹³
 armor, from Hephaestus' anvils,
 up Pelion, up the holy
 groves of sturdy Ossa,
 watchplaces of the nymphs,
 searching out the youth, where the father
 centaur reared Thetis' sea child
 to be a light to Greece
 swift-runner for the Atreidai. (442–51)

Though the predominant mood in this land environment is one of natural beneficence—we still see Achilles as the hero spawned and protected by sublime and creative forces—the tone is no longer so light as it was on the sea.

There is no activity here so lively as leaping or dancing. The sea nymphs “leave” (*lipousai*) Euboa; they “bear” (*epheron*) the arms “up . . . up” (*ana te . . . ana te*); they “search” (*mateusai*). Chiron has been “rearing” (*trephen*) Achilles. Achilles himself is less buoyant than he was in the strophe. There he was described as “light-leaping”; here he is “swift-running” (*tachuporon pod'*). The two phrases refer to the same thing—Achilles' traditional fleetness—but their connotations differ. We can almost feel the gravitational pull of the earth in the shift from the bounce of *kouphon halma podōn* to the increased linearity of *tachuporos*.

¹²See Denniston 105 for reconstruction of the difficult and partially corrupt lines 445–48.

¹³See Denniston 104 for the translation of μόχθους ἀσπιστὰς . . . τευχέων.

We feel an increased linearity also in the change of emphasis from process to goal. The nymphs' activity is directed towards "searching out the youth." The arms they carry are termed "toils" (*mochthous*), i.e., "products of hard work." Chiron has been rearing Achilles to be a "light to Greece" (*Helladi phôs*). The feeling of purpose that emerges from these images is not yet frightening; but it does begin to interject a sense of human reality into the romantic world Euripides has created as the setting for Achilles' incipient heroism. Whether we think of the gold Hephaestus forged into armor on his anvil, or the sea nymphs who have left their native element to deliver the armor, or the "sea child" (*einalion gonon*) who is to be presented with that armor and sent off to be a national hero, we sense that nature is being constrained, shaped by intelligent purpose. Though this is still the world of romance (for nothing unpleasant, no fear, no victim as yet impinges upon the beauty of its landscape), these subtle shifts toward slower, directed movement prepare the listener for the later, more drastic shifts, first to an absolute stillness in the air and then to a hideously directed, violent movement on earth, that occur in the following description of the armor.

Euripides does not let us admire the armor step by step in the process of its divine creation, as Homer does with his ekphrasis of the shield of Achilles (*Iliad* 18.468–612). Nor does he let us share its owner's first wondering perusal, as Vergil does in the case of Aeneas's shield (*Aeneid* 8.617–731). Nor does he choose a third possibility, to describe it as Achilles puts it on piece by piece for battle, the method chosen by Homer to signal Agamemnon's *aristeia* (*Iliad* 11.15–40), and by the poet of the *Shield of Herakles* (139–317). Euripides turns our attention away from cosmic significance, away from the glorious hero. He makes us view Achilles' war gear through the eyes of one of its unfortunate victims:

Ἰλιόθεν δ' ἔκλυόν τινος ἐν λιμέσιν
 Ναυπλίοισι βεβῶτος
 τὰς σᾶς, ὦ Θέτιδος παῖ,
 κλεινᾶς ἀσπίδος ἐν κύκλῳ
 τοιάδε σήματα, δαίματα
 Φρύγια, τετύχθαι.

From a Trojan come to Nauplia harbor,
 son of Thetis,
 I learned of these
 emblems, terrors for
 Trojans, wrought
 in the circle of your famous shield. (452–57)

The Chorus has actually met and talked to the Trojan refugee. For a moment we are brought back to the “real” world in which Electra and Orestes will attempt to be heroes. The mundane reality of this Trojan source will bear witness to the terrible truth that emerges from Euripides’ brilliant interlocking of mythic and epic horror in his depiction of the *sēmata*, *deimata* (emblems, terrors) on the armor. Fearful death is the fact behind the romance of traditional heroism. The first of the terrifying emblems on the shield represents a traditional “romantic monster-slayer”:¹⁴

περιδρόμῳ μὲν ἵππος ἔδρα
 Περσέα λαιμοτόμαν ὑπὲρ
 ἄλός ποτανοῖσι πεδί-
 λουσι φνᾶν Γοργόνος ἱ-
 σχειν, Διὸς ἀγγέλω σὺν Ἑρ-
 μᾷ, τῷ Μαί-
 ας ἀγροτῆρι κούρῳ·

On the rounding rim
 Perseus, throat-cutter, above
 the sea on winged sandals held
 the Gorgon
 in company with Hermes, messenger of
 Zeus, Maia’s
 country child. (458–63)

The poetry that describes this monster-slaying is beautiful, but it does not, in fact, return us to the world of romance. The poising of Perseus above the sea on his winged sandals, the suggestion of the Gorgon’s own nobility in the periphrasis *phuan Gorgonos* (“noble stature of the Gorgon”),¹⁵ the moral purity lent by the presence of Zeus’ messenger, the hint of wild unspoiled nature in *Maia’s agrotêri*

¹⁴J. T. Sheppard describes Perseus thus in his stimulating article “The *Electra* of Euripides,” *CR* 32 (1918) 140. I am indebted to Sheppard’s essay for first proposing a connection between monster-slaying and the “heroism” depicted in this play. Basing his observations on Electra’s character and the parody of the “Aeschylean” recognition scene that follows close upon this ode, Sheppard believes that the ode on Achilles suggests the “traditional romantic, heroic view of Orestes” that Electra in her frustrated broodings held of her potential savior.

¹⁵I am taking *phua* in its most prevalent Homeric meaning. Euripides’ audience would, I think, understand this meaning because of the “strong Homeric flavor” given to the ode by “epic-Ionic diction and dialectical features” (Walsh 279, with note 4, for examples).

kourôî (“Maia’s country child”)—all this is lovely. But what is the heroic action it beautifies? Throat-cutting. The harsh cruelty of Perseus’ epithet, *laimotoman*, is more fitting to a story of crude murder (as will occur twice later in the play) than to a deed of romantic derring-do.

The only action in this first, beautiful but cruel tableau is frozen into this adjective, “throat-cutter.” Though Perseus has winged sandals on his feet, he is given none of the buoyancy of the earlier “springing” or “running” Achilles. The only verb in the scene is the static *ischein*. Perseus “holds” his monster-trophy fixed in the air far above the human plane. Remote and still, this mythological image is the point to which the romantic movement of the first strophic pair has led and where that movement ends. When the ode later begins to gather a very different momentum, it will seem as though this throat-cutting monster-slayer conjoined with the next fixed image on Achilles’ shield is its point of origin.

This next image includes no monsters, but it is equally still, equally remote:

ἐν δὲ μέσῳ κατέλαμπε σάκει φαέθων
 κύκλος ἀελίοιο
 ἵππους ἅμ πτεροέσσαις
 ἄστρον τ’ αἰθέριοι χοροί,
 Πλειάδες, Ὑάδες, Ἑκτορος
 ὄμμασι τροπαῖοι·

In the center of the shield there shone radiant
 the circular sun
 with his winged horses
 and the lofty choirs of stars,
 Pleiades, Hyades, turning to rout
 the eyes of Hector. (464–69)

The sun’s “winged horses” (*hippois* . . . *pteroessais*) imply motion. But all the sun does, in fact, is shine (*katelampe*). The word *choroi* could imply that the stars were dancing. But unlike the *choroi* of ships (and/or sea nymphs) in the opening strophe, whose motion is made explicit in the participle *pempousai*, the lack of any verb except the *katelampe* they share with the sun makes these *choroi* of stars, constellations of sailing and storm, evoke the image of “circular group” rather than that of “dance.” The sun is round (*kuklos aelioio*) also. So is the shield on which all these images appear (*en kuklôi*, 455). The vibrant cyclic movement of the romantic water-world

which slowed and became linear on earth has now become a motionless aerial circle.

The image of sun and stars is not, however, as self-contained as was the picture of Perseus. A downward direction for the shining of the heavenly bodies is indicated by the prefix *kat-*. And on the earth outside the shield, we suddenly see a man (*Hektoros ommasi*). It is within the eyes of their victim, Hektor, who is not a picture, not a place of mythology, but a real human being (like the Trojan witness at Nauplia), that the stars' adjective *tropaioi* becomes kinetic.

Tropaioi is a difficult word to translate poetically into English. It means "of a turning," and, by extension, "of or for defeat."¹⁶ Both primary and extended meanings are necessary to the full impact of these lines; hence my somewhat awkward formulation "turning to rout." It is important to convey the idea of turning as well as that of defeat because *tropaioi*, in conjunction with sun and stars and Hektor's eyes, conjures up the single most psychologically terrifying moment in the *Iliad*, the moment Hektor's nerve fails as he awaits Achilles alone before the gates of Troy. Achilles comes in sight "like the war god"

. . . and the bronze shone around him like the
bright light of fire or of the rising sun.
When Hector perceived it, shuddering seized him,
nor did he still dare
to stay there, but he left the gates behind
and fled in panic.
Achilles sprang after him, confident in his swift
feet. (22.132–37)

We remember that, one hundred lines before, Hektor's father, high on the walls, had seen Achilles approaching. The simile used then to describe the dreadful warrior is not repeated when Hector catches sight of him, but Priam's striking vision has remained in the audience's mind throughout Hector's tense wait: Achilles, onrushing all-shining like a star, like the Dog star, the star "made a portent of evil" (*kakon de te sêma tetuktai*, 22.30).

It is impossible to tell whether the echo of Homer's *kakon de te sêma tetuktai* in Euripides' *sêmata, deimata . . . tetuchthai*, the phrase used to introduce the ornamentation on the shield, is intentional. But it clearly is no coincidence that the sight that appalls Achilles' victim

¹⁶LSJ s.v.

in both cases is either the semblance or a picture of the bright light of sun and stars. Euripides is deliberately evoking a scene from the *Iliad*, the scene in which we are perhaps least sympathetic with Achilles, most deeply empathetic with the doomed defender of Troy. Before and during the chase, during Hector's attempt and Achilles' refusal to agree to decent treatment of the loser's corpse, during the unequal fight and the final dialogue between dying man and implacable victor, Achilles is at his most inhumanly destructive, Hector at his most humanly pitiable. By placing the image of sun and stars with that of Perseus on the shield and by making them similar in stillness and remoteness, Euripides has linked Achilles' vengeful Iliadic force with Perseus' monster-slaying.¹⁷ By evoking Homer he draws on the emotional weight of the epic scene as he pulls us back to the earth, not the romantic earth that earlier seemed to nourish Achilles, but the earth that will receive Hector's body. As we envision the desperate man circling Troy, we remember what Achilles' fleetness of foot really implies. There is nothing either gay or sublime about this sport:

They strove not for a victim, not for an
oxide, the prizes men set for racing;
They ran for the life of Hector, tamer of horses. (*Iliad* 22.159–61)

The pictures on helmet and breastplate, which depict two more mythological monsters, remove Achilles' heroism even further from its initial context of romance. The world inhabited by the splendid young protégé of Sea and Earth gives way to one inhabited by their primeval offspring, the multiformed and menacing Sphinx and Chimaera.¹⁸

¹⁷Even without the linkage of the two pictures on the shield, we could probably assume that Euripides meant the image of Perseus to comment on the Iliadic action. In *Phoenissai* 1106–38, Euripides uses shield devices explicitly to reveal the character and point of view of the attacking warriors. The shield of Capaneus, who later boasts that not even the fire of Zeus can prevent him from overturning the city (1172–74), displays a picture of a giant carrying an uprooted city (1129–33). And Polyneices, who is attacking his own city and will kill his own brother, carries a shield on which mechanically moved horses “appear to rage in madness” (*mainesthai dokein*, 1123–27).

¹⁸Hesiod, *Theogony* 233–325. Medusa, the Gorgon, is the granddaughter of Earth and Sea, and is the great-grandmother of Sphinx and Chimaera. Pegasus, the last mythical figure in the ode, sprang from the blood gushing from Medusa's severed neck.

ἐπὶ δὲ χρυσοτύπῳ κράνει
 Σφίγγες ὄνυξιν ἀοίδιμον
 ἄγρην φέρουσαι· περιπλεύ-
 ρω δὲ κύτει πύρπνοος ἔ-
 σπενδε δρόμῳ λέαινα χαλ-
 αῖς Πειρη-
 ναῖον ὀρώσα πῶλον.

Upon the helmet wrought of gold
 were Sphinxes, bearing in talons
 their song-won¹⁹ prey. In the hollow of
 the breastplate a fire-breathing
 lioness sped her flight
 on claws while she looked at
 the Pirenian colt.

The “claws” and “talons” of the Chimaera and Sphinxes stand in grim contrast to the earlier springing and running feet of the romantic hero. The music suggested in the image of the *philaulos* dolphin is stilled, turned into a weapon, in the image of the Sphinxes’ “song-won prey” (*aoidimon agran*). Now this prey is borne (*pherousai*), rather than the divine gift carried (*epheron*, 445) by the Nereids.

The images in this strophe are no longer so remote and still as that of Perseus holding the Gorgon (458–63). It is as though the myth, once made kinetic through contact with an earthly victim (Hector), takes on an energy of its own, an energy quite different from the beneficent, natural buoyancy that originally seduced us into the heroic world.

The Sphinxes on the helmet are only slightly less fixed than was Perseus. Though *pherousai* does imply more motion than *ischein*, their main activity, like that of Perseus, is completed and encapsulated in an adjective, *aoidimon*. Whether they are meant to be on the earth or in the air is unclear. The Chimaera of the breastplate, however, is most definitely on earth: the fire-breathing lioness *sees* her enemy, the winged horse Pegasus, approaching from the sky; she

¹⁹ *ἀοιδίμος* in Homer means “subject of song” (*Iliad* 6.358). Here both LSJ (s.v.) and Denniston (p. 107) translate “won by song,” Denniston citing “the flexibility with which attributes are employed in Greek lyric verse” and the fact that the Sphinx is an *ἀοιδός* in both Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus* (36, 130) and Euripides’ *Phoenissae* (50, 808, 1507). Pausanias, too, describes the Sphinx as “singing” (*ᾄδουσαν*) when she sallied forth on her mission of destruction (9.26.2). In the case of the Sphinx’s prey, one would become “subject of song” through being “won by song.”

runs on the ground. This monster is both terrifying and terrified. As the last monster on the armor described by the chorus, she receives the full force of the energized monster-slaying myth with which Euripides began his description. Herself active and dangerous, she is just about to be killed by a young hero²⁰ who attacks from above.

The force that descends on the Chimaera accelerates in the description of Achilles' sword, the last picture the ode devotes to the hero:

ἄορι δ' ἐν φονίῳ τετραβάμονες ἵπποι ἔπαλλον,
κελαινὰ δ' ἀμφὶ νῶθ' ἔτο κόνις.

along the bloody sword four-footed horses leapt,
and black dust was cast on their backs. (476–77)

In rushing epic dactyls the horses gallop along the blade of the sword.²¹ *Epallon* ("leapt") is the same verb that described the dolphin's light rolling (*epalle* . . . *heilissomenos*) movement about the ships.²² Here the movement *epallon* describes is swift and straight—straight, we may assume, toward living flesh at the sword's point. Black dust rising from pounding hooves takes the place of the dark-blue prows. Black suggests the absence of light and life. Dust is arid; it is barren earth that chokes and that defiles. It is the mark of field turned into battlefield; it rises in the turmoil of fighting, it receives the mutilated bodies of the slain. It is an image of death, of grief.²³

Of all the fearful pictures on the armor, this is the grimmest, partly because Euripides has brought his whole image emphatically down to earth. He emphasizes four hooves rather than the mythological wings of Pegasus and the sun's team (474–75, 466). There is no named

²⁰Bellerophon. Cf. Pindar, *0.13.61–92*.

²¹That we are to think of the blade of the sword and not the hilt is shown by the word *φονίῳ*. Denniston, who assumes instead that the ornamentation is on the hilt, inadvertently supports the opposite view when he comments, "*φονίῳ* is rather weak, as it is the blade that draws the blood" (p. 108). For an example of beautifully decorated sword blades see Wolfgang Schadewaldt, *Von Homers Welt und Werk* (Stuttgart 1959) plates 13 and 14.

²²Noted by O'Brien who says, "The change in tone is measured by the matching images at the beginning and end, of leaping dolphins and leaping horses" (p. 17).

²³For grief, see Achilles stretched in the dust, *Iliad* 18.23–27; for death, see especially Hector's being dragged in the dust, 22.401–05. Dust is mentioned three times in the latter five lines to emphasize the pity of Hector's death.

driver, and, for the first time, there is no victim: no Perseus, no Bellerophon, no Gorgon, no Chimaera. *Phoniôi* ("bloody"), however, performs nearly the same function as *tropaioi* did with the image of sun and stars: it directs our attention to a victim exterior to the armor, a real-life victim, a human being. But here we are meant to visualize not a specific scene in the *Iliad* but *all* those of men dying defiled by blood and dust. Such horrific scenes are frequent, and Euripides has not directed our attention to any single one of them, but evokes the memory that on every day of fighting, "many men, Trojan and Achaian, . . . lay stretched out by one another, face down in the dust" (*Iliad* 4.543–44).

The war horses that gallop down the sword belong to no hero and to every hero. We could easily envision Achilles driving them, the hero whose immortal team

trampled corpses and shields together, splattering with blood
the axle beneath and the rails around the chariot,
which were hit with sprinklings from their hooves. (*Iliad*
20.499–502)

But the driver could be as well any of the "spear-laboring men like him" (*toiônde* . . . *doriponôn andrôn*, 479–80) whom the chorus says Agamemnon led; he could be any one of those nameless numbers of men who followed Agamemnon into battle, footsoldiers killing footsoldiers, horsemen killing horsemen, while "the dust rose from the plain, sent up by the loud-thundering hooves of their horses" (*Iliad* 11.149–52). Or he could be one of the Trojans during their temporary moments of victory: Hector's bloody team and chariot is the precursor of Achilles' (11.534–37 = 20.449–502). In this last grim image and in the word *toiônde* Achilles merges with all the men who participated in the Trojan bloodbath.

Toiosde means "such as" or "such a." It takes its full meaning, positive or negative, from context. The Chorus, exemplifying those who are so bewitched by the beauty and romance of traditional heroic stories that they do not comprehend their fearful and deadly reality, intend *toiosde* in its positive sense: "so great," or "so noble," or "so heroic." We know this because of the paroxysm of hate that they immediately direct against Clytemnestra, murderer of "the lord of such men":

τοιῶνδ' ἄνακτα δοριπόνων
 ἔκανεν ἀνδρῶν, Τυνδαρίς,
 σὰ λέχεα, κακόφρων κούρα.
 τοιγάρ σέ ποτ' οὐρανίδαί
 πέμψουσιν θανάτοις· ἦ σὰν
 ἔτ' ἔτι φόνιον ὑπὸ δέραν
 ὄψομαι αἷμα χυθὲν σιδάρω.

It was the lord of such spear-laboring
 men that your lust killed,
 malignant daughter of Tyndareos.
 Therefore the gods will, at length,
 send you to death; Yet,
 yet will I see beneath your neck
 red blood gush on the iron sword! (479–86)

O'Brien says that in so far as "one violence suggests another, we are prepared for this violent outburst of hatred against the Queen."²⁴ But the Chorus' outburst is not just "another" violence; it actually seems to grow out of the description of the earlier ones. The mythic violence of Perseus' "throat-cutting" joins forces with the epic violence of the bloody (*phoniōi*) sword to erupt in the blood (*phonion* . . . *haima*) that the Chorus hopes to see "gushing" (*chuthen*) from Clytemnestra's neck. Clytemnestra is both mythic monster and epic victim; these two concepts, inseparably fused now as the focus of heroic action, produce an energy so powerful that it can generate even matricide.

Vengeance is divinely sanctioned and heroic—that is the overt message of the ode. Electra will act on this assumption and goad Orestes into killing the woman she views as a monster.²⁵ She will

²⁴O'Brien 17.

²⁵Euripides, in fact, takes pains to show that neither Clytemnestra nor Aegisthus is the "monster" Electra makes each out to be. Electra describes Clytemnestra as *πανώλης* (60), "all-destructive" or "totally lost to morality." But Clytemnestra has a rather ordinary set of vices and virtues. She has a conscience about what she has done and maternal feelings toward her daughter. Despite her assertion that she was just in killing Agamemnon, she is somewhat remorseful (1109–10), and Electra can count on her to come as soon as bidden to attend at a grandchild's birth. See O'Brien 21, 34–35, and Emily Vermeule, *Euripides III* (New York 1959, 1963) 207, for more details of the discrepancy between Electra's vision of her mother and what the audience is made to see. For an alternative view of Clytemnestra's remorse and maternal feeling see Masaaki Kubo, "The Norm of Myth: Euripides' *Electra*," *HSCP* 71 (1966) 15–31. Kubo feels that Clytemnestra is supposed to be purposefully compromising her pride in order to

overcome his filial hesitation with the exhortation not to be a coward (982), and while he shields his eyes from the sight (1221)²⁶ will place her hand on the descending sword (1225). But she discovers, when the heroic paradigm has been fully translated into human fact, that she has put real blood on her hands and ineradicable horror in her world. When she and Orestes walk from the house “empurpled in their mother’s fresh red blood” (*mêtros neophonois en haimasi/pephurmenoi*, 1172–73), and the Chorus describes them as *tropaia deigmata*²⁷ (“revealing the rout”) of their mother’s “wretched pleas” (*athliôn prosphthegmatôn*, 1174), *tropaia* does not signify glorious victory. The blood that shows the defeat of the maternal claim is, rather, evidence that no other house is more “wretched” (*athliôteros*) than this house of Tantalos (1175–76). Though there may be justice, there is no glory here. Euripides thus shows dramatically what he implied lyrically in the ode’s subtle progression from the joyously romantic to the terror-filled mythic and epic genres of the heroic tradition.²⁸ The ode’s vision of glamorous superhuman heroes leads inexorably to an unglamorous vision of human victims; so in the real world of Electra and Orestes, unholy acts (1204–05) and utter misery are the result of accepting as paradigmatic the traditional heroes of the past.

get at the newborn male child whom she fears. Athenians, he says, would recognize the myth of the “parent pursuing the grandchild” and thereby punishing “herself on account of her own wickedness” (p. 29).

²⁶This detail clearly links Clytemnestra with the Gorgon. As O’Brien says, “The Perseus similitude finds its climactic expression in this scene” (p. 22). Orestes’ veiling his face also is cited by Sheppard as his final evidence in proving the “tragic relevance” of the ode about Achilles (p. 140).

²⁷For the possible reading *δείματα*, “objects of terror to defeat her piteous cries,” see O’Brien 24, note 18. The justification for this reading, which is made possible only because γ is added above the line in ms *P*, is a poetic one: it would connect the monsters on Achilles’ shield with Electra’s and Orestes’ murderous heroics.

²⁸A mutual contamination resulted from Euripides’ conflation of the mythic and epic stories (458–78). Monsters contaminate the human-centered tragic universe that Homer created. At the same time, Homer’s story of personally motivated vengeance sullies whatever moral clarity we might otherwise find in Perseus’ monster-slaying. Walsh, who terms Perseus’ slaying of the Gorgon “a disinterested act of pure heroism” and focuses on the ode’s function as foil, believes that Orestes’ and Electra’s personal hate for Aegisthus and Clytemnestra makes their action “less palatable . . . than its heroic counterpart” (Walsh 285). But the contamination that occurs within the ode shows that when Orestes and Electra later imitate the ode’s heroic action they are not straying, as Walsh maintains, “farthest from its essence.”

Homer's hero is only partially present in this ode. The Achilles who is sent off to Troy is taken from a romantic tradition²⁹ that is unconcerned with the sorrows of war. Thetis' sisters, the Nereids, aid Achilles' career as his mother does in the *Iliad*; the difference is that they do not weep. One can imagine Homer's Thetis sending her son off to war; it is impossible to imagine her dancing as she does so. The exuberance of the opening strophe is the perfect expression of the optimistic, high-hearted mood that often seems to prevail in the initial stages of a war, especially when that war is to be fought far from one's own home.³⁰

The next stage of war, actual conflict, is revealed from the perspective of one whose home was lost through Achilles' heroism. The hero remains un-Homeric. Homer places scenes of human life in all its happy and unhappy manifestations on his version of Achilles' shield; Euripides puts monsters on his. By doing so, he links martial heroism with the heroism of monster-slaying, man against malformed beast. This linkage suggests a dehumanization of the victim in the eyes of the conquering hero. But the fact that the images of the Gorgon, Sphinxes, and Chimaera are described as seen by his terrified victim suggests further that the terrifying conquerer has also become a monster, an unnatural force rather than a human being.³¹ These monsters are as alien to Homer's world³² as is the joyous romanticism of the opening strophe.

The only images Euripides draws from Greece's most beautiful song about the Trojan War are those that focus on the victim. Fear, blood and death are Homer's contribution to the ode. The sun and stars that shine from Achilles' shield into Hector's eyes recall the stark terror of *Iliad* 22. All the *Iliad*'s battle scenes contribute to the grim merging of all heroes and all victims in the blood-dusty image

²⁹Possibly the Epic Cycle; antistrophe *A* has affinities, too, with Pindar's *Nemean* 3.43–63. See above, note 7.

³⁰This is the mood that Agamemnon tries to recall at *Iliad* 11.229–34 and that Thucydides (6.24–25) ascribes to the Athenians at a point not far removed in time from the writing of the *Electra*.

³¹This idea finds expression outside of the ode also. O'Brien shows convincingly how Orestes becomes a symbol not only of Perseus but of the Gorgon: repeated references to Orestes' head culminate in "What host, what righteous person will look upon my head who have killed my mother?" (1195–97). O'Brien concludes his essay by describing the Gorgon as "the figure which represents at once the victim and the killer, as well as the fear which makes them all alike" (p.39).

³²When Achilles is at his most inhuman in the *Iliad*, Homer compares him to fire, dolphin, star, sun, hawk, hunting dog, lion. He is a natural force.

that concludes both Euripides' description of the armor and his "celebration" of Achilles. The supreme warrior of the supreme epic of the supreme national war is, finally, just a killer.

Brilliance and horror are both present in this ode, but they do not occur in balanced simultaneity as they do in the *Iliad*. In portraying Achilles in the *Electra*'s first stasimon, Euripides removes brilliance from its place on the Homeric battlefield and isolates it in another much less realistic tradition. He then overwhelms its seductive, "unreal" charm with the monster-contaminated Iliadic killing that he places in the second half of the ode. In so doing he transforms Achilles' career from an example of human achievement to a paradigm of inhuman destruction. Euripides' response to Homer's song seems similar to that of Penelope in the *Odyssey*, who, because she feels the personal reality of the epic song's subject, experiences its beauty as unadulterated pain (*Odyssey* 1.340–44). Like Penelope, Euripides cannot stop the song from being sung; but he can, since he is a poet himself, change it so that others may share the pain—and feel the danger of its allure.