

DOUBLE MEANING AND MYTHIC NOVELTY IN EURIPIDES' PLAYS

EMILY A. MCDERMOTT

The University of Massachusetts at Boston

The mythic tradition of the Greeks is protean. Each of the vast number of stories is itself variable, appearing now in one form, now in another, often standing alongside other versions which it flatly contradicts. Critical study of this remarkable tradition is doubly vexed, first by received myth's intrinsically fluid nature, then by the fragmentary preservation of mythic source material.

The critic who would assess the connection between a Greek tragedian of the fifth century and the mythic matter from which his plots are drawn is necessarily tangled in a nexus of questions concerning the relative antiquity of differing versions of a particular myth, their geographical affiliations, and their association with cultic practice. Nonetheless, few would dispute a general assertion that Euripides' plays are rife with mythic innovations, both major and minor. A commentary on any Euripidean play will almost inevitably cite more than one plot element which seems to have been Euripides' own introduction into the saga. Unfortunately, however, the key words here are "seems to have been," for the intrinsic difficulty of reconstructing pre-Euripidean mythic sources often makes it impossible to demonstrate with certainty that a particular instance of mythic heterodoxy is traceable to a consciously innovative Euripides. Was he the first to have Medea deliberately kill her children? Had the motif of the wresting of a soul from death been attached to the story of Admetus and Alcestis before Euripides presented Heracles bumbling into the mourning king's palace? How much had Hermione and Andromache had to do with each other before the murderous plottings of the *Andromache*?

The path that I will follow in this paper will be especially difficult, for it becomes involved not only with the problems in mythic reconstruction cited above, but also with the slippery question of double meaning. In brief, I will propose that, at certain points in Euripides' plays when he was consciously making innovations into received myth, he also had his characters signal those innovations through double meaning.

Euripides was a "bookish" playwright, a "*poiêtês sophos*."¹ Increasingly, critics have called attention to instances of Euripidean cleverness. Long-recognized bits of wit at the expense of the literary traditions, such as the *Electra*'s parody of the recognition scene between Orestes and Electra in Aeschylus's *Choephoroi*, have been joined by others in which the playwright consciously picks out a certain tension between his characters' words or actions

¹ The first characterization is Robert Eisner's in "Euripides' Use of Myth," *Arethusa* 12:2 (1979) 157; the second is taken from the title of a study which is seminal in the examination of Euripidean wit, R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "Euripides: *Poiêtês Sophos*," *Arethusa* 2:2 (1969) 127–42.

and the conventional dramatic form within which they were, perforce, circumscribed. Thus, Winnington-Ingram has pointed out that Electra's query, ποῦ γὰρ ἄγγελοι; at *Electra* 759 contains an anomalous glance at the dramatic convention whereby off-stage events are promptly reported to the characters and audiences of Greek tragedies by the fortuitous arrival of messengers; other studies have followed in similar mold.²

An action or event in a tragedy may be unexpected in one or both of the following senses: (a) a twist of plot may run counter to a *character's* expectation; that is, it may be something which he or she, from a vantage point within the plot, has no way of predicting; or (b) it may run counter to an *audience's* expectation, either because it seems inconsonant with the characters and events which lead up to it, or because it contradicts a more familiar version of received myth. When a playwright (as commonly) turns to creation of tragic irony, the first element above pertains, but the second does not: the dramatic effect is achieved by the fact that the audience knows where events are heading, while the characters are pathetically ignorant of the truth. In the type of double meaning I will examine in this study, however, both these elements are joined together: events that come to a character unexpectedly are also mythic innovations intended to surprise the audience. Thus, when a character says words that express the novelty of a turn of events, these words may not only apply at the level of dramatic action, but also reflect the response of the audience as they discover that the plot is departing from a predictable mythic track.

One example of the type of double meaning I will discuss in this study has previously been identified. Euripides' introduction into the *Hercules Furens* of the usurper Lycus provides a certain case of pure mythic invention. This unsavory tyrant (and archetypal foil for the proto-democratic Theseus) appears in no independent source; three later references to him clearly derive from Euripides' play.³ Wilamowitz noted long ago that Euripides' elaborate introductory explication of Lycus's provenance and pedigree (*HF* 26–34) is tantamount to an admission that he is the playwright's own invention.⁴ More recently, Bond has added the pertinent observation that the description of Lycus just after his introduction as ὁ καίνος οὗτος τῆσδε γῆς ἄρχων Λύκος (38)⁵ —echoed by three later recurrences of the epithet καίνος for Lycus (at 541, 567, 768)—is

² E.g., Geoffrey Arnott, "Euripides and the Unexpected," *G. & R.* 20 (1973) 49–64; Arnott, "Red Herrings and Other Baits, A Study in Euripidean Techniques," *MPL* 3 (1978) 1–24; George Gellie, "Tragedy and Euripides' *Electra*," *BICS* 28 (1981) 1–12; F.J. Nisetich, "The Silencing of Pylades (*Orestes* 1591–1592)," *AJP* 107 (1986) 46–54; Emily A. McDermott, "*Medea* Line 37: A Note," *AJP* 108:1 (1987) 158–61; and McDermott, *Euripides' Medea: the Incarnation of Disorder* (College Park, Pa. 1989) 17ff. Ann N. Michelini, "ΜΑΚΡΑΝ ΓΑΡ ΕΞΕΤΕΙΝΑΣ" *Hermes* 102:4 (1974) 524–39, examines internal references to the rhesis form among all the dramatists.

³ Asclepiades, *S Od.* 11.269 (= *F.Gr.H.* 12F27); Hyginus, *Fab.* 32; Seneca, *HF.*

⁴ Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Euripides, Heracles*² (Berlin 1959; orig. publ. 1895) 2.112.

⁵ This and all subsequent quotations from *Hercules Furens*, *Heraclidae*, *Hecuba*, and *Supplices* are from J. Diggle's *OCT*, vol. 1 (1984) and vol. 2 (1981). Quotations from *Phoenissae* and *Orestes* are from Gilbert Murray's *OCT*, vol. 3 (1913). Titles and names appear as they are found in the *OCD*².

a further signal of Euripides' invention: Lycus is a new king not only because he has just recently succeeded Heracles, but also because he makes his mythic debut in this play.⁶ This emphatic attribution of "novelty" to a character whom Euripides has invented and inserted, full-grown, into the mythic tradition thus becomes double-edged, blurring the conventional separation between the characters' world and the audience's; thus the playwright underscores, from *within his plot*, a technique of his own dramatic art: his penchant for mythic innovation.

Several more examples of the sort of self-conscious double meaning that occurs in the *Hercules* may be identified in Euripides' plays. While the fact of mythic innovation is seldom so demonstrable as in Lycus's case, nonetheless references to novelty or unexpectedness by characters in the plays are found with some frequency in connection with probable Euripidean alterations in the tradition, leading to an inference that these references constitute deliberate double meanings, intended as authorial signposts to his characteristic mythic innovations.

The legend of the expedition of the Seven Against Thebes and its aftermath was a frequent topic in Attic tragedy; among extant plays, Aeschylus's *Septem* and Euripides' *Phoenissae* deal directly with this episode in the Theban cycle; three others (Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Oedipus Coloneus* and Euripides' *Supplices*) treat aspects of the invasion's aftermath. Allusion to the siege of Thebes is made early on in Homer, Hesiod, and Pindar.⁷ In the fifth century, by the common process through which Athens sought to connect itself with the more ancient mythic traditions, an Attic legend arose to the effect that, after the siege was over, the Athenians interceded to gain burial for the fallen Seven. This story is a virtual doublet for the tale of the Athenians' protection of the Heraclidae (see below) and appears in conjunction with the latter at Herodotus 9.27 and later in the orators.⁸

Such, then, were the antecedents from which Euripides drew his basic material for the *Supplices*. In Euripides' version, an appeal is made to Theseus by Adrastus and the mothers of the fallen invaders to help them win burial (forbidden by the Thebans) for their kin; swayed by his own mother's empathetic intercession, Theseus marches against Thebes and wins the return of the bodies to his new allies.

⁶ Godfrey W. Bond, ed., *Euripides, Heracles* (Oxford 1981) xxviii. In three of the four instances cited by Bond (*HF* 38, 541, and 768), it should be noted, *καινός* is conjectured for the *κλεινός* of LP; but in all three cases the emendation is accepted by both Murray and Diggle in their respective Oxford editions of the play. There is an additional significant (and non-conjectural) appearance of *καινός*, not noted by Bond, when Heracles arrives home and, seeing the straits to which Lycus has reduced his family, addresses this inquiry to Megara: *τί καινὸν ἦλθε δώμασιν χρέος*; (530). Just as Lycus as personage is new to the tradition, so are the dire circumstances fastened by him upon the absent Heracles' house.

⁷ Homer, *Il.* 4.378ff., 6.223, 10.286; Hesiod, *Op.* 162; Pindar, *Ol.* 6.15–16, *Nem.* 9.16–27, *Pyth.* 8.38ff.

⁸ E.g. Isoc. 4.54ff., 12.168ff.; Lys. 2.7–10. Cp. Pl., *Menex.* 9 (239b). For detailed discussion of the use of these two stories in the Athenian epitaphioi, see Nicole Laroux, tr. Alan Sheridan, *The Invention of Athens* (Cambridge, Ma. 1986) 60–70.

A section of Plutarch's *Life of Theseus*, in which Plutarch takes some pains to refute Euripides' version of this story, makes it quite clear that Theseus's march against Thebes had not traditionally been presented on the dramatic stage:

He also aided Adrastus in recovering for burial the bodies of those who had fallen before the walls of the Cadmeia, not by mastering the Thebans in battle, as Euripides has it in his tragedy (οὐχ ὡς Εὐριπίδης ἐποίησεν ἐν τραγῳδίᾳ), but by persuading them to a truce; for so most writers say (οὕτω γὰρ οἱ πλείστοι λέγουσι), and Philochorus adds that this was the first truce ever made for recovering the bodies of those slain in battle...And the graves of the greater part of those who fell before Thebes are shown at Eleutheræ, and those of the commanders near Eleusis, and this last burial was a favour which Theseus showed to Adrastus. The account of Euripides in his "Suppliants" is disproved by that of Aeschylus in his "Eleusinians" (καταμαρτυροῦσι δὲ τῶν Εὐριπίδου Ἰκετίδων οἱ Αἰσχύλου Ἐλευσίνιοι), where Theseus is made to relate the matter as above. (Plutarch, *Theseus* 29.4–5)⁹

Euripides' version was wrong, says Plutarch; most others agree—especially Aeschylus, in his lost *Eleusinians*—that the conflict was settled peacefully. There is no reason for us to reject either Plutarch's account of the Aeschylean version or his characterization of it as the majority opinion, though as literary critics we will quickly shift the focus from Plutarch's search for the "correct" version to an inquiry into authorial design. It has been suggested by several scholars that the "bellicose" version of the story, which is also followed by Herodotus, was the innovation of an author of a mid-fifth century epitaphios.¹⁰ Whatever its specific origin, it is fair to infer that Euripides was the first to introduce the element of armed battle between Thebans and Athenians to the Attic stage, that this new variant was adopted by the playwright as a purposeful corrective to an orthodoxy represented by Aeschylus's *Eleusinians*, and that its effect on its audience (as much later on Plutarch) was akin to that of one of his pure innovations.¹¹

Looking at Euripides' play, we see that Theseus will win the burial of the fallen warriors not through peace, but in war—a new kind of war—not for profit, nor for vengeance, but simply to redress a wrong. Theseus is a disinterested party, but he will enter the fray and put his own and his citizens' lives on the line for a principle, τὸν Πανελλήνων νόμον (*Supp.* 526). Theseus himself stresses this point in his long and heated exchange with the Theban herald who

⁹ The translation is from the Loeb edition: Bernadotte Perrin, tr., *Plutarch's Lives* (Cambridge, Ma. 1959).

¹⁰ Laroux 64 and 374–75n. 312.

¹¹ In a fascinating mirroring of the earlier changes in the saga, Isocrates in his *Panegyricus* (4.58ff.) first adopts the altered ("bellicose") version of the story (that the Athenians went to war against the Thebans) but later, in the interests of appeasing the Thebans, self-consciously recants that version (12.172ff.) reverting to the "pacific" Aeschylean version (that the Thebans were persuaded diplomatically by Theseus's intervention).

argues against Athenian intercession; he concludes the debate with these emphatic words:

...ἐγὼ γὰρ δαίμονος τοῦμοῦ μέτα
στρατηλατήσω· **καινὸς ἐν καινῷ** δορί.
ἐν δεῖ μόνον μοι· τοὺς θεοὺς ἔχειν, ὅσοι
δίκην σέβονται· ταῦτα γὰρ ζύνονθ' ὁμοῦ
νίκην δίδωσιν. ἀρετὴ δ' οὐδὲν φέρει
βροτοῖσιν ἢν μὴ τὸν θεὸν χρῆζοντ' ἔχηι. (*Supp.* 592–97)

Theseus is **καινὸς ἐν καινῷ** δορί (“a new commander with a new sword”) in three senses. On the most literal level, he is commander in a new war, one just recently begun, to redress the wrongs of the old one. On a second level, he is a new *kind* of commander, one who fights the new kind of just war outlined above.¹² On still a third level, this phrase is an emphatic example of the use of double meaning to signal mythic innovation: the newness of Theseus’s command rests as well in the playwright’s contradiction here of the mythic tradition presented by Aeschylus, that a bloodless treaty was struck for the return of the corpses of the Seven.¹³

An extended series of double meanings pointing to the playwright’s departures from received tradition is to be found in Euripides’ *Heraclidae*. This play tells the tale of Athenian protection of the persecuted sons of Heracles. A long tradition attests to the travels of the Heraclidae from state to state, in search of respite from Eurystheus’s wrath.¹⁴ Pindar notes the Thebans’ boast to have defended the exiles.¹⁵ By a process parallel to that described above for the *Supplices*, an Attic legend grew up in the fifth century attributing the deliverance of the Heraclidae to the Athenians. The outlines of this story may be seen already in Herodotus 9.27;¹⁶ allusions to it in the orators (where it is regularly coupled, as in Herodotus, with the parallel story of Theseus’s championing of Adrastus’s cause) clearly draw on Euripides’ fleshed-out version.¹⁷

It is clear that, beyond his acquiescence in the patriotic transferral of the legend’s finale to Athens, Euripides has made one significant variation in the myth as he received it. Traditionally, the persecutor Eurystheus is beheaded near

¹² The prominence of this sense of the words is conveyed, for example, by Frank Jones’s translation (in D. Grene and R. Lattimore, ed., *The Complete Greek Tragedies* [Chicago 1958] vol. 4): “as a new campaigner with a new intent.”

¹³ Twice in the lines succeeding the messenger speech that announces Theseus’s victory over the Thebans the Chorus refer to the “unexpectedness” of the events as they have turned out: νῦν τήνδ’ ἄελπτον ἡμέραν ἰδοῦσ’ ἐγὼ / θεοὺς νομίζω (731–32); cp. τὰν ἄελπτον ἡμέραν / ἰδοῦσα (784–85). It is possible that these uses of ἄελπτος are intended to reinforce the novelty of the mythic events as Euripides has presented them; on the other hand, the phrase ἄελπτος ἡμέρα may be too common an idiom to allow for pregnant usage.

¹⁴ The tradition is already exemplified in Hecataeus 30 *FGH* ([Longinus], *Subl.* 27.2).

¹⁵ Pindar, *Pyth.* 9.79ff.

¹⁶ The story was also told by Pherecydes 3.84 *FGH* (see Ant. Lib. 33).

¹⁷ E.g. Isoc. 4.56; Lys. 2.11–16. Cp. Pl. *Menex.* 9 (239b).

the Scironian rocks by either Iolaus or Hyllus, as he flees from battle.¹⁸ Two traditions survive concerning the fate of his head: that it was brought to Alcmena, who dug out its eyes with weaving pins, and that it was buried in Tricorythos at a site which was therefore given the name Εὐρυσθέως κεφαλή.¹⁹ In Euripides' play, by contrast, he is taken prisoner by Iolaus at the selfsame rocks and handed over (alive, whole, and in a speaking role) to a vengeful Alcmena for execution.²⁰ Critics who treat the theme of the *Heraclidae* will continue to ponder the deeper questions of why the Athenians yield to Alcmena's specious arguments in favor of Eurystheus's execution and abdicate their role (not only traditionally, but as emphatically assumed in this play up until this reversal) as champions of fairness and humanity toward those taken in war.²¹ For the purposes of this study, the relevance of the play's finale rests not in its meaning (which is indisputably central to the theme of the play), but in the technique by which the dramatist signs what is surely a significant departure from received tradition: the delay in Eurystheus's death and the drastic change achieved in its character when he is no longer killed in battle but executed after being taken (and initially protected) as a prisoner of war.

As the captive Eurystheus is brought before Alcmena, his entry is announced to her in the following words:

Εὐρυσθέα σοι τόνδ' ἄγοντες ἤκομεν,
ἄελπτον ὄψιν, τῶιδέ τ' οὐχ ἦσσαν τύχην. (*Heracl.* 929–30)

The “unhoped for,” or “unexpected” sight of a captive Eurystheus is fraught with double meaning, for this sight is as unexpected to the audience (who anticipate his beheading at Iolaus or Hyllus's hands) as it is to the characters in the play. In fact, the “unexpectedness” of Eurystheus's capture rests less in the characters' surprise at their stroke of good luck than in the surprise this novel twist in the myth brings the audience, as Eurystheus is brought on stage to plead his case, to demonstrate perplexing goodwill to the Athenian people, and eventually to die—a sympathetic character in the end—at the hands of a vindictive heroine who in killing him explicitly flouts the will and customs of her Athenian protectors (961ff.).

Other lines which precede the unexpected arrival of a living Eurystheus on stage are open to a parallel dual interpretation. Shortly after a servant brings Alcmena the news of Eurystheus's capture—specifically located, in accordance with tradition, at the Scironian rocks (860)—and his impending arrival, Alcmena initiates a joyous celebration of her family's new-found freedom from persecution. But she quickly brings herself up short, to ask:

¹⁸ By Iolaus at Pindar, *Pyth.* 9.81; Strab. 8.6.19 (p. 377); Paus. 1.44.10; by Hyllus at Apollod. 2.8.1, Diod. 4.57.6.

¹⁹ The former story is from Apollod. 2.8.1, the latter from Strab. 8.6.19 (p. 377).

²⁰ I am perplexed by assertions in *RE* that Eurystheus is killed during Euripides' *Heraclidae* (*RE* s.v. Hyllus, vol. IX, 1, col. 123 [Eitrem]; s.v. Eurystheus, vol. VI, 1, cols. 1355, 1356 [Hiller v. Gaertringer]). As it stands, Euripides' play ends with the *decision* to execute Eurystheus.

²¹ See D.J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama: Myth, Theme and Structure* (Toronto 1967) 117–20, for discussion of the issues and other critics' responses to them.

ἀτὰρ τί κεῦθων Ἰόλεως σοφόν ποτε
Εὐρυσθέως ἐφείσαθ' ὥστε μὴ κτανεῖν; (Heracl. 879–80)

“But why hasn’t Iolaus killed Eurystheus?,” she asks. In a witticism very much akin to Electra’s “But where are the messengers?,” Euripides has Alcmena ask, essentially, why the plot she is part of has just swerved from its expected course: Iolaus is *supposed* to kill Eurystheus, by tradition. And what of the phrase τί κεῦθων...σοφόν? Literally, of course, it refers to Iolaus’s as yet mystifying motivation for refraining from the expected bloodthirstiness toward his persecutor: “concealing what clever design has he spared Eurystheus?”; that is, “with what clever (and secret) design in mind.” It is hard, however, to resist inspecting the phrase for double meaning. Should it not, on another level, also be read, “Concealing what piece of cleverness has he spared Eurystheus?,” or “What bit of authorial cleverness is concealed in his decision not to kill Eurystheus”?

Immediately after the servant’s heralding of the unexpected sight of a captive Eurystheus, he continues: οὐ γάρ ποτ’ ἤϋχει χεῖρας ἵξεσθαι σέθεν... (Heracl. 931). A few lines later he speaks of luck’s having “changed” Eurystheus’s fortune or fate (μετέστησεν τύχην [935]). These phrases subtly reinforce the unexpectedness of this turn of plot, both for the character Eurystheus and for the audience who expect his death. The same effect is achieved at two later points. First, during the debate between the Chorus and Alcmena over the propriety of executing the prisoner, this exchange occurs:

Αλ. χρῆν τόνδε μὴ ζῆν μηδ’ ἄορᾶν φάος ἔτι.†
Χο. τότε’ ἡδίκηθη πρῶτον οὐ θανὼν ὅδε. (Heracl. 969–70)

The Chorus’s odd comment that Eurystheus was wronged when he was not put to death at the appropriate moment reflects their feeling (which must have been shared by a fifth-century audience, as it has by critics since that time) that the story has gotten out of joint: once Eurystheus’s life has (untraditionally) been spared, the characters have been drawn into a quandary over how to gain justice and the audience into perplexity over the meaning of the moral debate in the play’s finale. A final double meaning is put into Eurystheus’s own mouth, when he asserts that his execution will pollute those who effect it, ἐπειδὴ μ’ οὐ διώλεσαν τότε / πρόθυμον ὄντα (Heracl. 1009–10). They did not kill him when they had their chance—when he was ready for it (πρόθυμος); even Eurystheus seems to have been taken aback by his unexpected survival. Now both characters and audience are committed to an ending replete with the moral ambiguity which follows upon Euripides’ mythic innovation.

In the *Phoenissae*, Euripides undertakes to present his version of the expedition of the Seven Against Thebes. In looking at the mythic shape of this play, one might with some justification (and only a little flippancy) characterize it by saying that Euripides seems to have been reluctant to eliminate from his cast of characters any of the potential players in the story. Jocasta is the main character; her brother Creon and nephew Menoeceus figure in the plot; Teiresias makes his customary appearance; Antigone is there, displaying a younger child’s version of the sibling devotion which was the hallmark of her mature dramatic

characterization by Sophocles; a distraught and crazed Oedipus is living on inside the palace and is brought out into the open in the finale of the play; unlike other tragic treatments, which have been content with bringing only one of Oedipus's two warring sons on-stage (Eteocles in Aeschylus's *Septem*; Polyneices in Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus*), Euripides contrives to bring the two face to face in a major *agon*; there are even two messengers.

It is with the innovative meeting of Polyneices and Eteocles that I will be concerned here. Jocasta, a would-be peacemaker, has arranged it; Polyneices enters the palace, stealthily, under her pledge of safety. When Jocasta and he meet, she dances a highly emotional lyric celebration of their reunion, toward the beginning of which these words appear:

ἰὼ ἰώ, μὀλις φανεῖς
ἄελπτα κάδοκτητα ματρὸς ὀλέναις. (*Phoen.* 310–11)

To Jocasta the character, who has herself arranged Polyneices' arrival, their meeting is "unhoped for" and "unexpected" only in the word's hyperbolic sense of "too good to be true," or (accompanied by a parallel semantic weakening) of "extraordinarily wonderful." Her words, however, are pregnant with double meaning, for to the audience, tutored in received myth, this reunion is *literally* unexpected. Again Euripides subtly signals his changes in the traditions.

The action of the *Hecuba* is formed by the two loosely-joined stories of the deaths of Polyxena (Hecuba's daughter who is sacrificed to the ghost of Achilles) and Polydorus (her youngest son, whom she had sent from Troy and entrusted to the care of the Thracian king, Polymestor). Of these two stories, the former is relatively well attested in pre-Euripidean sources; Euripides' version of it is, further, agreed to be relatively traditional.²² By contrast, the absence until the second century B.C. of any other mythic reference to the Polydorus-Polymestor story as told by Euripides has led many critics to conclude that this element was Euripides' own addition to the Trojan saga.²³ Whether the story was Euripides' own invention or his adaptation of an obscure Thracian legend (as Conacher suggests, following Pohlenz), it is nonetheless clear that much of the dramatic effect of the play on its Greek audience would have derived from the bald juxtaposition of a traditional story with an unfamiliar one. As he undertakes to join these two tales into one play, Euripides also takes the opportunity to flag his own mythic innovation through double meaning.

In the critical scene where Hecuba, already distraught over Polyxena's sacrifice, is finally to learn that Polydorus has been murdered, the playwright achieves a high degree of tragic irony. When Polydorus's shrouded corpse is brought before Hecuba, she at first assumes that it is Polyxena's. To a handmaiden's lament for her deprivation, she misguidedly responds: οὐ **καινὸν** εἶπας, εἰδόσιν δ' ὠνείδισας (*Hec.* 670). The handmaid comments:

ἦ δ' οὐδὲν οἶδεν, ἀλλὰ μοι Πολυξένην
θρηνεῖ, **νέων** δὲ πημάτων οὐχ ἄπτεται. (*Hec.* 674–75)

²² For a clear review of the mythic sources on Polyxena, see Conacher 147–50.

²³ *RE*, s.v. Polymestor, vol. XXI, 2, col. 1769 (J. Zwicker). See also Conacher, 150–51, esp. 150n. 12. At *Il.* 20.407ff. and 21.90–91, Polydorus is killed in battle by Achilles.

As Polydorus's corpse is unshrouded, the handmaid adds:

ἀλλ' ἄθρησον σῶμα γυμνωθὲν νεκροῦ,
εἴ σοι φανεῖται θαῦμα καὶ παρ' ἐλπίδας. (*Hec.* 679–80)

In all three quotations, the references to novelty (or lack of it) point specifically to the irony of Hecuba's mourning over a known (= old) sorrow, while the audience knows she is about to be devastated by a new and unexpected one. The words are so clearly apposite in this sense that they trigger little impulse to inspect them for double meaning. The case is different, however, when Hecuba, having finally learned the truth, keens:

ἄπιστ' ἄπιστα, καὶνὰ καὶνὰ δέρκομαι.
ἔτερα δ' ἄφ' ἑτέρων κακὰ κακῶν κυρεῖ. (*Hec.* 689)

At first sight, this appearance of καὶνὰ may seem no different from the previous descriptions of events as either καὶνός or νέος. In fact, though, there is a significant distinction here: the two earlier references are used in their literal sense: the sufferings are either “new” or “not new” accordingly as they are previously unrealized or already known by Hecuba. But when an enlightened Hecuba laments the sight of Polydorus' murdered corpse as ἄπιστ' ἄπιστα, καὶνὰ καὶνὰ, she has switched from literal to figurative use of the word καὶνός: this is clearly an unbelievable and strange or unprecedented sight—not just newly happened or realized by Hecuba, but so horrible as never to have been witnessed before by mankind. Arrowsmith, for example, renders: “Horror too sudden to be believed, / unbelievable loss, / blow after blow!” On hearing these lines, of course, the audience would without effort adjust to the switch in the word's denotation. Nonetheless, since it does echo the earlier appearances of καὶνός and νέος, continuing a verbal pattern, it is my contention that it would naturally retain some element of its earlier denotation as “new” and that it therefore invites dual reading, signalling that the strange and unbelievable ills which have just been revealed to Hecuba on the level of plot are novel for the audience viewing the play as well; their novelty rests in the unexpectedness of the mythic events which Euripides has here chosen to present. A parallel covert reference to mythic innovation in the play appears at its end, when the Chorus comments on Hecuba's vengeful murder of Polymestor and his sons: φίλοι, πέπρακται καὶν' ἔσω δόμων κακὰ (*Hec.* 1038). The strange new evils wrought by Hecuba within the house are not only the latest in a series of catastrophes affecting the character Hecuba, but also yet another exemplification of the innovative plot lines that Euripides loved to craft by diverging from the mythic material passed down to him.

A judgment similar to that of the Chorus at *Hecuba* 1038 is made by the Chorus of the *Orestes*. After the messenger speech (bizarre in both form and content) in which the babbling Phrygian messenger has stammered out the story of Orestes and Pylades' unprecedented “murder” of Helen and their equally unexampled seizure of Hermione as hostage,²⁴ the Chorus speaks these words:

²⁴ The events of the *Orestes*, as Arrowsmith has aptly characterized them, are “almost entirely free invention, an imaginative rendering of the events which follow the murder of Clytemnestra by her children” (William Arrowsmith, tr.,

καὶ μὴν ἀμείβει καὶνὸν ἐκ καὶνῶν τόδε...(*Or.* 1503). Not only horror after horror, but also innovation after innovation marks the plot of the *Orestes*, as these heroes of the Aeschylean stage degenerate into petty terrorists.

The subtle disturbances of dramatic reality achieved by the playwright's repeated glances at the mythic traditions from which his plots depart are delicate—and carefully tucked away—bits of wit, or authorial σοφία. As Winnington-Ingram has suggested, they are aimed at the modern, smart set in the audience, those like Aristophanes and Alcibiades. They are not systematic, but that is part of their virtue, as wit and system may be said to be largely antithetical. Cleverness which is too predictable is no longer clever.

In sum, then, Euripides has on several occasions in his plays embedded a second level of meaning into his characters' words. Taking the opportunity provided by their musings on the strangeness of events in their lives or by their discovery of new reversals in fortune, he has sent his audience—or, rather, those few in it with ears finely tuned to a modernistic, proto-Alexandrian literary sophistication—gracefully veiled signals of the parallel novelty of his treatments of received myth.

Orestes, in Grene-Lattimore [above, note 12] vol. 4, 107); similarly, Willink calls the play a “*tour de force* of audacious myth-invention” (C.W. Willink, *Euripides, Orestes* [Oxford 1986] xxii).