

# The New Criterion

## Books

May 2003

### Dark comedy

by [Donald Lyons](#)

A review of Euripides. Vol. 5: *Helen, Phoenician Women, Orestes*. Vol. 6: *The Bacchae, Iphigenia at Aulis, Rhesus*, edited by David Kovacs.

What Thucydides says about the total tergiversation of the Greek ethos in the course of the Peloponnesian War remains the best introduction to the late, bleak, crazy plays of Euripides:

Fanatical enthusiasm was the mark of a real man, and to plot against an enemy behind his back was perfectly legitimate self-defense. Anyone who held violent opinions could always be trusted, and anyone who objected to them became a suspect. To plot successfully was a sign of intelligence, but it was still cleverer to see that a plot was hatching... . Revenge was more important than self-preservation... . Love of power, operating through greed and through personal ambition, was the cause of all these evils. To this must be added the violent fanaticism which came into play once the struggle had broken out... . [T]here was a general deterioration of character through the Greek world. The simple way of looking at things, which is so much the mark of a noble nature, was regarded as a ridiculous quality and soon ceased to exist.

David Kovacs has done a splendid job editing all six volumes of the new Loeb Euripides. The final two volumes contain *Helen, Phoenician Women, and Orestes* (volume 5); *The Bacchae, Iphigenia at Aulis, and Rhesus* (volume 6). Kovacs has provided for each play a crisp introduction, a learned text, a clear translation, and a useful bibliography. All his volumes have a spacious, airy feel. In this, as in much else, they differ from Arthur S. Way's cramped four volumes (1904), which were full of locutions like "Thou hast done—what? Thou thrillst me with fear" and breathed the chipper spirit of Edwardian certainty. Nevertheless, although Kovacs has given us the best text, the best translations—lively, bold, and spirited—continue to be in the Chicago version, especially those of William Arrowsmith, which include those late masterworks, *Orestes* (408 B.C.) and *The Bacchae* (407)—plays that I will look at here after a brief survey.

In his early years the facile young dramatist used myth to investigate the psyches of women; he called them Alcestis, Medea, and Phaedra. Such plays were to earn Euripides the comic scrutiny of Aristophanes—a mockery that could not hide a likeness, a fondness for extreme situations that both men shared. The comic writer Cratinus noticed this in his coinage, *euripidaristophanizein*, to write in the style of both men.

Around 412, toward the end of both his career and the war, came two plays—*Iphigenia among the Taurians* and *Helen*—that consciously sought to offer an alternate, a differing, a happy version of the most familiar Greek stories. (The *Ion* of 414 is similarly euphoric.) Iphigenia, secreted off in Eurasia, and Helen, hidden down in Africa, offer Orestes and Menelaus, respectively, joyful rescue

from a nasty world. It is difficult not to see in these plays the vocabulary of tragedy used as a dreamlike, fantasy escape from what was now an increasingly somber world.

The *Orestes* has not been appreciated for what it is. It amounts to nothing less than a thorough and lawless rewriting of Athens' great founding play, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (458), particularly the last member of the trilogy, *The Eumenides*, which presented the suffering and redemption of Orestes, the Apollo-driven killer of his killer mother. Out of Orestes's trial, presided over by Athena, came the founding legal institutions of Athenian civilization and the peaceful domestication of the previously hostile Eumenides. Intelligence and goodwill reign.

In Euripides' wartime revision, Electra is tending her delirious brother Orestes after the matricide. Orestes sleeps. "And why repeat the old charges against Apollo?" mutters the young woman sarcastically. "The world knows all too well how he pushed Orestes to murder the mother who gave him birth, the act of matricide which wins, it seems, something less than approval in men's eyes." Menelaus, whose wife Helen and daughter Hermione are hiding in the palace, will be the solution to all problems when he arrives. A half-crazed Orestes awakes and begs Menelaus for help against the people, who are about to order his death by stoning. Menelaus dithers. Orestes' bosom pal Pylades suggests: "We'll murder Helen. That will touch Menelaus where it hurts." But, when they try to grab Helen, she escapes by flying through the roof to heaven, as reported by an excitedly incoherent Phrygian slave. Orestes decides to murder, if not the wife, at least the daughter of Menelaus on the grounds that "I can never have my fill of killing whores." Menelaus is very upset. He and Orestes insult each other first in *stichomythia* (the exchange of whole single lines) and then in *antilabe* (the exchange of parts of lines). Apollo suddenly pops by on the machine and glibly solves the quarrel, pairing off unlikely types.

What is amazing about this play is the way it ingeniously uses the vocabulary of mythology to display the collapse of the same world that mythology supported and explained. Euripides was a very clever writer—a genius, if you will—who painted feckless people adrift in a savage society—and painted them often with a dark, strangely modern comedy.

According to tradition, Euripides wrote *The Bacchae* in wild Macedon after leaving a doomed Athens in 408, a few years before the disastrous end of the Peloponnesian War. (Kovacs buys this colorful story.) It was produced posthumously in Athens by a son or nephew. In it the dialectic between a god's fierce power and any human's silly impotence is taken to a point where a pious mother tears apart an impious son, thinking him a young, delicate calf she caught in a Dionysiac orgy. There are passages of rapt beauty: "The upper air was still, the leaves of the wooded glade kept silence, and no sound of beast could be heard." There is also humor, of the ridiculing kind: "Your girdle is slack," Dionysus tells Pentheus, as the god dresses up the king as a woman for his mountain foray.

*The Bacchae* strikes me as neither defaming nor exalting religion. Rather it sees the world as empty of meaning but not of energy. It is a bitter but amused old man's play, crammed with stratagems but endorsing none. The artist he most reminds me of is Buñuel.

Donald Lyons

[more from this author](#)

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion | [www.newcriterion.com](http://www.newcriterion.com)

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/darkcomedy-lyons-1750>