To what extent does Euripides dispense with the conventions of Attic tragedy?

_Eur:_ I saw through him years ago. All that rugged grandeur – it’s all so uncultivated and unrestrained. No subtlety whatsoever. Just a torrent of verbiage, stiffened with superlatives and padded out with pretentious polysyllables.

_Aesch:_ That’s about the level of criticism one might expect from you, ‘son of the seed-goddess’. And what are your plays but a concatenation of commonplaces, as threadbare as the ragged beggars who populate them.¹

(Aristophanes, _Frogs_, 835-840)

Aristophanes’ imagined conflict between Euripides and Aeschylus encapsulates a number concepts that appear to have dominated critical response to the work of Euripides’ since. Euripides has been critically constructed in opposition to his elders Aeschylus and Sophocles as the representative of the new versus the old, the witty versus the austere, and the radical versus the conventional. These strong oppositions have coloured readings of Euripides and produced some startlingly polemical interpretations of the man and his work. Schlegel called him “a master and a tyro”⁵, Nietzsche argues he was a “tragic poet determined to make his notion of tragedy prevail over the traditional notions”⁶, whilst throughout the 20th century critics have grappled with Euripides’ relationship with the tragic tradition. There appears to have been a distinct tendency from first performance onwards to mythologize Euripides’ as rebellious upstart with a reactionary agenda to challenge the generic conventions he inherited from his predecessors. Imposing such an oppositional understanding on Euripides’ position in relation to the Attic tragic tradition is potentially misleading, even fallacious.

As tempting as it might be to see Euripides as having thrown aside conventional concern this is not supported by the texts. For Euripides to have ‘dispensed with convention’ it must be assumed that stable tragic conventions once existed and such an assumption is problematic. Conventions of Attic drama would be an endlessly debateable topic in itself, so for the purpose of this argument I propose that we understand the messenger speech, the chorus, unity of plot and divine intervention as accepted conventions of the genre to test the hypothesis that Euripides’ plays do demonstrate a self-conscious awareness of the pressure of convention but present a playful, and at times daring, rather than scornful attitude towards it.

Convention itself is an ambivalent term, the OED recognises that it has both positive and negative connotations, on the one hand it suggests an accepted standard of artistic treatment, but also implies a certain artificiality or conservatism. This internal pressure within the term itself appears to be manifested in the work of Euripides which acknowledges the existence of certain conventions but also presents an anxiety concerning the formalism that convention implies. Our understanding of Euripides’ relationship to Aeschylus and Sophocles can perhaps be illuminated by Harold Bloom’s ‘anxiety of influence’⁷ hypothesis that sees poets in a necessary struggle between the inspiration and models provided by earlier poets and the desire to forge an original artistic vision.

One of the incontestable preoccupations of Greek tragedy concerns the transmission of information with the plays of all three major tragedians demonstrating an anxious interest in the reliable or unreliable

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¹ Aristophanes, _Frogs_
² Michelini, p.12
³ Nietzsche, p.75
⁴ title of 1973 book
communication of facts. Furthermore, reported action is necessary to describe significant events (normally violent deaths) that takes place off-stage and to propel the plot forwards. This means that the messenger speech became a crucial dramatic convention in tragedy and Euripides’ treatment of the messenger seems typical of his attitude to other features that may be regarded as conventional. In the *Bacchae* Dionysos, in conversation with Pentheus, appears to pre-empt the role of the messenger:

\[
\textit{Dio:} \quad \text{But listen first to this man and note what he has to tell, the one who is here from the mountain to give you some news. I shall stay at your side; I will not run away.}\quad ^{5} \\
\quad \textit{(Bacchae, 659)}
\]

Euripides fittingly has the patron deity of theatre and the tragic festivals ironically instruct another on-stage character to listen to the information which the, as yet unseen, messenger will bring. The playwright demonstrates a treatment of this particular convention that a modern reader might identify as post-modern. Having a character pre-empt and explain the role of the messenger simultaneously upholds and undermines the convention. Euripides certainly doesn’t dispense with the messenger, rather he foregrounds the artificiality and dramatic necessity of it as convention. The audience are made aware that Pentheus is trapped by the world of the play, and indeed, the generic expectations of tragedy. Like the unfortunate ‘protagonists’ of Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* Pentheus’ fate is shown to be subject to a dramatic plan over which he has no agency. The plays of Sophocles and Aeschylus too are populated by characters whose fates are explicitly predetermined, however, what is different in Euripides is this playful foregrounding of the way in which tragedy tends to construct itself. The pre-empted messenger occurs also in the *Orestes* when the Chorus Leader announces:

\[
\text{Pylades, but this messenger, it seems, will soon tell us what was decided about your brother.}\quad ^{6} \\
\quad \textit{(Orestes, 813)}
\]

And, right on cue, the predicted messenger arrives to report the decision of the Argive court. Again Euripides demonstrates an ironic awareness of how stock device operates in tragedy thus appearing to treat convention with a certain bored amusement. Perhaps acknowledging Euripides’ playfulness might help Nietzsche answer the question that he poses in *The Birth of Tragedy*: “How did it happen that his great respect for his audience made him treat that same audience with utter disrespect?” Nietzsche’s aggressive tone constructs Euripides as an arrogant playwright who felt superior to the audience whose support he nonetheless required to prolong his career. Alternatively, we can simultaneously understand Euripides involved in both ‘respectful’ and ‘disrespectful’ discourse with his audience. He grants them enough intelligence that he assumes them to be aware of conventions of the tragic genre, but also teasingly undermines their familiarity with the use of these precedented devices.

Euripides’ manipulation of convention is not confined to the messenger speech, the chorus receives a similar treatment. Euripidean drama maintains a chorus but their function and the way they behave is somewhat different to the models of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Euripides’ choruses are not demarcated from the action of their plays as decisively as in his forbears, they attain a ability to question their role in the drama, and, at times, to interact quite directly with the characters. In the *Orestes* before the chorus are

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5 *Bacchae*  
6 *Orestes*  
7 Nietzsche, p.74
even able to deliver their first ode their status and stage significance is problematized. Traditionally, the chorus would enter singing their lines and dancing the strophe. However, in this play Electra pleads with them to enter quietly so that they will not disturb the languishing Orestes:

_Elec:_ O women, good friends, approach quietly, make no noise, tread softly.

_(Orestes, 135)_

Euripides has Electra demonstrate a metatheatrical awareness of the stage conventions associated with the chorus. This is potentially problematic because it assumes for Electra, a representative of mythic narrative and a Theban, an impossible familiarity with Attic tragedy. Therefore, in this example, Euripides not only confounds the typical choral entrance, but also by working the reason for this particular breach of convention into the text imbues his play with a playful generic awareness not present in either Aeschylus or Sophocles. Electra becomes a staged version of the director-playwright figure and could even be read here as representative of the playwright and his tendency to toy with expected convention.

Furthermore, the chorus of the _Orestes_ seem strangely unsure of their role in the drama. Unusually their first ode is shared with a character and they are shown to be dependent on Electra for their information, they ask, “what news should I report?”8 (line 152) and subsequently ask for clarification from her: “What are you saying?”9 (line 154). This choral uncertainty represents a marked contrast to the initial utterance of the chorus of Furies in Aeschylus _Eumenides_, roughly parallel in the events it covers to the _Orestes_. The Furies enter in very decisive fashion and their first speech is full of imperatives (“Wake her up!”10 (line 140) and “kick slumber away”11 (line 141)), they represent the antithesis of Euripides’ reticent chorus. Indeed, the contrast in the use of the chorus convention is so striking that it is possible that Euripides intentionally exploited the disparity with the Aeschylean prototype for dramatic effect. Francis Dunn argues that the treatment of the chorus in the _Orestes_ represents a “licentious parody of Aeschylus”12, but whilst this reading ought not be dismissed it seems that Euripides is aiming at more than subverting a predecessor, his chorus question the very relevance of their own convention in the dramatic action.

The chorus of the _Medea_ directly question their inability to intervene in events that is dictated by convention. They threaten to intercede in Medea’s murder of her children which can be heard taking place off-stage, however, they do not. Euripides prevents a fraught moment where convention appears to be on the verge of being utterly confounded but, eventually, is upheld, albeit having been challenged. Another significant example of Euripides staging potential contravention of convention occurs in the _Orestes_ at the moment when the on-stage murder of Hermione seems a very real possibility. Death in Attic tragedy always occurs off stage and is subsequently reported to characters, chorus and audience by a witness. However, Orestes with blade poised at Hermione’s throat threatens to break this taboo, Euripides thus imbues the scene with a double suspense as the audience anticipate not only a child-murder, but additionally, the potential breaking of a rigorously upheld convention. It is only Apollo’s sudden appearance that prevents the murder taking place. Thus Euripides, without actually dispensing with convention altogether, uses that possibility to foreground to his audience the way that convention pervades tragedy; the playwright exploits and tests generic custom to invigorate moments of high drama. A.N.

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8 Orestes, 1152
9 Orestes, 1.154
10 Eumenides, 140
11 ibid
12 Dunn, p.173
Michelini blames Euripides’ “deliberate violation of genre norms”\textsuperscript{13} for his relative lack of success in scooping first prizes at the Dionysia. However, he must have been popular enough for he was a prolific presenter of plays at the dramatic festivals.

The \textit{Orestes}, alongside \textit{Heracles}, are significant plays in thinking about Euripides’ treatment of two more important considerations in Attic tragedy, namely plotting and the presence of the gods. The most striking feature of the plot of both plays is its apparent doubleness, at a midway point in both plays the plot decisively changes its focus: the \textit{Orestes} shifts from exploring Orestes’ pained response to his matricide to a revenge plot against Helen; and \textit{Heracles} moves from the protagonist’s rescue of his family from the tyrant Lycus to his possession and murder of his family. Aristotle in his \textit{Poetics} identified unity of plot as one of the defining conventions of Athenian tragedy and in making this claim he necessarily needs to disregard Euripides and exalt Aeschylus and Sophocles as his models.

Michelini reads these ‘double-plots’ as “extreme examples of the Euripidean shock tactics”\textsuperscript{14} and doubtless these plays which have such a sudden change of impetus would have been jarring to an Athenian audience used to plays interested in a single \textit{agon}. Negative reaction to these problematic plots has persisted in interpretations of Euripides with Schlegel accusing him of constructing a drama flawed by “insurrection of the individual parts against the unity of the whole”\textsuperscript{15}, yet surely there is more at play here than a petulant desire to confound and confuse. W.G. Arnott must be wrong when he argues that the first half of \textit{Heracles} is a “red herring”\textsuperscript{16}, rather the design of the plot is another example of Euripides manipulating convention to move towards a more sophisticated drama.

In constructing two seemingly distinct halves Euripides in fact forces his audience to consider the themes and motifs that might relate the sections. In \textit{Heracles}, for example, in the first section Heracles is portrayed as a domestic warrior and this is ironically overturned in the sudden movement from domesticity to savagery. Furthermore, the play interests itself in a number of concerns that are very familiar to the tradition of Greek tragedy; pollution, sanity and insanity, and especially the motif of tragic self-discovery, but presents them in an unconventional form.

A reason often posited for the fragmentary nature of many modernist texts (\textit{The Waste Land} a prime example) is a collapse of faith in the wake of the Great War and a challenge to notions of a divine order. The fragmentation of Euripides’ plays also seems to be related to their treatment of the gods, generally speaking, the increasing distancing of the divine world from the action of the drama (compared to the same dynamic in Aeschylus and Sophocles) necessarily manifests itself in a disintegration of the unity of plot. In the \textit{Orestes} the protagonist bemoans the absence of the gods from his drama:

\textit{Ores}: What was I to do? Has the god no power to acquit me of my guilt when I appeal to him? What escape then can anyone have, if he does not protect me from death after ordering me to do the deed?\textsuperscript{17}

(\textit{Orestes}, 595-97)

\textsuperscript{13} Michelini, p.71
\textsuperscript{14} ibid p.233
\textsuperscript{15} Schlegel in M, get reference
\textsuperscript{16} p.231 in Mich, get refernece
\textsuperscript{17} Orestes
Euripides foregrounds the question of where the tragic hero might locate himself without recourse to the gods. His Orestes seems to be saying “this isn’t what I expected after what happened to me in Aeschylus”. In the *Eumenides* Orestes’ movement through the play is controlled by divine ordinance, whereas in the *Orestes* the role of the gods is significantly diminished and the mortals are granted more agency over their actions. The absence of the gods and subsequent lack of divine control over the action of the play makes the sudden shift to revenge tragedy possible. Indeed, the gods do not intrude in the play until the arrival of Apollo as *deus ex machina*, a convention that Euripides uses significantly more than either of his predecessors. The somewhat jarring and artificial conclusion that Apollo imposes on the *Orestes* seems to fit Euripides purpose appropriately because it proves the failure of a deity to make the play a harmonious whole. In *Heracles* the *deus ex machina* convention arbitrarily alters the course of the plot at the core of the play, again the only divine intervention in the action appears a disruptive force. Furthermore, this central entrance of the *deus* means that it is left to the mortal Theseus to handle the conclusion of the play, however, he has no divine power to bring the play to a close and must instead use his persuasive powers to convince Heracles to follow him to Athens. Dunn describes Theseus as a “surrogate deus”\(^{18}\), filling the space in the play normally given to a god and attempting their task but without divine control, in effect, Euripides uses him to problematize a convention of his own construction.

Despite the diminished presence of the gods in Euripides it seems fallacious to suggest that he created a more realistic, more human drama for as L.H.G. Greenwood reminds us, “ancient drama was not realistic”\(^{19}\), Euripides was still bound by the conventions of the Attic stage in terms of set, props and costume. Nevertheless, the removal of the gods from the majority of the action does create a different dynamic in the interaction of the mortal characters compared to the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles where the link between man and gods (and therefore their impact on the plays) is far closer.

At the end of *Frogs* Aristophanes has Dionysus elect Aeschylus as the tragedian to return to Athens in her hour of need. However, the play’s quick-wittedness, its interest in parody, its treatment of the gods and its double plot suggest that it is the work of Euripides that infiltrated the creative consciousness of the playwright. There is a danger that from Aristophanes the reader might construct an mythologized image of ‘Euripides versus’. Euripides was clearly a controversial figure during his lifetime and critical opinion has reacted polemically to him, in a sense his reputation precedes him. However, the attitude towards the convention of Attic tragedy manifested in his plays is daringly playful rather than disregarding. The paradox is that the playwright must acknowledge convention in order to be seen to challenge its hegemony.

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\(^{18}\) Dunn, p118  
\(^{19}\) Greenwood, p124