THE ORESTES OF EURIPIDES

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With brief Notes.

BY

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INTRODUCTION.

THE *Orestes* was exhibited, as we learn from the Scholiast on v. 371, in the Archonship of Diocles, Ol. xcii. 4, B.C. 408. Aristophanes, in the *Frogs*[1] (B.C. 405), cites and ridicules v. 279. In both these plays sympathy is shewn with the peace-party against the turbulent counsels of Cleophon, who resisted all negotiations and all offers of peace on the part of the Lacedaemonians[2]. Euripides, by representing a compromise effected between the rival thrones of Argos and Sparta[3], evidently invites his countrymen to take the more conciliatory course.

The *Orestes* is a very good example of the later style of Euripides. The popularity of it in the post-Attic schools of Greek learning is proved by the number of quotations from it preserved by Stobaeus and many grammarians and lexicographers. It has been severely criticized by some modern scholars, K. O. Müller, A. W. von Schlegel, and G. Hermann; but for all that, it is unquestionably a very interesting composition, not only from the many scenes of pathos and imminent danger, and the usual tragic alternations of hopes and fears, but from the beauty and cleverness of the versification and the complexity and ingenuity of the plot. Taken, as nearly all the Greek dramas were which treat of the Τρωικὴ πραγματεία, from the now lost epics of the Cyclus, it has for its general theme a subject familiar to us from the allusions to it in the *Odyssey*, as well as from the *Orestea* of Aeschylus and the *Iphigenia at Tauris* and *Elec-*

[1] v. 304.
[2] See *Orest.* 696, 772, 903, 1682. *Ran.* 680, and *ult.*
[3] *Orest.* 1660.

tra, the just vengeance executed on a mother[1] for the murder of a father, and the consequent madness of the matricide, his trial, and narrow escape from death. The scene is laid at Argos, or rather, in the ancestral palace of the Atridae at Mycenae; and the time is the return, after seven years wandering, of Menelaus, at the critical moment when Orestes is about to be brought before a solemn tribunal of the citizens of Argos. Tended in his illness and ravings by the affectionate care of Electra, supported in his trial and aided in his subsequent scheme for escape by Pylades, but basely betrayed by his nearest relatives Menelaus and Tyndareus, the father of Clytemnestra, he comes out of all his troubles triumphant over his persecutors, and in the end is reinstated by Apollo himself in all his ancestral rights. The Chorus, who take rather a subordinate part in the action, consist of Argive ladies, friends and sympathisers to Electra. Menelaus (as he is generally represented in the tragedies) is base, selfish, treacherous, uxorious, and cowardly. Tyndareus, who thinks only of his daughter's murder, and not of her crimes which led to it, is full of a not unnatural detestation of the matricide, whom he is determined to see punished. Helen, who has just returned with Menelaus, shews some sympathy for Electra and her brother, and some regard for the memory of her sister Clytemnestra, to whose tomb she sends offerings by the hands of Hermione. She is however vain and selfish; the amiable and penitent Helen of Homer is not the Helen of the Tragic poets. Pylades, who alone never desponds, is a brave and chivalrous friend, who will either save Orestes from the anger of the citizens or die with him.

The scene opens with Electra's narrative of the family troubles and the present position of herself and her brother, who has horrible delusions, and fancies his mother's Furies are pursuing him. A dialogue with Helen ensues, in which

[1] That Euripides did not follow the *Odyssey* (a doubtful allusion to which occurs in v. 583) is clear from the fact that Homer makes Aegisthus the murderer, and Aegisthus alone the person slain in revenge by Orestes. See *Od.* iii. 197.

the latter expresses, though somewhat coldly, her regret for her sister and her pity for Electra. Then a very beautiful description ensues of the ravings of Orestes, his sister's affection, his return to his senses, and his being informed of Menelaus' arrival. The Chorus sing an appropriate *stasimon* on the dread goddesses and their visitations on the family (316 seqq.); after which Menelaus comes on the stage, and gives an account of his wanderings. In a long dialogue with Orestes he learns the whole story of the murders of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Orestes implores his uncle to use his influence with the Argives in his behalf. Tyndareus however, the father of Clytemnestra, now comes forward, dressed in deep mourning, and breathing anger against the murderer. A long but interesting argument ensues, in which the merits of the case are judicially and sophistically discussed; and the issue is, that Menelaus declines to interfere (687 sqq.). Pylades next appears, announcing in breathless haste that the trial is about to be held on the capital charge, on which both Orestes and his sister are to be arraigned before the people. Pylades promises his support, and after a choral ode (807—843) on the misfortunes of the house of Tantalus a messenger arrives, who gives a graphic account of the trial, the speeches made for and against him, his defence, and the condemnation of the culprits. Electra sings a long monody (960—1012) bewailing their common fate, and after mutual endearments and leave-taking, a consultation is held with Pylades as to the best course to be pursued. He advises that they should seize Helen and put her to death (1105) to spite Menelaus, or at least, try to influence him by the threat. Electra (1191) further suggests that Hermione should be secured as a pledge and a hostage against Menelaus' revenge. The plan is successfully carried out. Hermione is caught; and a Phrygian eunuch who has escaped from the palace gives, in abject terror, a long description of the capture of Helen (1369 seqq.). Menelaus, returning full of fury, finds that Helen has miraculously vanished (1557). Orestes now threatens not only to kill Hermione but, with the aid of