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**Euripides' *Orestes*: Staging the Most Popular Tragedy in Antiquity**

Euripides' *Orestes* was the most frequently re-performed tragedy in Classical antiquity, but many modern critics have had a hard time accounting for its ancient popularity. While there are several scholars who have produced fascinating studies of the imagery, intertextuality, and history of scholarship of this play (Zeitlin 1980, Porter 1994), no one, to my knowledge, has attempted to "rehabilitate" the *Orestes* in light of the evidence we have about its performance history in the ancient world. This paper will suggest that the unique features of the *Orestes*' self-conscious plot and difficult staging issues were the key to its popularity. The play could provide a kind of "one-stop shopping" for an experienced and sophisticated audience interested in seeing the full range of possibilities contained in theatrical space within a single tragedy.

First performed at the Great Dionysia in 408 BCE, Euripides' *Orestes* proved to be the most popular tragedy in Classical antiquity. It was re-performed throughout the Hellenistic period and may have been performed, at least in excerpts, as late as early Imperial Rome; it was even made into a school text in later centuries. Contemporary readers of the *Orestes* often find this fact surprising; the play has been frequently criticized as being uneven in tone, lacking virtually any appealing characters, unfocused, and awkwardly resolved at the end. One translator of Euripides' *Orestes* presents the view that the *deus ex machina* emphasizes the problems of the play rather than "solving" them, and notes, "The play, on this view, has a modern, even absurdist, feeling about it" (Nisetich (1995) 14). But this "modern" or "absurdist" feeling may be one of the keys to the popularity of the play in antiquity: the *Orestes* presented many novelties of staging and plot, placed in fascinating tension with one of the oldest, best-known, and most-treated storylines. In fact, it is re-performance itself that has become interesting in the *Orestes* - *Orestes*' reenactment of the act of matricide by attempting to kill his mother's sister, Helen; the play's re-performance of the dramatic and literary tradition; and the play's staging problems, which invited alternate stagings. Thus, the play's popularity in Classical antiquity speaks to the sophistication of theatrical audiences, not only at the *Orestes*' original performance, but also outside Athens and after the 5th c. BCE.