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GENDER AND THE CITY
IN EURIPIDES' POLITICAL PLAYS

DANIEL J. GALE

Gender and the City in Euripides' Political Plays

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**GENDER AND THE CITY
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*For my teachers,
Froma Zeitlin and Jenny Strauss Clay
δισσὼ γάρ ἄστερ' . . .*

PREFACE

IT is now nearly half a century since a book-length study has been devoted to the two tragedies commonly referred to as Euripides' 'political plays': *Children of Herakles* and *Suppliant Women*. Although the appearance of Günther Zuntz's still-influential monograph *The Political Plays of Euripides* in 1955 did much to revive serious critical interest in a pair of works that had been, and often continue to be, written off as flat, uninteresting, and anomalous failures within the Euripidean (and indeed within the tragic) canon, the fifty intervening years have witnessed a scholarly and critical ferment that has revolutionized our understanding of Greek tragedy, and indeed of ancient Greek culture and society as a whole. It is the aim of the present study to make use of more recent critical modes in order to re-evaluate Euripides' political plays, and in so doing to allow them at long last to take their proper place within the Euripidean corpus.

Exceedingly influential among the various schools of criticism that have emerged during the crucial past generation of classical scholarship are the feminist and the French. The former has contributed vastly to our understanding of the Greeks' assumptions about sex and gender; the latter—the Paris-based school of historical anthropologists led by Jean-Pierre Vernant, and influenced by the French structural anthropologists in the early part of the twentieth century—has altered our understanding of the dialectical workings of the Greek mind as expressed in legal, religious, and artistic institutions. Although the logical implications of their respective methods could be seen, ultimately, to conflict—the tendency of the former to superimpose contemporary paradigms and assumptions (about psychology, gender, and power) on a culture from the distant past runs counter to the latter's insistence on respecting that culture's historical uniqueness—the two often complement each other. For instance, the patriarchal system that is the subject of the ongoing investigation and critique of the feminists seems to have been both justified by and perpetuated in certain foundational cultural associations,

expressed in law, ritual, and literature, that are the subject of highly nuanced investigations by the French. (Associations, for example, between the feminine, dirt, and 'the natural', on the one hand, and between the masculine, reason, and 'civilization', on the other.) The insights afforded by these two ways of reading Greek culture have allowed us, in many cases, to see a cultural logic at work in texts and practices that had once seemed incoherent.*

Although I make no attempt to hide my indebtedness to key insights afforded by these schools—along with more traditional philologists, their members are frequently and gratefully acknowledged in these pages, and those readers who strenuously resist either school are likely to be unpersuaded by what follows—I am just as eager to avoid critical and interpretative orthodoxies of any kind; and indeed I use my first chapter to point out certain excesses that owe more to ideology than they do to critical sensitivity, and hence tell us more about the critics than they do about the plays. In attempting to chart an interpretative path somewhere between a reductive Scylla (the tendency to read works of literature as little more than vehicles for promoting the ideological agenda of, say, patriarchy, with little interest paid to the artist's special, subversive role) and a hopelessly naive Charybdis (an interpretative stance that utterly ignores the possibility of ideological agendas altogether), I like to think I am heeding the lesson of these two works, which, as I hope to show, argue in a very complex manner for negotiation and delicately achieved equilibria, as opposed to monolithic certainties.

Because the issues I have alluded to here (admittedly in very circumscribed fashion) are likely to be of interest to a reading public not necessarily restricted to academic classicists, I have

* There is, of course, a vast literature of, and on, these two schools; readers unfamiliar with them would do well to consult, on the French School, the brief but very useful overview by Simon Goldhill in 'Modern Critical Approaches to Greek Tragedy', in P. E. Easterling (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1997), 331–4, and Froma Zeitlin's Introduction to her collection of Vernant's writings, *Mortals and Immortals* (Princeton, 1991), 3–24. A useful collection of feminist writings on the classics that represents many methodological and theoretical subdivisions within the general rubric of feminism is Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin (eds.), *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (London and New York, 1993).

attempted to make the discussion that follows accessible in a number of ways. The first chapter offers a brief overview of the vexed interpretative history of the two plays, and goes on to suggest that critical bafflement about their aesthetic merit has, in fact, been largely due to a failure to incorporate the insights of which I have just spoken—especially insights about the role of women in Greek society. Because it goes on to review some important arguments that have been made about women both in Greek society and on the Athenian stage, part of that introductory discussion will already be familiar to many classicists. But this review is a necessary preliminary both to understanding my own position, which builds upon some pre-existing approaches to the role of women in tragedy, and to appreciating the interpretative schemes that structure my extended discussions of the works themselves.

I have, moreover, loosely structured those main sections as running commentaries on the action of the plays. In part this is because these works are quite often unfamiliar even to classicists, and hence casual references to specific events that transpire in them are bound to have less impact than would references to the events that transpire in (say) *Medea*. But even more, as my readings of the texts are meant to demonstrate, the subtle play of doublings and reversals, of masculine and feminine gestures and intonations, that enables these works to create their specific political meanings is best appreciated in a truly 'dramatic' context: that is, as we encounter them during the course of the play. Although such an approach, as opposed to a more thematic treatment, occasionally yields some repetition, as gestures, words, and themes encountered in earlier scenes are brought once more to the reader's attention for the purposes of comparison, this chronological explication has the advantage of allowing the reader to appreciate the political plays as works for the theatre as well as works for the *polis* and its citizens.

Also for the benefit of the engaged, non-classicist, 'general' reader, extended citations from the texts are given both in Greek and in English translation; translations are mine unless otherwise stated. Since the purpose of such citations is to illuminate specific points as part of an ongoing argument for a specific interpretation, these translations are often more literal than lovely. In paraphrasing or quoting single words or shorter bits of the texts

in the body of my narrative, I have chosen to transliterate the Greek into Roman characters. Although unsightly to the eyes of those who read Greek, this transliteration allows Greekless readers to 'read' repetitions—for example, in words like *phyō*, *pephyken*, and *ephyn*, which are related to or derived from *physis*, 'inborn nature', 'generation', or 'birth', an all-important concept in *Children of Herakles*—as a reader of Greek would. These repetitions forge crucial meanings in the text, and are worth being able to see for oneself. In transliterating Greek words into Roman characters, I have rendered *kappa* as 'k', *chi* as 'kh', and *upsilon* as 'y' throughout. The only place where Greek appears untranslated and untransliterated is in those notes devoted to textual and palaeographical issues likely to be of interest to classicists only.

The transliteration of Greek proper names presents a problem that is by now well known; I have chosen an equally well-known solution. The Romans' own transliterations of Greek names have tended to stick: hence we generally speak and write of Aeschylus rather than Aiskhylos, Plato rather than Platōn; tend to use Latin *-us* endings rather than the Greeks' *-os*; and so forth. The convention I have followed in rendering Greek names into English represents (once again) a compromise of sorts. Extremely familiar names retain their Latin forms here: Sophocles rather than Sophokles, Oedipus rather than Oidipous. If you adopt 'Aiskhylos', after all, you are forced into increasingly pedantic and, finally, uninhabitable corners: 'Aiskhylaian theatre' is as terrifying to behold as the Erinyes are. But I have seen no reason not to transliterate less canonized names more accurately: hence Iolaos for Iolaus, Alkmene for Alcmena, Erekhtheus for Erechtheus, and so forth. One of the lessons we have learned from the French is that the Greeks are, finally, much stranger to us—more 'other' than 'self'—than we would once have thought. It seems worth while to replicate this notion as often and reasonably as possible, to have things 'look' Greek, even in orthography. As for the names of ancient works for the theatre, I have generally chosen to translate rather than transliterate these, since their titles are often illustrative: it is pointless to refer to *Hiketides* when you are speaking about *Suppliant Women*, or to *Herakles Mainomenos* when the play is about exactly what its title refers to: *The Mad Herakles*. (In the case of line references within the text,

however, I have used conventional abbreviations used by classicists for the names of plays, for the sake of space and convenience: hence *Hkld.* (from *Herakleidai*) for *Children of Herakles*, *Su.* for *Suppliant Women*, *Med.* for *Medea*, *Septem* for the *Seven Against Thebes* (*Septem contra Thebas*), and so on.)

One translation choice that may appear strange to those already familiar with these texts is in the name of an important character. Although a late tradition gives to Herakles' daughter the name 'Makaria', she is never named in the play, and there is no reason to believe Euripides intended her to be known as anything other than *parthenos*—a word that means, literally, a 'virgin'. A long-standing tradition renders the name of this character as 'the Maiden', a word whose quaint and rather Victorian connotations have become annoying in general and are especially inappropriate in the context of this play's unsentimental and often violent action; and yet to call her 'the Virgin'—ostensibly the literal translation—risks evoking powerful and, to a great many readers, distracting Christian overtones. *Parthenos* in Greek certainly could, and often did, have the technical sense of a female with an intact hymen, and yet it more generally has the sense of the English word 'girl', the French *jeune fille*, or the German *Mädchen*—a term, in other words, whose common usage assumes, to some extent, the technical meaning 'virgin' without sounding as clinical. The reason that Herakles' daughter appears in the play at all is that, as a young unmarried female child, she fulfils the divine specifications for a sacrificial victim; yet almost immediately after she gives up her life in (she thinks) exchange for the undying renown generally awarded to male heroes, she is swiftly forgotten during the remainder of the play. And so here she shall be 'the Girl': emphatically young and female, and just as emphatically anonymous.

Ironically, the dictatorial force of critical habit I alluded to in speaking of transliteration prevents me from translating accurately the one title I would have liked above all to render precisely. When Euripides' audience went to the theatre of Dionysos to see a performance of a play called *Herakleidai*, it is almost certain that they thought they were going to a drama about the *sons* of Herakles. The Greek *-idēs* (plural *-idai*) patronymic ending denoted first of all a man's sons and then, more generally, his descendants; under Athenian law as known to Euripides'

audience, only the most extreme circumstances permitted a man's name, house, or property to be transmitted via his daughter. In a play called *The Sons of Herakles*, the bold actions of the dead hero's virgin daughter on behalf of her kin—a Euripidean innovation in a well-known and beloved patriotic myth—must have been all the more surprising. The fact that scholars invariably refer to this work as *The Children of Herakles* is, in its way, symbolic of the interpretative problems that have always haunted the political plays; the elision of gender-specific meanings, the failure to hear overtones of sex and gender in these ostensibly purely 'political' works, are symptomatic of a long-standing critical state of affairs. That state is one that the following pages attempt to alter.

This book owes a great deal to the support and generosity of a number of people and institutions over the past few years. It began life as a dissertation submitted to the Classics Department at Princeton University, where Andrew Ford and Richard Martin, who sat on my dissertation committee, offered excellent readings and helpful suggestions at the earliest stages of my thinking and writing about Euripides and his political plays. The transformation of that thesis into a book would have been unthinkable without the comments and suggestions offered by a number of people who read the manuscript as it evolved. I am particularly indebted to Judith Mossman and to the other, anonymous reader for the Oxford University Press, both of whom painstakingly critiqued the manuscript, and to Hilary O'Shea for her interest, support, and patience. Above all, I am grateful to Lily Knezevich, who patiently read through the manuscript at every stage of its development, offering countless helpful editorial suggestions and criticisms and, best of all, giving me an idea of what the reaction of the 'intelligent non-specialist reader', that semi-mythical beast, might really be.

The pages that follow examine, among other things, Euripides' penchant for dramatizing the disastrous consequences that result when men fall into the hands of powerful women. I am happy to say that my own experience would not have proved useful fodder for our playwright in this respect. It was my great good fortune to fall into the hands of the dedicatees of this book at an early enough age to have been profoundly moulded by

them: Jenny Clay, when I was an undergraduate; Froma Zeitlin, when I was a graduate student. It is true that, like the pairs of female figures in the political plays, they represent, in their ways, quite different modes—of thinking, and teaching, and writing; but in my case, the contrasting and yet complementary examples of these two extraordinary women could not have been more constructive for, or more warmly and gratefully accepted and acknowledged by, the man who encountered them. Their influence on me has been as great as any teacher's, or friend's, can be; for me they have always been, and will continue to be, 'twin stars' like those that miraculously appear at the climax of *Children of Herakles*: the brilliant lights by which I always chart my course. Whatever I have written that is good, is theirs.

D.M.

Princeton, New Jersey
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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AJP</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
<i>BICS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies</i> (University of London)
<i>CP</i>	<i>Classical Philology</i>
<i>CQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>CR</i>	<i>Classical Review</i>
<i>CW</i>	<i>Classical World</i>
<i>FrGrHist</i>	F. Jacoby (ed.), <i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> (Berlin and Leiden, 1923-58)
<i>GR</i>	<i>Greece and Rome</i>
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>HSCP</i>	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
<i>LSJ</i>	H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. S. Jones (eds.), <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (Oxford, 1968)
<i>MD</i>	<i>Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici</i>
<i>PCPS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>La parola del passato</i>
<i>QUCC</i>	<i>Quaderni urbinati di cultura classica</i>
<i>REG</i>	<i>Revue des études grecques</i>
<i>SAWW</i>	<i>Sitzungsberichte der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaft in Wien</i>
<i>SO</i>	<i>Symbolae Osloenses</i>
<i>TAPA</i>	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
<i>WS</i>	<i>Wiener Studien</i>
<i>YCS</i>	<i>Yale Classical Studies</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>

‘The glue of the democracy.’

*Demades, a 4th-century Athenian politician, on the Theoric Fund,
the state subsidy established in Athens to encourage attendance at
dramatic festivals*

(Plutarch, Moralia, 10.1011)

‘There are more women in them than men.’

Lucian, on Athenian tragedies

(On the Dance, 28)

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I

Introduction

Gender, Politics, Interpretation

The drama is a celebration of Athens.

Aristophanes of Byzantium,
in his introduction to
Euripides' *Suppliant Women*

And just how, you creep, do my Stheneboias 'hurt the city'?

Euripides, complaining about his reputation
as a subversive, in the comic poet
Aristophanes' *Frogs* 1049

Interpretative *Aporia*

How to reconcile these two 'Aristophanic' comments about Euripidean theatre? This question sums up the task confronting contemporary critics eager to re-evaluate the tragedian's least-esteemed and still widely neglected plays: *Children of Herakles*, composed around 430 BC, at the beginning of the first decade of the Peloponnesian War, and *Suppliant Women*, first performed about 423 BC, towards the end of that decade.¹

¹ In the absence of external evidence for production dates of Euripidean plays, certain metrical considerations—specifically, the proportion of resolved iambic feet to the number of iambic trimeters in a given play—have proved to be a fairly reliable indicator of the date of composition, the percentage for an undated play being compared to those of reliably dated works. (For a discussion of this method see first T. Zielinski, *Tragodoumenon Libri Tres*, 3 vols. (Cracow, 1925), ii. 133–240, and E. B. Ceadel, 'Resolved Feet in the Trimeters of Euripides and the Chronology of the Plays', *CQ* 35 (1941), 66–89.) In the case of *Children of Herakles*, this figure (5.7%) seems to place the play somewhere between *Medea* (431; 6.6%) and *Hippolytos* (428; 4.3%). Internal references (e.g. the prophecy that Eurystheus' body will protect Athens from foreign invaders) have persuaded some scholars that the play was produced in 430, before the first large-scale Spartan invasion of Attika; so Günther Zuntz, *The Political Plays of*

The first epigraph, a rather laconic though influential appraisal of *Suppliant Women* as little more than a panegyric of Athens, was provided by the Hellenistic scholar Aristophanes of Byzantium around the turn of the second century BC in his own introduction to this play; it set the precedent for the simplistic evaluation of that work—and of *Children of Herakles*, with which it continues to be paired—that persists to the present day. When the scholar Günther Zuntz referred to the *Suppliant Women* and to *Children of Herakles* as Euripides' 'political plays' in the title of his still-influential 1955 study of these works, he was merely articulating what was already implicit in his predecessor's judgement, made two millennia earlier. For both scholars, the works were patriotic paraphrases of fifth-century Athenian political discourse.² Even the generations of Euripidean scholars who

Euripides (Manchester, 1955), 83 ff., followed (albeit somewhat tentatively) by the play's most recent editor, John Wilkins, in *Euripides Heraclidae: with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, 1993), xxxiii–xxxv, a useful discussion with full bibliography.

The dating of *Suppliant Women* is given a typically thorough discussion in the superb edition of this work by Christopher Collard, *Euripides Supplices, edited with Introduction and Commentary*, 2 vols. (Groningen, 1975), i. 8–14; Collard offers ample bibliography and summary of other scholars' arguments. (All references to Collard are to vol. ii, his Commentary, unless otherwise noted here.) The metrical evidence (14.2% resolutions) points to a date in the mid-420s: cf. *Andromakhe* (almost certainly c. 425: 12%) and *Hekabe* (425/4: 14.7%). Internal evidence points strongly to a date soon after 424. In November of that year the Boeotians had refused to return the bodies of the Athenian war dead for burial after the battle of Delium (Thuc. 4. 89–101); the desperate attempt to retrieve such bodies is of course the drama's great *Leitmotif*. For a detailed account of the play's allusions to the battle of Delium, see Sophie Mills, *Theseus, Tragedy, and the Athenian Empire* (Oxford, 1997), 91–7, and also the extended analysis by A. M. Bowie, 'Tragic Filters for History: Euripides' *Supplices* and Sophocles' *Philoctetes*', in Christopher Pelling (ed.), *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford, 1997), 45–56.

² Zuntz, *The Political Plays of Euripides*. In fairness to Zuntz, it should be said that his book was produced as an effort to counter the strict historicism of scholars such as Grégoire, who in his discussion of *Suppliant Women* rather typically sees the play as little more than a vein rich in the ore of contemporary political allusions (L. Parmentier and H. Grégoire (eds.), *Euripide* (Paris, 1923), 92 ff.). Although Zuntz posited a more general connection of the plays' contents to contemporary events (*Political Plays*, 20 ff.), and indeed was among the few who attempted to show an overall coherence in the works' ostensibly disjointed elements, he still sought to present the plays as an unmediated endorsement of Athenian civic ideology.