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Edited and Translated by
DAVID KOVACS

EURIPIDES

CYCLOPS ALCESTIS

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DAVID KOVACS



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EURIPIDES

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NOTE ON SECOND PRINTING

When the first printing of this volume was nearly exhausted, I was invited to make corrections. It seemed a good opportunity to rethink a few textual and translation decisions in the light of the reviews this volume and its companion *Euripidea* have received. I here express gratitude to all my reviewers but especially to Donald Mastronarde and David Bain, whose learned and courteously phrased skepticism has lead me to retract some of the textual novelties the first printing contained. In other cases I have tried to carry the discussion further in my forthcoming *Euripidea Tertia*.

University of Virginia

D. K.

For Frank and Irene Kovacs

PREFACE

I have incurred a number of debts of gratitude in writing this volume, which it is a pleasure to acknowledge here. My thanks for financial assistance go to the Marguerite Eyer Wilbur Foundation, the Earhart Foundation, and the Perseus Project of Harvard University for grants allowing me to spend the 1990 spring semester in Oxford, and to the University of Virginia for a semester's leave the previous semester and two summer research grants. I am grateful to the governing body of Christ Church, Oxford, for making me an honorary member during my stay there. In addition, this book benefitted immensely from discussions or correspondence with Angus Bowie, Godfrey Bond, Malcolm Heath, Richard Kannicht, Mary Lefkowitz, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, David Lewis, Jon D. Mikalson, and Oliver Taplin, but especially from the generosity of James Diggle and Charles Willink and the stylistic criticisms of George Goold.

Further work was made possible in two subsequent years by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, an independent federal agency. I am grateful for its support.

This volume is dedicated to my parents in profound gratitude.

University of Virginia

David Kovacs

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INTRODUCTION

The Life of Euripides

For the biography of Euripides, as for those of ancient writers in general, reliable evidence is in short supply.¹ During his lifetime no one saw fit to write about him as a person, and by the time curiosity about him developed, the means to satisfy it had nearly all vanished. There were, to be sure, the public records, inscribed on stone, of his entries in the tragic competitions giving year, plays, and the order in the final awarding of prizes, and perhaps one or two records on stone of his participation in non-dramatic events, such as the festival of Apollo Delios he participated in when he was a boy in his home deme of Phlya. But there was little beyond this: no one who wrote about him could quote letters from or to him, and few genuine reminiscences from Euripides' family or contem-

¹ I refer throughout by author's name to the following: Dieterich, "Euripides," *RE* VI (1907), 1242–81; Jacoby, *FGrH*, vol. 3 b (Supp.); Wilamowitz, *Einleitung in die griechische Tragödie* (Berlin, 1907) [= *Euripides: Herakles*, vol. I (Berlin, 1895, reprinted Darmstadt, 1959)]. Numerals preceded by T refer to the section *Testimonia Vitae et Artis Selecta*, the principal ancient notices of Euripides' life, published separately in my *Euripidea*, Supplement to *Mnemosyne* 132 (Leiden, 1994).

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poraries survived into the fourth century to be passed on by Aristotle or Philochorus. Practically the only evidence dating from Euripides' lifetime was the work of Aristophanes and other poets of Old Comedy, much of which is available to us as well. The poets of Old Comedy certainly did not write with the intention of providing information about their comic targets, and their evidence is difficult to assess, though, as we will see, this did not stop biographers from using Old Comedy as a source for the life of Euripides, with sometimes ludicrous results. It is important for the assessment of Euripides' work to be clear about the limitations of our knowledge of his life. There is a demonstrable tendency in Euripidean criticism to bring to the interpretation of the plays information about the poet's intellectual and artistic affinities derived from the biographical tradition. It will emerge from the present discussion that this tradition is highly unreliable, and that on such questions the only defensible stance is agnosticism: we simply do not know anything about Euripides' life that can furnish an interpretive key to his works.

The main biographical tradition is represented in four brief, summary Lives (the *Genos Euripidou kai bios* found in many manuscripts of the plays, an article in the *Suda*, a sketch by Thomas Magister, and one in Aulus Gellius²) and fragments of a longer *Life of Euripides* by Satyrus.³ Much

² The *Genos* [=T 1] is to be found on pp. 1–6 of Schwartz's edition of the scholia, Thomas Magister [=T 3] on pp. 11–13 of Dindorf's edition. The *Suda* article [=T 2] is E 3695 (ii 468 in Adler's edition), and the Aulus Gellius sketch [=T 5] is at 15.20.

³ The papyrus fragments of Satyrus' *Life of Euripides* [=T 4] are P. Oxy. 1176, *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 9 (1912), 124–82, most

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of what these sources claim to know is obviously not factual at all and can be categorized under four heads.⁴ Often these lives report as fact the jokes or even the plots of Old Comedy, as when we are told that Euripides' mother sold vegetables, an Aristophanic joke we have good reason to doubt is based on fact, or when Satyrus tells us that the women conspired at the Thesmophoria to kill Euripides, which is the plot of Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*.⁵ A second category of pseudo-evidence is material about the poet's life derived from his plays. The story about the infidelity of his wife, for example, "explains" why he wrote his first *Hippolytus*,⁶ and the anecdote about this wife's second husband ends with a slightly altered quotation from his *Electra*. A common procedure is to cite a "fact" about Euripides (e.g. "He wrote his plays in a cave looking out to sea") and then to cite as a consequence of this "fact" something which may in reality be its sole warrant (e.g. "and that is why he takes the majority of his metaphors from the sea").⁷ A third category is stories of a mythological character, such as the oracle allegedly given to Euripides' father.⁸ A fourth is material that can be shown

recently published, with commentary, by G. Arrighetti, *Studi Classici e Orientali* 13 (1964).

⁴ On the prevalence of the non-factual in ancient biography see J. Fairweather, "Fiction in the Biographies of Ancient Writers," *Ancient Society* 5 (1974), 231-75 and M. Lefkowitz, *The Lives of the Greek Poets* (Baltimore, 1981).

⁵ Fr. 39 X [=T 4.13].

⁶ *Genos* [=T 1.24].

⁷ *Genos* [=T 1.22].

⁸ See the *Genos* [=T 1.3], Aulus Gellius [=T 5.2], and Oenomaus quoted in Eusebius *Praep. Evang.* 5.33, 227C [=T 13].

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on independent grounds to be fabrication, such as the statement, irreconcilable with the chronology of Anaxagoras' career, that Euripides turned to the writing of tragedy after he saw the philosopher get into trouble for his teaching.⁹ Such evidence can be easily discarded. Not much in the *Lives* survives this process.

Another stream of tradition comes from sources that are concerned with history or with the lives of others and that mention Euripides in passing. A number of notices that one cannot always dismiss out of hand are transmitted in Aristotle, Plutarch, and others in connection with events and persons of a more public and political nature. This material will all be assessed separately as it bears on the various phases and aspects of Euripides' life.

Of the dates of his life, the death date is the easiest to determine. Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs* was put on at the Lenaea in the archonship of Callias (406/5), i.e. in January of 405. The plot begins with Dionysus in the Underworld, where he has gone because he has been suddenly seized by a longing for the tragic poetry of Euripides, recently dead. It culminates in the contest between Aeschylus and Euripides for the throne of tragedy. Before that contest, we are told that Euripides came down to Hades and challenged Aeschylus. It is subsequently related that Sophocles came down and did not challenge him but plans to challenge Euripides if he should prove the winner. In view of this not quite explicit chronology, it is reasonable to suppose that Sophocles died in the first half of Callias' year, the latter half of 406, as in fact the *Marmor Parium* and other sources tell us. It is also reasonable to infer that Euripides

⁹ See the *Suda* [=T 2.5].

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died not much earlier, in the archonship of Antigenes (407/6). We are told in the *Genos* that when the news of Euripides' death was brought to Athens Sophocles, himself dressed in mourning, brought on his chorus in the *proagon*, or opening ceremonies, without their customary garlands. This notice sounds genuine. If it is, this would be the Dionysia of 407/6, i.e. March of 406. This death date is confirmed by the entry on the Marmor Parium,¹⁰ which dates Euripides' death to 407/6. The rest of the biographical tradition puts his death a year later, for reasons we shall see.

Euripides was born, we are told by all but one source,¹¹ in the year of Salamis, the archonship of Calliades (480/79), and in most sources he was born on the very day of the battle and on the island of Salamis itself. The date is very probably one of antiquity's fictitious "synchronisms," by which exact dates that are hard to remember are replaced by nearby dates that are easier. Such synchronisms are characteristic of a whole school of biographical and chronological writing associated with the names of Apollodorus and Eratosthenes. This particular synchronism has several advantages. First, the three great tragic poets are all brought into relation with Salamis, since Aeschylus fought in it and Sophocles (we are told) was a young lad and danced a paeon in honor of the victory. Second, such a synchronism puts his birth in the archonship of Calliades, his first tragic competition in that of Callias (456/5), and his death (by a further synchronism) in the archonship of an-

¹⁰ *FGrH* 239 A 63 [=T 67].

¹¹ See the *Genos* [=T 1.2], the *Suda* [=T 2.3], Plutarch, *Quaest. Conv.* 717C [=T 7], and Diogenes Laertius 2.45 [=T 8].

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other Callias (406/5) at the easily remembered age of seventy-five.¹² Coincidences of this kind do happen, and it is no scholastic synchronism but a well-documented fact that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both died on July 4th, 1826, exactly fifty years after the signing of the Declaration of American Independence. But it would be mistaken to place too much reliance on the date of Euripides' birth. Some of this skepticism inevitably infects the notice about his place of birth as well.

The one dissenting voice is the Marmor Parium,¹³ which gives a date of 485/4 for Euripides' birth. This too is suspicious as it is the date of Aeschylus' first victory in the tragic competitions. Since, however, the Marmor Parium is the only source to give 407/6 for Euripides' death, a date corroborated by other evidence, in contrast to the synchronistic 406/5 of the other sources, it may be telling the truth about his birth as well. The most we can say with certainty is that he was born at a date not too far from 480 and that he was in his seventies at the time of his death.

Euripides belonged to the deme of Phlya, north of Mount Hymettus, part of the Athenian "tribe" of Cecropis.¹⁴ With only one dissenting voice the tradition makes him the son of a merchant or huckster father, Mnesarchus or Mnesarchides, and a vegetable-seller mother, Cleito. The lone dissenter is Philochorus, the fourth-century historian, who "demonstrates" that Cleito came "of very

¹² Cf. Eratosthenes, *FGrH* 241 F 12, quoted in the *Genos* [=T 1.17].

¹³ *FGrH* 239 A 50 [=T 6].

¹⁴ Harpocration, s.v. Φλυέα (i 302 Dindorf) [=T 11] and Theophrastus, quoted in Athenaeus 10.24, 424EF [=T 12].

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noble family.”¹⁵ Just what his demonstration relied on we cannot tell. Nor can we tell whether he said anything about Euripides’ father or whether he did not need to because the parallel tradition about him had not yet developed. We find vegetables mentioned in connection with Euripides’ mother numerous times in the comedies of Aristophanes, and it is clearly a familiar joke. There is no reason in theory why she could not have sold vegetables (though just why Aristophanes thought his audience would find the joke funny after so many repetitions is hard to see). Yet even apart from the evidence of Philochorus, there are other things in the record, as we shall see, that make the story of Euripides’ humble origins seem unlikely.¹⁶

The *Suda*, which quotes the valuable notice of Philochorus about Euripides’ mother, also tells us that his parents were exiled, settled as resident aliens in Boeotia and then in Attica.¹⁷ Although the phrasing is consistent with their being Athenians to start with, this is more likely to be a somewhat confusingly abridged version of the story told by Nicolaus of Damascus,¹⁸ in which the father, a Boeotian, is unable to pay his debts in Boeotia (colorful details about the Boeotian punishment for insolvency are the

¹⁵ *FGrH* 328 F 218, quoted in the *Suda* [=T 2.2].

¹⁶ F. Schachermeyr, “Zur Familie des Euripides,” *Antidosis. Festschrift für Walther Kraus* (Wien-Köln-Graz, 1972), pp. 306–26, points out that Comedy seems to confine allegations of menial occupation to *arrivistes* and suggests that Euripides’ parents, while well-off, derived their income from trade.

¹⁷ See the beginning of the *Suda* article [=T 2.1].

¹⁸ *FGrH* 90 F 103(v), quoted in Stobaeus iv 159 Wachsmuth-Hense [=T 10].

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occasion for the story) and then comes to Athens. In spite of the local color, this report seems lacking in foundation.¹⁹

We are told that Euripides as a boy was torch bearer in a procession in honor of Apollo Zosterios and served as wine pourer for the young men of prominent families who danced in honor of Delian Apollo.²⁰ These seem reliable reports. No one would make up such notices, and at least the second of them cites an inscription on stone in Euripides' home deme of Phlya. Services such as these suggest a family well established in the community and provide evidence against the Boeotian-immigrant story. Ancient Greek *poleis* granted citizenship to people from other *poleis* only very rarely, and there is no good reason to think that a bankrupt settler from Boeotia could have been accepted as an Athenian citizen in good standing, much less that his son could have been chosen to participate in a religious ritual with "the sons of the chief men of Athens." The origin of this story, as Wilamowitz saw,²¹ is not far to seek. Someone wished to explain why Euripides was called Euripides, after the Euripus, which runs between the Boeotian coast and the island of Euboea, rather than, say, Cephisiades, after the river that runs through Attica. He came up with the idea that his father must originally have been a Boeotian. It remained only to think of a reason he might have left his native land.

¹⁹ For a different view see Schachermeyr, above, n. 16.

²⁰ See the *Genos* [=T 1.7] and Theophrastus, quoted in Athenaeus 10.24, 424E [=T 12].

²¹ Wilamowitz, p. 8.

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Somewhat less easily dismissed are two *separate* connections with the island of Salamis. He is said to have been born on Salamis on the very day of the battle and also to have fitted out a cave on the island, where he retired to be alone and write.²² Our authority for the second of these is Philochorus; and later travellers, such as Aulus Gellius, were shown an unattractive grotto on the island as the cave of Euripides. Either his birth on Salamis or his possession of land there is possible in itself. The population of Athens voted in 480 to leave the city, except for a few defenders left on the Acropolis, and were settled in Trozen, Aegina, and Salamis (Hdt. 8.41), so that if Euripides' mother gave birth to him during the Persian invasion, he might plausibly have been born on the island. Alternatively, if his date of birth was moved to coincide with that of the battle of Salamis, there is good reason for anyone telling the story to give Salamis as the place of birth.

We also cannot disprove the idea that Euripides or his father may have *possessed* land on the island, though the difficulties are greater than Wilamowitz was prepared to admit.²³ When Euripides was a boy, his parents were prominent members of their deme of Phlya, which suggests that they lived there. If Euripides' family was as prominent as the Philochorus and Theophrastus testimonia suggest, they would scarcely have qualified for a cleruchy on Salamis, and while they might have acquired

²² See the *Genos* [=T 1.22], Thomas Magister [=T 3.2], Satyrus, fr. 39 IX [=T 4.12], Aulus Gellius 15.20.5 [=T 5.5].

²³ See Jacoby, p. 584, n. 7 on fr. 218, and n. 5 on fr. 219; Wilamowitz, p. 6.