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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1 EURIPIDES: LIFE AND WORKS

For Greeks of the fifth century BCE there is very little biographical information that can be relied upon. Much of the information about Euripides extant in later antiquity¹ is based on plausible and (more often) implausible inferences from allusions in Old Comedy and from statements in the dramas themselves (according to the widespread, but false, assumption that various first-person statements may express the dramatist's own convictions). The doxographic tradition often constructed teacher-pupil relationships whenever a similarity was detected between two intellectuals. Anecdotes commonly transmitted stories based on traditional patterns of folktale and myth rather than on genuine biographical data.²

Eur. was probably born some time in the decade of the 480s, and no later than about 475. The first reliably recorded date in his life (from the *Marmor Parium*) is that of his first production of plays at the Great Dionysia in 455, when he was presumably at least 20 years old and may have been as old as 31 or 32. Different ancient traditions place his birth in 480/79 (in some sources, more precisely, on the very day of the Battle of Salamis) or in 485/4 (a coincidence with the first victory of Aeschylus) or one of the two previous years.

His father's name was Mnesarchides (or Mnesarchos) of the deme Phlya (Kekropid tribe), and anecdotes and later cult connect him with Salamis (for his birth, and for the cave in which he is supposed

¹ For the text of ancient and medieval sources for the life of Euripides (hereafter Eur.), along with English translation, see Kovacs (1994) 2–66. The major sources are the *Life* transmitted in some manuscripts of the plays, a long entry in the medieval encyclopedia known as the *Suda*, and papyrus fragments of a *Life* in dialogue form written by the Peripatetic grammarian Satyrus late in the third century BCE; other information comes from brief references in ancient writers, the scholia (marginal annotation) and hypotheses (plot summaries and other information prefaced to the plays in medieval texts), and the *Marmor Parium* (an inscription of 264/63 BCE recording by date key events in Attic history and general Greek history). For a fuller discussion of Eur.'s life and the reception of his dramas, see Kovacs' Loeb edition, 1 1–36.

² See Fairweather (1974), Lefkowitz (1979) and (1981).

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to have isolated himself to compose).³ In order to have received the extensive musical and poetic education implied by his career, he must have come from a family of ample means. The anecdote in one *Life*⁴ about his training for athletic competition may also point to an upper-class background.⁵ The jokes found in Old Comedy mocking his mother as a lowly seller of vegetables may be a distortion of some actual family connection with production of food for the Attic marketplace.

Eur. will have undergone the standard Attic military training and service in his youth and prime. He may have participated in deme activities and the Attic assembly, and may have served on juries or the Council, but nothing is recorded of this (nor is there any reason it should have been).⁶ To become a dramatic poet, he presumably associated with and observed established poets, who in the early decades of the fifth century were also usually actors and chorus-trainers, and then attempted compositions on his own, preparing himself to 'request a chorus', that is, to ask the eponymous archon to include him among the competitors at a dramatic festival.

Eur. was obviously very much at home with the intellectual currents of his day, including developments in rhetorical training and the epistemological, political, and anthropological speculations of the Sophists.⁷ To a greater degree than Sophocles, he presents us with characters who engage in intellectual and ethical speculations and who comment about language, the process of argumentation, and skill at speaking. Eur. uses these features, however, to dramatize the aspirations and frustrations of human knowledge and human

³ The cave on Salamis where Eur. was believed to have worked has been identified and contains various dedications, showing it was a place of pilgrimage in post-classical times: one cup has Eur.'s name inscribed on it in lettering of the Roman period. See Blackman (1998) 16–17.

⁴ Test. 1(3) in Kovacs (the *Life* that precedes the plays in some MSS).

⁵ See Miller (2000) for the argument that not all Greek athletes came from wealthy families.

⁶ Stevens (1956).

⁷ This is too large and complex a subject to be dealt with in this context. On Eur. and the Sophists see Conacher (1998) and Allan (2000a), with the bibliography that they cite. On rhetoric and language see (e.g.) Croally (1994), Goldhill (1986) ch. 9, Lloyd (1992), Scodel (2000).

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civilization, and in so far as one can speak of his attitude toward modern trends, it is neither uniformly positive nor negative.⁸ The simplified claim made in the ancient *Life* that he was a ‘pupil of Anaxagoras and Prodicus and Protagoras and an associate of Socrates’⁹ should be greeted with scepticism, although such a belief has exerted a significant influence on Eur.’s posthumous reputation and modern reception.

When scholars in the fourth century examined the records of competitions in the Athenian state archives, they found that Eur.’s participation in the Dionysia began in 455. His last certain Athenian production during his lifetime was at the Dionysia in 408, and a final tetralogy was entered in the competition shortly after his death. His name was found in the list of competitions at the Great Dionysia 22 times (88 dramas), and ancient scholars catalogued 92 plays under his name, of which a few were of disputed authorship, and Eur. also produced at least a few plays for other venues.¹⁰ Possibly his surviving *Andromache* is one such play, since it could not be found in the Attic production lists under Eur.’s name (although Callimachus thought it was the play listed under the name of Democrates).¹¹ At the end of his life he was writing plays in Macedonia at the court of the king Archelaos, including one about the king’s mythological namesake, the lost *Archelaos*.¹² Eur. also wrote a praise-ode for the famous Alcibiades after his victory in the chariot-race at the Olympic Games of 416 (*PMG* 755–6), and Plutarch (*Nikias* 17.4) quotes as the work of Eur. a grave-epitaph for Athenians killed in the Sicilian disaster of 413.

⁸ See (e.g.) Reinhardt (1957), Mastronarde (1986).

⁹ Test. 1(4) Kovacs; a similar claim is made in the entry in the *Suda* (Test. 2(3) Kovacs).

¹⁰ See Easterling (1994) and the more speculative discussion of Dearden (1999).

¹¹ On the uncertainties of the evidence see Allan (2000b) 149–52.

¹² See Revermann (2000) 454–5. Aelian *Var. hist.* 2.8 tells a story in which Eur. competes in a dramatic festival at Peiraeus; if this is true, it could have involved either a reperformance of a play also seen at the Great Dionysia or production of a play never staged in the city. On the number of Eur.’s plays see now Jouan and Van Looy (1998) xi–xvi.

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The known dates in Euripides' theatrical career are as follows:

455	first competition (included lost <i>Peliades</i>)
441	first victory in the competition
438	<i>Alcestis</i> (earliest surviving play of Eur.): fourth play in a tetralogy that won second prize (with lost <i>Kressai</i> , <i>Alkmeon A'</i> , <i>Telephos</i>)
431	<i>Medea</i> : first play in a tetralogy that won third prize (with lost <i>Philoctetes</i> , <i>Dictys</i> , and satyr-play <i>Theristai</i>)
428	second <i>Hippolytus</i> : part of a tetralogy that won first prize ¹³
415	<i>Trojan Women</i> : third play of a tetralogy that won second prize, (with lost <i>Alexandros</i> , <i>Palamedes</i> , and satyr-play <i>Sisyphos</i>)
412	<i>Helen</i> , along with lost <i>Andromeda</i>
408	<i>Orestes</i>
407/6 (winter)	death of Eur. in Macedonia
405–400	<i>Iphigenia in Aulis</i> , <i>Alkmeon B'</i> , and <i>Bacchae</i> , produced by Eur.'s son; posthumous first prize

The other surviving plays and some of the lost plays are dated approximately on the basis of quotations in dated comedies, the proportion and type of resolutions allowed in the iambic trimeters, and (the least reliable criterion) possible allusions to contemporary events. Resolution in the trimeter has been studied in great detail,¹⁴ and it has been shown that from the 420s to the end of his life Eur. gradually loosened the traditional form of the tragic trimeter by admitting a higher and higher percentage of resolved positions (see PM 19), by using more lines with multiple resolutions, and by extending the

¹³ It is generally assumed that the second *Hippolytus* is the extant play; this is probably the case, but it must be conceded that ancient scholars may simply have had two *Hippolytus* plays and two dates on the production-lists and constructed what was to them a plausible story, that the play with the more shocking portrayal of Phaedra was the earlier and that criticism of it caused Eur. to write a new version. See Gibert (1997).

¹⁴ See Cropp and Fick (1985).

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word-shapes and positions in which the resolutions occur. The estimated dates based principally on resolutions in the trimeters are as follows:¹⁵

c. 430	<i>Heracleidae</i>
c. 425	<i>Andromache</i>
c. 425–4	<i>Hecuba</i>
c. 423	<i>Supplices</i>
c. 420 ¹⁶	<i>Electra</i>
c. 416	<i>Heracles</i>
c. 414	<i>Iphigeneia in Tauris</i>
c. 414	<i>Ion</i>
411–409	<i>Phoenissae</i>

Although Eur. won only four first prizes during his life (441, 428, and two unknown dates), there was no question, once his career was established, that he was a tragedian of the highest rank, and clearly archons must have welcomed his participation in the contest of the Great Dionysia. It needs to be emphasized that it was not an individual play by itself that was ranked first, second, or last in a competition, but the entire tetralogy of which it was a part. Since we normally have no idea of the quality of the lost accompanying plays, the quality of the competitors' productions, or the technical competence of the direction and acting of any given tetralogy, it is idle to speculate on the reason for a particular prize based on the single surviving play. Many have nevertheless assumed that

¹⁵ Omitted from this list is *Rhesus*, which is transmitted among the select plays of Eur. but seems to be a fourth-century tragedy by an unknown poet: see (in favour of Euripidean authorship) Ritchie (1964) and Burnett (1985); (against) Fraenkel (1965). The satyr-play *Cyclops* is also omitted, since it is uncertain whether the test of resolutions should apply in the same way to a satyr-play. Seaford in his edition of *Cyclops* argues that it should and dates the play to c. 410–408; others put the play in the 420s.

¹⁶ Some scholars date *Electra* to 413 in the belief that lines 1347–8 allude to the Sicilian Expedition and that lines 1280–3 announce *Helen* of 412: see the counter arguments of Zuntz (1955) 63–71 and the additional remarks in Cropp's edition, l–li.

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Medea so shocked or offended the Athenians that the judges were hostile.¹⁷

Aristophanes' *Frogs* shows that at his death Eur. could be regarded as one of the three giants of fifth-century tragedy. His popularity only increased after his death. Many features of the style and the projected world-view of his plays made them especially accessible and attractive to the developing panhellenic audience of the fourth century and the audiences and readers of the Hellenistic era and later: the relatively easier verbal style, the rhetorically-tinged self-presentation of his characters, the variety and complexity of plot mechanisms, the penchant for giving voice to marginalized groups, the emergence of personal themes less tied to civic identity, and the sense of abandonedness or even absurdity that often arises from the role of the divine and fortune (or Fortune) in the plays. His stature within the classical canon from the fourth century to the end of antiquity is evidenced by numerous quotations in ancient authors, the frequency of Euripidean lines in the anthology of Stobaeus and other similar collections, and inscriptions and papyri indicating performance and reading of his plays or of excerpts from them.¹⁸

Eur. has benefited during the past century from the remarkable recovery of ancient texts from scraps of papyrus rolls preserved in the sands of Egypt.¹⁹ Along with fragments of summaries of several

¹⁷ Nor is the assumption of a 'patriotic' reason for disapproval of *Medea* very cogent. The anecdote ($\Sigma Med.$ 9) about Eur. being paid by the Corinthians to make Medea the killer of the children might go back to a joke in comedy about Eur. being 'unpatriotic' for treating the Corinthians (bitter enemies of Athens in the run-up to the full outbreak of the Peloponnesian War in 431) so well. On the negative side, Creon is depicted as an abettor of a perjurer, and the citizen-women of the chorus as acquiescing in the death of their own royal family. But the audience of *Medea* had more important things to be shocked about than the way the heroic-age Corinthians were portrayed.

¹⁸ See the evidence in Csapo and Slater (1995) *passim*; for papyri, Pack (1967) is updated by the CD-ROM *Leuven database of ancient books* (1998), and the up-to-date database known as Mertens-Pack³ is to be made available online by the Centre de Documentation de Papyrologie Littéraire (CeDoPaL) of the University of Liège.

¹⁹ Even before the age of discovery of Egyptian papyri, a substantial portion of *Phaethon* was recovered from some pages of an ancient book (fifth century CE) that had been reused (at some point after the sixth century) to repair

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plays, the papyri have provided major gains in our knowledge of *Hypsipyle* (over 250 readable lines, and many additional scraps), *Antiope* (some 130 lines, most of which are readable), *Erechtheus* (about 80 readable lines to be added to two long book fragments from the orator Lycurgus and the anthologist Stobaeus), *Kretes* (about 60 lines), *Kresphontes* (50 lines, only half of which are complete), *Telephos* (about 40 full lines, plus scraps), *Melanippe Desmotis* (about 40 lines), *Archelaos* and *Phrixos A* (around 20 lines each). The more extensive fragments of lost plays are conveniently accessible in Diggle's *TGFS*, and in Collard, Cropp, and Lee (1995–).²⁰

2 THE PLAY: STRUCTURE, THEMES, AND PROBLEMS

Eur.'s play has been the object of intense scholarly study for over two centuries in all the languages in which classical scholarship is conducted, and even in English alone within the past few decades the bibliography is immense, and the pace of new contributions is accelerating. Similar ideas have been expressed many times over. The following discussion makes no claim to particular novelty, but attempts to deal with some major issues that are particularly germane at the beginning of the twenty-first century and to give some guidance to a selection of helpful bibliography. Many of the works referred to contain more exhaustive references to other contributions.²¹

another manuscript: we have portions of about 325 lines, with over 160 more or less complete. See Diggle's edition of *Phaethon*, 33–4.

²⁰ See also Jouan and Van Looy (1998) and (2000). For a full collection of fragments of Eur., we still await Vol. v of *TrGF* edited by R. Kannicht. In the meantime, the outdated collection to which reference is made is A. Nauck, *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* (2nd edn 1889, reprinted with Supplement by B. Snell, 1964).

²¹ For recent lengthy bibliographies on *Medea*, see Van Looy's Teubner edition, xxix–lxiv; Clauss and Johnston (1997), McDermott (1989). Among the most influential and important English-language discussions of the interpretation of the play in recent decades are Burnett (1973), Easterling (1977), Knox (1977), Bongie (1977), Foley (1989) (revised in Foley (2001)), Boedeker (1991) and (1997), Rabinowitz (1993), Kovacs (1993), Burnett (1998).

(a) *Medea as revenge-plot*

In terms of story-pattern, Eur.'s *Medea* may be analysed as a revenge-play.²² In this variation of that common type, in place of the slaying of one antagonist by the other, the murder is transferred to the enemy's children²³ and his new kin, and a complete reversal of the antagonists' positions is accomplished. A revenge play commonly features such elements as grievance, overcoming of obstacles, deception, murder, and celebration of success, and these may easily be identified in Eur.'s play.

The grievance in *Medea* is Jason's abandonment of a marriage of several years' standing that has produced male offspring. In extant tragedy, the motif of the abandoned or wronged wife has its most famous parallel in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (458 BCE), although Agamemnon's sexual infidelity to Clytemnestra is only one aspect of a complex chain of causes culminating in his death at her hands.²⁴ *Medea* can usefully be read as a revision or extension of the model of Clytemnestra: both women are dominantly persuasive and deceptive, both make use of the pretense of being a weak female, both use fabrics and woven material to entrap their victims, both can be identified with an Erinys, and *Medea's* scorning of military service as less fearful than childbirth challenges a motif of male superiority that Orestes and Athena used against Clytemnestra (248–511.). The exact nature of *Medea's* grievance is the subject of dispute and ambiguity in the play, with the antagonists themselves and the observing characters (chorus, servants, Aegeus) offering shifting perspectives. Jason tends to reduce *Medea's* complaint to sexual jealousy, taking advan-

²² See esp. Burnett (1973) and (1998); also Kerrigan (1996).

²³ Killing an enemy's children is a motif in many myths (notably, Atreus killing the children of Thyestes; in Eur. *Hec.*, Hecuba killing the children of Polymestor, and in *Her.* 970–1, 982–3, the mad Heracles threatening to kill the children of Eurystheus), and in a smaller subset the killer is also a parent of the victim (as in the story of Procne and Tereus).

²⁴ Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (which may possibly have been produced earlier than *Medea*: on the dating, see Easterling's comm., 19–23) also exploits this motif, but with the important qualification that the wife acts in ignorance of the harm she will cause and punishes herself with death upon realizing the truth.

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tage of the Greek (male) stereotype of females' liability to sexual impulse, and thus he ignores the issues of status to which Medea herself often refers. On the one hand, Medea is a wife who has borne male children to Jason: by contemporary social norms and by the norms of 'heroic society' as depicted in the poetic tradition, she has fulfilled a vital familial role and is owed due consideration as a partner in the family. Medea's legitimate claim to such status is confirmed by the disapproval of Jason's remarriage expressed by the chorus and (significantly, because he is male and himself of high status) by Aegeus. On the other hand, Medea views herself as a heroic partner in Jason's adventures. She is not a normal citizen-woman, but a princess and a saviour, and she has formed her bond with Jason not as a subordinate in an exchange between her father and her husband, but as an equal (21–2n.). She and Jason exchanged the pledge of right hands and the oaths characteristic of *xenoi* of equal status, and again Aegeus serves importantly as an outsider who confirms Medea's status among the elite. Medea thus takes on the traits of the insulted chieftain. For her sense of outrage over the failure of her partner to abide by the heroic code of mutual exchange and loyal good will, she may be compared to the Achilles of the *Iliad* and the Ajax of Sophocles' eponymous play. Medea repeatedly refers to honour, dishonour, and the avoidance of being laughed at by her enemies (see section (b) below), and unlike Achilles, who for a time rejects the heroic code because he perceives it as flawed, Medea makes her tragic decisions because she gives precedence to her heroic status and to following the dictates of the heroic code of retaliation.

In order to get her revenge, Medea has many obstacles to overcome within the play, proceeding through more steps than is usual for extant Greek revenge-plays. These steps provide the structure of the plot in its linear aspect, although there are also parallel and symmetrical aspects that connect scenes through similarity and reversal (discussed below). Also remarkable in the structuring of this plot is the fact that so many separate decisions and intentions formed by Medea are brought successfully to fulfilment: this is unusual because for the actions attempted by the major characters in tragedy, the proportion of frustrated intentions and perverted outcomes is normally very high. The first obstacle Medea faces is her own distraction and despair, so vividly portrayed in the opening scenes. At

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the outset she seems not only totally isolated – a woman without a sponsor and a foreigner unwelcome back home and threatened by powerful enemies in the Greek world – but also inconsolable and self-destructive. Yet when she comes outdoors in the first episode, she has mastered herself and begins a series of persuasive and manipulative speeches. She solidifies the Corinthian women's sympathy and extracts their promise of silence in support of her hope to avenge her husband's insult. Creon's decision to exile Medea is the second obstacle, and structurally it is the precipitating plot-event that sets in motion this 'one day' of tragic action.²⁵ The audience has already learned of this decision through the conversation of the tutor and the nurse in the second scene of the prologue, but Medea herself is informed before their eyes, and in an immediate and supple reaction she uses supplication and gentle words to wrest from Creon the extra hours she needs to work toward her revenge. The third obstacle is her fear of being caught by her enemies, in the act of revenge or after the act, and subjected to their vengeance and mockery. This she overcomes in the Aegeus-scene, when she secures a place of refuge. The fourth obstacle, delivery of her poison, is surmounted in the fourth episode when she deceives Jason into taking the boys, with the poisoned gifts, to the princess. Medea's own divided feelings present another barrier to the completion of her scheme, and her temptation to save her sons is defeated in the famous monologue of the fifth episode. This internal obstacle is a brilliant deepening of the motif of hesitation that Aeschylus deployed in the confrontation of Orestes and Clytemnestra (*Choe.* 896–904), and this struggle with herself has had a long afterlife in Greek, Roman, and more modern literatures. Finally, the rapid arrival of Jason after the killing of the children lends urgency to the question of how Medea will actually escape from her house and make her way to Athens on her own, and the unexpected gift of her grandfather's winged chariot provides the solution.

The revenge, as often, depends on deception of the enemy, but there is considerable variation and complication in Eur.'s portrayal of Medea's deceptiveness. The most straightforward instance of de-

²⁵ On the tendency of Greek tragedy to present events in one day see Aristotle, *Poetics* 5 (1449b12–13).