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978-0-521-76839-9 - The Art of Euripides: Dramatic Technique and Social Context

Donald J. Mastronarde

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Approaching Euripides

PRE-MODERN RECEPTION

Modern reception and interpretation of the major authors and literary texts of ancient Greece are heavily conditioned, and often distorted, by the long history of anecdote, criticism, pedagogy, and scholarship that has accreted around them, and there are few authors to whom this applies more forcefully than to Euripides. It is indispensable, therefore, as a preliminary step in approaching the works of Euripides, to take account of the long tradition of reception and judgment to which the plays have been subjected. Such an accounting will reveal several important potentialities inherent in his dramas as well as the agendas and preferences of the various readers and audiences, and it ought to help us move beyond some of the commonplaces that continue to influence the appreciation of his work.

A thorough treatment of the reception of Euripides would require a whole volume to itself. For the purposes of this book, some highlights will have to suffice. We may begin with the earliest stages of that reception, those from antiquity, which have had the longest span of direct and indirect influence: the judgments about Euripides' themes and styles conveyed in comic form in the plays of Aristophanes; the strictures on his dramatic technique that emerge as *obiter dicta* in Aristotle's *Poetics*; the biographical tradition about the poet himself; and the scholia and prefatory material transmitted with select plays in the medieval tradition of the extant plays.

Aristophanes, a younger contemporary¹ who staged his comedies during the last two decades of the tragedian's career, made use of Euripides most intensively in *Acharnians* (425), *Women at the Thesmophoria* (411), *Frogs* (405), and in a minor way in *Clouds* (the extant version is somewhat later than 423) and *Peace* (421). Exploiting a kind of culture war for humor, the

¹ Aristophanes' productions date from 427 to 388 and he may have been born around 450–445, whereas Euripides' productions date from 455 to 405 (posthumous) and he is likely to have been born in the period 485–475.

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comic playwright fashions an exaggerated and oversimplified contrast between old and new, assimilating under one grouping Euripides, New Music, the sophists, Socrates, and the amorality engendered by intense internal political strife, prolonged war, and dedication to retaining imperial power. The Aristophanic portrayal is the earliest source for the idea that in Euripides (as contrasted primarily with Aeschylus²) rhetorical cleverness, “realistic” costuming, choice of sensationalized myth, and innovative lyric style diminish the dignity of the tragic genre and fail to produce the proper edification of the audience, as well as for the idea that Euripides is an atheist.³

From the *Poetics* derive many of the often repeated charges of the defects of Euripidean dramaturgy: faulty dramatic construction (use of the *deus ex machina*, Ch. 15; the backhanded compliment about being “most tragic even if he does not manage other matters well,” Ch. 13, which leads many to apply Aristotle’s complaint about lack of probability or necessity in Ch. 9 to Euripides); the perception of unworthy or unrealistic characterization (Menelaus and Iphigenia, Chs. 25, 15); the contrast with Sophocles, implicit when Euripides is cited as an example of the wrong approach, and explicit with respect to characterization (Ch. 25)⁴ and the use of the chorus (Ch. 18). Curiously, Aristotle’s admiration for Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Tauris* (Chs. 14, 16) has been much less influential until recent times. Aristotle’s opinions were especially decisive for reception once interest in tragedy was revived in Western Europe in the sixteenth century. But even though we cannot trace much direct knowledge of the *Poetics* itself in antiquity, similar judgments were no doubt conveyed in other works of Aristotle and in those of his immediate students (especially Dicaearchus and Aristoxenus) and thus had an impact on the scholarly treatment of Euripides in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, especially the major Alexandrian scholars, whose views have left traces in the surviving scholia.⁵

² Aeschylus is featured most prominently in *Frogs*, but the same contrast is assumed in *Acharnians* 10 and *Clouds* 1365, and presumably in fr. 161 K–A.

³ For the decisive role of Aristophanes in conditioning subsequent interpretation and criticism of Euripides, see Snell 1953.

⁴ Aristotle (*Poetics* 1460b33–4) ascribes the contrast between idealized characterization in Sophocles and realistic in Euripides to a statement of Sophocles himself. If this reflects a reality of written transmission (Sophocles is alleged to have written “About the chorus,” which some think could have been about tragic production in general and not simply about the chorus), it is another contemporary source of reception. But the statement could also have an anecdotal origin, perhaps involving oral transmission, so that it could be apocryphal, but still an early perception.

⁵ For the importance of the Aristotelian background to rhetorical and literary theories assumed in the scholia (primarily on Homer and the dramatists), see Meijering 1987.

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The biographical tradition for most Greek poets is almost completely unreliable, and the case of Euripides is no exception. Mythical elements enter the lives, especially regarding birth, oracles, and death. Elements of rivalry and one-upmanship are highlighted or invented. Similarities between ideas in the poetic text and the works of other famous men generate allegations of plagiarism, collaboration, or teacher–pupil relationships that probably never existed. Illegitimate inferences are made from statements of characters in the dramas to establish the attitudes or experiences of the poet himself. The exaggerated, fantastic, or humorously malicious details provided in comedy are treated as facts.⁶ In the biographical tradition⁷ on Euripides we find the claim that his mother was a seller of vegetables (and the opinion that this claim is false); that he tried his hand at painting, or at competitive athletics, before becoming a poet; that he was student of Prodicus, Socrates, and Anaxagoras; that he was socially aloof and unpopular with his fellow-citizens; that he composed his plays in a lonely cave on Salamis overlooking the sea;⁸ that his dramas about adulterous women were inspired by his personal experience of two adulterous wives; that Athenian women at the Thesmophoria festival discussed condemning him to death; that he was torn to pieces by dogs (or by women). It is easy to see how some of these details come from a comedy, from well-known myths, or from Euripides' own plays, and scholars have long acknowledged that most of what we read in the *Life of Euripides* or learn in other anecdotes is not to be taken seriously, but there is always some residual pull of the framework of perception suggested by the biographical tradition, especially where it overlaps the Aristophanic characterization, so that many still approach Euripides' relationship to his contemporary intellectuals and artists and to his civic community in the light of that unreliable tradition.⁹

Following the lead of Aristophanes and Aristotle, Hellenistic scholars found fault with various Euripidean strategies and techniques, especially on grounds of deviation from proper tragic decorum and lack of “necessity” in construction of scenes or speeches. An implicit contrast with Sophocles often seems to

⁶ On the characteristics of the lives of ancient poets see Fairweather 1974, Lefkowitz 1979 and 1981.

⁷ The major sources are a life prefixed to the plays in the medieval manuscripts, an extended notice in the Byzantine encyclopedia called the *Suda*, and a section of Aulus Gellius (*Noctes Atticae* 15.20). For these and other testimonia see Kannicht, *TrGF* 5:1.39–45, Kovacs 1994: 1–141 (with English translation).

⁸ The cave on Salamis where Euripides was believed to have worked has been identified and contains various dedications, showing it was a place of pilgrimage in postclassical times: one cup has Euripides' name inscribed on it in lettering of the Roman period. See Lolos 1997; Blackman 1998: 16–17; Sauzeau 1998.

⁹ On Euripides as an Athenian citizen, see Stevens 1956.

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operate in such evaluations, and it is possible that Didymus, the great compiler of Hellenistic literary commentary in the age of Augustus, was decisive in shaping the content and tone of the surviving scholia to Euripides.¹⁰ Other judgments found their way into the prefatory materials¹¹ that accompany the select plays: two short extracts of aesthetic evaluation accompany *Phoenissae* (one somewhat appreciative, the other complaining of unnecessary or undramatic parts); the characters in *Orestes* are condemned for their ethical shortcomings (“all are bad except Pylades” – an unjustified exception); the material accompanying *Alcestis* and *Orestes* notes a resolution more suitable to comedy or satyr-play than tragedy (relying on the crude assumption that all tragedies end in disaster or death); the extant *Hippolytus* is praised as correcting what was “unseemly and deserving of condemnation” in the other version Euripides wrote. In the early reception of Greek tragedy in the Renaissance, when command of the Greek language (especially poetic idiom) was rare, the literary judgments of the scholia and prefatory material were taken very seriously and strongly influenced what was said about the plays and the poets.¹²

If we now turn from these earliest sources of literary and philological interpretation to later ones, we find that the reputation of Euripides in the Hellenistic and Roman periods was actually complex and conditioned by the different contexts of reception. For the general educated public, he rapidly became a cultural icon of wisdom and skill. One theme of Euripides’ biography in the Peripatetic tradition reflected in Satyros¹³ is the failure of

¹⁰ Elsperger 1908; Meijering 1987.

¹¹ These prefatory supplements to the poetic text fall into three broad categories: (1) a one- or two-sentence summary of the play’s action together with basic information about the production (year, accompanying plays, ranking in the dramatic competition) and the play (scene, composition of chorus, speaker of prologue); (2) an epitome of the play in a long paragraph, often as much about the antecedents of the action as posited in the play or narrated in the prologue as about what happens in the play itself; (3) miscellaneous other comments (some pertaining to rhetorical qualities, some to questions of authenticity or dependence on another version) or mythographic information. On the first type see Achelis 1913, Zuntz 1955: 129–31 (with references to other discussions), Barrett 1964: 153; on the second type, see especially Rusten 1982, Rossum-Steenbeek 1998, with references to earlier discussions; for examples of the third type, see the prefatory matter accompanying *Med.*, *Phoen.*, and *Rhesus*.

¹² These ancient judgments are still taken more seriously than they ought to be, especially the ones in the prefatory material that have been attached to the name of Aristophanes of Byzantium (second century BCE). In my opinion, this ascription results from a process of accretion, and the literary judgments do not actually go back to that scholar, who may have been responsible only for the standard factual details about the original production.

¹³ On a fragmentary papyrus book-roll recovered from Egypt, we have tantalizing scraps of a bizarre “life” of Euripides in dialogue form by Satyros of Callatis (third century BCE). The papyrus is re-edited with an extensive commentary, including good observations on the biographical tradition of Euripides, by Schorn 2004.

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his contemporary Athenians to appreciate him adequately as the innovative intellectual and great artist that he was. The tradition may in fact have exaggerated this motif as part of a tendency of later historians and scholars to denigrate the Athenian democracy of the fifth century. The positive counterpart to such denigration of Athens was the claim to cultural authority made for the Macedonian dynasties by writers who passed on and elaborated the anecdotes about Euripides' residence in Macedonia at the end of his life as well as by scholars performing the bibliographic and editorial work at the Alexandrian Library (which claimed, truly or not, to possess the Athenian state copies of the plays of the three great tragedians).¹⁴ On the other side of this competition for ownership of a cultural icon, the Athenians of the later fourth century made no differentiation between Euripides and Sophocles and Aeschylus when they recognized them as sources of wisdom and national pride in their orations, honored them with statues in the new stone-built theater, and accorded special treatment to their re-performed texts.¹⁵

Although in his own lifetime Euripides won only four first prizes in (perhaps) twenty-one productions at the Great Dionysia,¹⁶ after his death he quickly eclipsed all other fifth-century dramatists in the performance repertoire. As time went on, performances included not only more or less fully staged complete plays, but virtuoso performance of excerpts with new music and dance. Among early papyri of tragedy, many are not from full texts of the plays, but from selections or anthologies that must reflect the performance tradition.¹⁷ Moreover, for the fourth century there is tantalizing evidence of Euripides' popularity and influence in the fragments of comedy. Among the subset of known comic titles that match those of known tragedies, a remarkable number are Euripidean titles.¹⁸ We often

¹⁴ See Revermann 1999–2000, Battezzato 2003, Hanink 2008.

¹⁵ See Wilson 1996 (esp. 315–16); on the symbolic significance of Lycurgus' decree requiring actors to follow the accepted texts of the great three, see Scodel 2007.

¹⁶ He won for the fifth time posthumously. The entry in the *Suda* says that Euripides produced plays in twenty-two years all together. It cannot be determined whether this total is based on a count of didaskalic notices (and if so, whether the count applies only to the Great Dionysia or whether possible productions at the Lenaea are included – but most of the ancient scholarly references to tragic competitions are to the Dionysia) or by someone who considered eighty-eight plays to be genuine and divided that total by four. On the number of plays and productions, see Collard and Cropp 2008a: xi–xii; Kannicht *TrGFV*.77–80; Kannicht 1996; Pechstein 1998: 19–29 and in Krumeich *et al.* 1999: 400–1.

¹⁷ The nature of the Ptolemaic papyri of Euripides is the subject of a work in progress by Susan Stephens (presented at Berkeley in spring 2009).

¹⁸ Euripidean titles that also occur as titles of comedies in the late fifth and in the fourth century: *Aegeus* (Philyllius), *Aeolus* (Antiphanes, Eriphus; cf. Aristophanes' *Aeoliscion*), *Alcmeon* (Amphis, Mnesimachus), *Andromeda* (Antiphanes), *Antiope* (Eubulus), *Auge* (Philyllius, Eubulus), *Bacchae*

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cannot be sure that Euripides' plays inspired all of these instances, since some titles are known to have been used by Sophocles or other tragedians as well. Nor do most fragments permit us to see how the comedy may have exploited a tragic play (did the heroic characters of the original also appear in the comedy? How extensively were the tragic characters, tragic plot-motifs, or parodied passages deployed throughout the complete comedy?).¹⁹ Nevertheless, such reception of Euripides in Middle Comedy will have been one mechanism for reinforcing his stature with the theater audience and may have provided an auxiliary path for the adoption in New Comedy of plot-motifs like rape, exposure, and recognition and of conventions like the prologue monologue. In addition, scholars can discover allusions to or parodies of Euripidean passages or expressions in both Middle and New Comedy.²⁰ Although it is possible that by the time of Menander many tragic allusions may have been recognized by the audience as typically tragic rather than specifically Euripidean,²¹ this general perception in itself attests to the canonical status his works and his style had attained within the century after his death.

The gnomological tradition and the citation of Euripidean lines by cultured authors indicate a high prestige value for some degree of (even indirect) familiarity with the classic writer. Euripides' authority manifested itself also in the way mythographers followed or reported his versions of myths, even when modern scholars have concluded that Euripides' versions were innovative, even eccentric, at the time his plays were written. It was a major mark of Greek educated culture to show familiarity with a wide range of myths, so as to be able both to understand allusions in art, literature, and performances and to make appropriate display of one's knowledge. Such familiarity came in part from direct knowledge of reading texts, at school or in the home, and Euripides is, after Homer, the poet most commonly represented in the scraps of ancient books that have accidentally survived from antiquity, mainly in Egypt. But more often this cultural training derived not from detailed knowledge of an extensive range of classic texts, but from mythographic handbooks and collections of stories,²² such as the so-called epitomes or "Tales from

(Diocles, Antiphanes), *Bellerophon* (Eubulus), *Cretans* (Apollophanes, Nicochares), *Danae* (Apollophanes, Sannyrion, Eubulus), *Erechtheus* (Anaxandrides), *Ion* (Eubulus), *Ision* (Eubulus), *Helen* (Alexis, Anaxandrides, Philyllius), *Medea* (Strattis, Antiphanes, Eubulus), *Meleager* (Antiphanes, Philetærus), *Mysi* (Eubulus), *Oedipus* (Eubulus), *Oenomaus* (Antiphanes, Eubulus), *Orestes* (Alexis), *Peliades* (Diphilus), *Phoenissae* (Aristophanes, Strattis), *Polyidus* (Aristophanes), *Protesilaus* (Anaxandrides), *Philoctetes* (Strattis, Antiphanes), *Phoenix* (Eubulus), *Chrysippus* (Strattis). In addition, note that both Axionicus and Philippides wrote plays entitled *Phileuripides*.

¹⁹ See, in general, Hunter 1983: 28–30; Nesselrath 1990: 188–241 and 1993; Casolari 2003.

²⁰ See, for example, Arnott 1996: 62–3. ²¹ Porter 1999–2000: 172. ²² Cameron 2004.

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Euripides” ascribed (falsely, it appears) to Dicaearchus of Messene (Sicily). Numerous papyrus fragments give evidence of the popularity of this collection, and it was a source both for later mythographers and for the epitome included as “hypothesis” to each play in the medieval tradition of select plays.²³

The educational system, especially training in rhetoric, displays a second strand of this broader reception. Some of the positive comments about Euripides are based on admiration for the tragedies not as dramas or literary representations of emotion-stirring events,²⁴ but as sources for gnomic statements and examples of rhetorical technique. Thus the prefatory material to *Andromache* comments favorably on the style of the prologue speech, on Hermione’s speeches in the first episode (one evidencing “royal stature” and the other being “not badly framed”), and apparently on Peleus’ speech as well; *Phoenissae* is “full of many fine gnomic statements.” Quintilian leaves undecided whether Sophocles or Euripides is the better poet overall, but effusively explains why Euripides is far more useful to the person training himself for oratory (*Inst. orat.* 10.1.66–8 = Eur. T 145 Kannicht). Rhetorical skill and the abundance of gnomic sayings are chief points in Dio Chrysostomus’ recommendation of Euripides to a politically active man seeking greater proficiency in oratory (*Orat.* 18.6 = T 147 Kannicht: see further T 146, 148, 196, 197). Incidents and speeches from tragedy could serve as inspiration for rhetorical practice, as for instance in the *progymnasma* (exercise) of Libanius (a prolific author from Antioch in Syria, fourth century CE) that paraphrases and expands the speech of Menoeceus about willingly sacrificing himself to save his city (*Phoenissae* 991–1018; Libanius *progymn.* 11.22). Indeed, if one asks why *Hecuba*, *Orestes*, and *Phoenissae* emerged as the Euripidean triad, that is, as the plays most likely to be read and studied in the Byzantine “system” of higher education, one must weigh not only the popularity of these plays in the performance tradition (for which there is evidence in the case of the latter two) and the range of important mythography that is covered by the set (embracing Troy, Thebes, and Argos), but also the speeches and gnomes that would have been prized in the rhetorically oriented education of the late Roman period. Euripidean excerpts also loom very large in the anthology of gnomic wisdom of Stobaeus from the fifth century CE, and such collections must go back many centuries, even perhaps to the fourth century BCE.

²³ Rossum-Steenbeek 1998. On the disputed ascription to Dicaearchus, see Mastronarde 1994: 140 n. 1.

²⁴ There are, however, also appreciations of the pathos of Euripides: in the prefatory material to *Medea*, the opening is praised for being “very pathetic” at the same time that the artful composition (*epexergasia*) of the nurse’s speech is admired; *Phoenissae* is also called “very pathetic,” apparently as a positive evaluation.

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In contrast to the appreciation that Euripides received as a general cultural authority and as a model for rhetorical skill, a more critical attitude flourished in scholarly and philosophical contexts. Philological commentary aspired to a relative ranking or comparison of the three tragedians; biography and anecdote sought juicy material; scholars paraded their expertise by finding fault with the famous poet on specific points of style; and scholars or teachers promoted a particular ethical and artistic decorum by condemning his deviations from their preferred norm. We can observe how the scholia to Sophocles preserve many comments praising his dramatic construction and characterization while those to Euripides more often contain criticism on these counts. Although this contrast goes back ultimately to the influence of Aristotle and his Peripatetic followers, it is likely that the prominence and preservation of such comments in the scholia reflect the agenda of the Roman period, from Didymus in the Augustan age onward.²⁵ In the renewed “Greek classicism” aligned with Roman imperial rule, cultural authorities such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus were eager to distance themselves from the popular tastes and political disorder of the Hellenistic period and to give higher status to purity of language and style and to canonical works from the fifth and fourth centuries. Scholars and schoolteachers could thus enhance their own standing by subverting the popular preference for Euripides and by demonstrating their skill at detecting weaknesses in his works.

Somewhat akin to such philological commentary is the reception of Euripides among Hellenistic philosophers. It was surely with Euripides’ *Medea* in mind that the Stoic Chrysippus began a long tradition of using Medea’s killing of her children as an illustration of the harmful triumph of emotion over reason. Fragments and passages of Teles, Favorinus, Epictetus, and Plutarch show that Polyneices in *Phoenissae* was a standard example used in arguments against the false valuation of exile in conventional morality.²⁶ Epictetus also cites the power-hungry Eteocles for his incorrect judgment about what is the greatest of goods. The culturally familiar and

²⁵ Meijering 1987 often suggests that such judgments of Euripides are survivals of the commentaries of Aristophanes of Byzantium; but Aristophanes’ authorship of these opinions is no more secure than the ascription to him of literary critical comments in the prefatory material to plays (n. 12 above). Even if the judgments were taken from Aristophanes, it is significant that they were selected and preserved as the scholiastic comments were compiled and reduced during the Roman and early Byzantine period.

²⁶ There is some precedent for this use of Euripides in Aristotle, as in *EN* 1110a28 (“what compelled the Euripidean Alcmeon to commit matricide seems ridiculous”), 1167a32–4 (“but whenever one person wants himself [sc. to rule exclusively], like the characters in *Phoenissae*, people engage in civil strife”), and Aristotle uses Euripidean lines to illustrate points (e.g., *EE* 1244a10, *EN* 1136a11, 1142a2, *Pol.* 1277a19), but not in the combative way typical of later diatribe. For *Medea* see Gill 1983 and 2005, Dillon 1997; for Epictetus’ use of the sons of Oedipus, see Mastrorarde 2009: 65, 462.

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authoritative texts are thus selected to provide effective negative examples for those challenging their listeners and students to follow a more philosophical path in life. Gnomonic excerpts on moral and theological themes were likewise of interest to Hellenistic philosophers, either for support of their own views or as alternatives to attack, and Greek patristic texts that quote Euripides probably reflect earlier compilations of key passages on divinity, fate, and the like rather than direct reference to complete plays or a new culling of examples. The fashion of valuing very highly the maxims to be culled from the texts remained strong in the Byzantine middle ages and the Renaissance.²⁷

FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO GERMAN CLASSICISM

The ancient sources, particularly the scholia, the lives, Aristotle, and Quintilian, were extremely influential in the first centuries of modern reception, from 1500 well into the 1700s. For instance, to accompany his influential Latin versions of *Hecuba* and *Iphigenia in Aulis* (Paris 1506, Venice 1507, but his work on *Hecuba* probably began a few years earlier), Erasmus translated the hypothesis of the Palaeologan scholar Thomas Magister for *Hecuba*, but wrote his own epitome for *Iphigenia in Aulis*, which had no hypothesis in the manuscript tradition. Some of his choices in his translation of *Hecuba* may perhaps point to use of the scholia (from manuscript sources).²⁸ The scholia became widely available in 1534 with the edition by Arsenius of Monembasia, and the first Latin translation of the whole Aldine corpus (lacking *Electra*, first available in 1545) appeared in 1541, the work of Dorotheus Camillus, a pseudonym for Rudolf Collin. By the 1550s we begin to see some efforts toward assessment of the individual plays in the context of the Latin translations. The Reformation scholar Philipp Melanchthon was noted for his inspiring lectures on classical authors, and Guilielmus Xylander stitched together, edited, and supplemented translations by Melanchthon to produce a new Latin translation of the full

²⁷ In some Byzantine manuscripts gnomonic lines have special marking with marginal symbols or the notation ὠραῖον (“beautiful”), and gnomological compilations were still being made: for instance, *Gnomologium Vatopedianum* (Longman 1959), and the El Escorial and Barberini *gnomologia* (Matthiessen 1974: 38, 45). The first collections of tragic fragments in the Renaissance were essentially gatherings of maxims: Kassel 2005.

²⁸ For example, *Hec.* 8 πλάκα = *glebam*, 9 φίλιππον = *ferocem*, 16 ὀρίσματα = *Pergama* might reflect explanations in the scholia, but Erasmus had also seen the partial translation of *Hecuba* by Filelfo, who used *glebam*, *ferocem*, and *moenia* in these three places. The scholia to Euripides were not printed until 1534, but manuscripts of *Hecuba* with at least scholia recentiora are numerous and are likely to have been available to Erasmus. For Erasmus’ editions of these two plays, see Waszink 1969.

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corpus of Euripides (Basel 1558, with a somewhat revised issue in 1562). Xylander included some sporadic brief comments on particular plays.²⁹ Contemporaneously, Gasparus Stiblinus (Caspar Stiblin) worked on an even more ambitious edition (Basel 1562, but with a dedicatory letter dated 1559). Stiblinus is now more famous for a utopian political treatise,³⁰ but his Euripides is significant because it seems to offer the earliest particular assessments of all the plays in the corpus. He produced a new Latin translation of the plays, with the ancient hypotheses also translated before each play. Following each play, he supplies his own preface (*praefatio*) as well as notes (*annotationes*). His approach is in line with the tendency of sixteenth-century writers on poetics (for example, Scaliger, Castelvetro, Sir Philip Sidney) to attempt a reconciliation of Platonic and Aristotelian views of poetry by insisting that poets both delight and instruct, and that representations of morally suspect behavior edify by providing a model of what is to be avoided. Both in his dedicatory epistles (one to the Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I and one to his readers) and in his individual prefaces, Stiblinus emphasizes the didactic and moral effects of observing disasters, sufferings, and wrongdoing, and frequently points to the rhetorical skill of particular speeches, in line with Quintilian's advice about the utility of Euripides. As a commentator, Stiblinus drew inspiration from the Donatan commentaries on the comedies of Terence: he divides each tragedy into five acts, following the model of the Terentian comedies and in accordance with Renaissance theory; the structure and topics of his prefaces imitate those of Donatus; and he employs analytic terms that he found in Donatus' work on Terence (*epitasis, catastrophe, paraskeue, praestructio*) to make original observations about dramatic structure. Many of his notes are drawn from the scholia, but he also adduces information and comparative passages from ancient authors,³¹ especially prose writers like Plutarch and Cicero on ethical issues. Stiblinus' efforts stand out because philologists editing Euripides in

²⁹ Some relevant remarks are in his dedicatory preface, and others (which might be derived from Melanchthon) precede certain plays, such as *Phoenissae* and *Cyclops*: for the latter, the comment is "this tragedy is the image of some extremely cruel tyrant. I believe the poet may have wanted to describe some Egyptian king or tyrant. By the Satyrs he means fools and imposters (*moriones et impostores*). The play has the general argument that no one is trustworthy to a tyrant, even someone who obeys."

³⁰ Firpo 1963.

³¹ A telling example is Stiblinus' note on *Hecuba* 1261, where he gives a rationalized alternative version of the death of Hecuba: she annoyed the Greeks so much with her insults and curses that they threw her from the mast into the sea. This unusual version is taken from half of a *scholion recentius* on 1261 (I.509.3–9 Dindorf, already published in Arsenius' edition of 1534), where throwing from the mast is confusingly conflated with stoning on land. A similar rationalization, with stoning rather than casting into the sea, is in the Latin Dictys Cretensis 5.16.