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 Excerpt
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INTRODUCTION

I. EURIPIDES AND ATHENS

(a) *Life and works*

Euripides appears to us as one of the most vivid and recognizable poets of the fifth century BC. Compared to Aeschylus and Sophocles, more than twice as many of his plays have survived complete, while the greater quantity both of quotations in ancient authors and of sizeable papyrus fragments of the lost plays (reflecting his popularity throughout antiquity) gives us a more detailed picture of his dramatic oeuvre.¹ In addition, we possess a variety of sources purporting to chronicle the life of the poet,² who even appears as a character in three of the surviving comedies of Aristophanes (*Acharnians*, *Women at the Thesmophoria*, *Frogs*). Yet the very abundance of ancient ‘evidence’ for Eur.’s life and character has had a paradoxically confusing impact on the interpretation of his works (on which more below). For with the exception of a few details securely based on the Athenian didascalical records, all the surviving evidence is of highly dubious reliability,³ and the bulk of it is little more than anecdote based on naïve ‘inference’, whether from the plays themselves⁴ or from the absurd caricatures of Eur.’s art and life generated by Aristophanes and other comic poets.⁵

¹ For a complete collection of the fragments of Euripides (hereafter Eur.), see the edition by R. Kannicht, *TrGF*v (abbreviations are listed above); also Jouan and Van Looy (1998–2003) with translations and notes (in French). The more substantial fragments are edited by J. Diggle in *TrGF*S, and are translated with excellent introductions and commentaries by Collard, Cropp, and Lee (1995: *Telephus, Cretans, Sthenoboea, Bellerophon, Cresphontes, Erechtheus, Phaethon, Wise Melanippe, Captive Melanippe*) and Collard, Cropp, and Gibert (2004: *Philoctetes, Alexandros, Palamedes, Oedipus, Andromeda, Hypsipyle, Antiope, Archelaus*). A Loeb edition by C. Collard and M. Cropp is also forthcoming.

² The five major sources for the life of Eur. are edited by Kannicht, *TrGF*v (Testimonia 1–5): these are the Γένος καὶ βίος Εὐριπίδου transmitted in some medieval manuscripts of the plays; a chapter (15.20) in Aulus Gellius’ *Attic Nights* (published c. AD 180); an entry s.v. Εὐριπίδης in the medieval encyclopedia known as the *Suda*; a sketch of the poet’s life by Thomas Magister (thirteenth to fourteenth century); and papyrus fragments of a longer *Life of Euripides* in dialogue form by Satyrus, a grammarian of the third century BC. For these texts with English translation, see Kovacs (1994b) 2–29.

³ The variety of anecdote and fiction in the lives is revealingly explored by Fairweather (1974); cf. also Lefkowitz (1981) 88–104 and Kovacs (1994a) 1–4 on Eur. For a less distrustful view of the biographical tradition, cf. e.g. Matthiessen (2002) 14–17.

⁴ E.g. the notion (related in the Γένος: *TrGF*v τ 1.74–6) that Eur. wrote his first *Hippolytus* as a response to his wife’s infidelity.

⁵ Thus the plot of Ar. *Thesm.* is treated as biography by both the Γένος and Satyrus, with each claiming that the women of Athens conspired to kill Eur. during the Thesmophoria (*TrGF*v τ 1.99–100, τ 110). For satirical treatment of Eur. by other comic poets, cf. Ar. *Wasps* 61 (from a list of tired gags the audience should not expect) οὐδ’ αὖθις ἀνασελγαινόμενος Εὐριπίδης. Telecleides (whose first victory was c. 445) associated Eur. with Socrates (frs. 41–2 K-A), for example, which suggests that there were stock jokes about Eur. even before Aristophanes.

In fact we have very little reliable evidence for Eur.'s dramatic career and know almost nothing about his life. He was evidently dead by the time of the first production of Aristophanes' *Frogs* at the Lenaea (in early January) of 405, and the *Marmor Parium* (a marble stele from Paros inscribed c. 264/3 with various dates from Greek history) puts his death in 407/6 and his birth in 485/4, dates which are as reasonable as any preserved in the sources.⁶ Like his father Mnesarchides (or Mnesarchus), Eur. belonged to the Attic deme of Phlya (part of the Cecropid tribe and to the north of Mt Hymettus). The musical and poetic training necessary for Eur.'s career implies a wealthy background, and it is clear from the range of contemporary intellectual issues handled in his plays that Eur. was a man of great learning and curiosity. As usual the biographical tradition deduced from Eur.'s broad cultural interests that he must have been a pupil or friend of nearly every major philosopher, rhetorician, and sophist of his day (*TrGF* v T 35–48), and the image of Eur. the radical, controversial, and even alienated intellectual has had a major (and often misleading) influence on the subsequent interpretation of his works (and equally, via Aristophanes' *Frogs*, those of the allegedly 'unphilosophical' Aeschylus).⁷

Using the public records of the City Dionysia at Athens, ancient scholars calculated that Eur. had competed 22 times (= 88 plays).⁸ It is possible that Eur. staged new plays elsewhere,⁹ including the large deme theatres of Attica, and he is said to have ended his life in Macedonia writing plays for king Archelaus.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the bulk of his work was intended for Athenian audiences at the City Dionysia, and it is their world-view we must try to reconstruct as we interpret the plays. Eur. won first prize at the Dionysia four times during his lifetime and once posthumously (when his son, also called Eur., produced a tetralogy that included *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Bacchae*). Given the stereotype of the alienated poet, Eur.'s four victories (compared to Aeschylus' 13 and Sophocles' 18) have often been taken to show that the Athenians were uneasy with, or even hostile to, his plays, yet this is hardly plausible, since Eur. was chosen 22 times by the eponymous archon to be one of the three tragic competitors at the city's greatest dramatic festival, and a playwright under such a cloud would not be repeatedly selected to vie for first prize.¹¹

⁶ For the conflicting and suspiciously synchronizing dates of Eur.'s birth and death (including, for example, the tradition of his birth on the island of Salamis on the very day of the great battle in 480), see *TrGF* v T 10a–17c.

⁷ See Allan (2005) 74–5.

⁸ Although 92 plays were catalogued by ancient scholars under Eur.'s name, some were deemed spurious: see *TrGF* v p. 80 For a sceptical view of the transmitted figures for Eur.'s productions, see Luppe (1997).

⁹ The *Andromache* was long thought to be such a play, but the available evidence suggests that the play was first produced in Athens, but written so as to appeal to audiences elsewhere (Allan (2000) 149–60).

¹⁰ For the surviving fragments of the *Archelaus* itself, see Harder (1985) 125–272. The play told how the king's mythical ancestor and namesake killed the double-crossing Cisseus of Thrace and founded the Macedonian city of Aegae. Eur.'s time in Macedonia is the subject of four of the five fictional letters composed in his name c. AD 100: see Gösswein (1975), Costa (2001) 171–4.

¹¹ Stevens (1956) refutes the notion of Eur.'s unpopularity with the Athenians. The poet's alleged lack of success was used in the biographical tradition to explain why he went to work for

Of Eur.'s 17 surviving tragedies (not including the probably spurious, fourth-century *Rhesus* or the satyr-play *Cyclops*) *Helen* is one of nine plays for which we have fairly secure production dates based on the information recorded in ancient hypotheses and scholia. The remaining plays can be dated relative to these on stylistic grounds, the most important criterion being the rate and type of resolution (i.e. substitution of two short syllables for a long) found in the iambic trimeters, since Eur.'s plays show a gradual increase over time in the rate and variety of resolved positions.¹² The cumulative evidence allows us to reconstruct Eur.'s theatrical career as follows (extant works are in bold):¹³

455	Eur. competes for the first time at City Dionysia (plays included <i>Peliades</i>)
441	first victory
438	Alcestis (fourth play in tetralogy with <i>Cretan Women</i> , <i>Alcmaeon in Psophis</i> , <i>Telephus</i>); wins second prize
431	Medea (first play in tetralogy with <i>Philoctetes</i> , <i>Dictys</i> , and satyr-play <i>Theristae</i>); wins third prize
c. 430	Children of Heracles
428	Hippolytus ; wins first prize
c. 425	Andromache
c. 424	Hecuba
c. 423	Suppliant Women
c. 420	Electra
c. 416	Heracles
415	Trojan Women (third play in tetralogy with <i>Alexandros</i> , <i>Palamedes</i> , and satyr-play <i>Sisyphus</i>); wins second prize
c. 414	Iphigenia in Tauris
c. 413	Ion
412	Helen (other plays included <i>Andromeda</i>)
411–409	Phoenician Women
408	Orestes
408/7	<i>Archelaus</i> (performed in Macedonia)
407/6	Eur. dies in Macedonia
405–400	Iphigenia in Aulis , <i>Alcmaeon in Corinth</i> , and Bacchae , produced by Eur.'s son; wins posthumous first prize

Archelaus (*TrGF* V T 1.44–50). However, Eur. was only one of many poets and artists who took up commissions at the court of a Hellenizing king, as Aeschylus had done many years before while a guest of Hieron, tyrant of Syracuse, writing a tragedy on the foundation of the city of Aetna (frs. 6–11 Radt = *TrGF* III); cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 1.58–70.

¹² There are approximately 445 resolutions in 1253 iambic trimeters in *Helen*, the equivalent of (on average) one resolution every three lines (or more precisely 35.5%, compared to 6.7% for *Alcestis* in 438 and 49.3% for *Orestes* in 408).

¹³ For the metrical criteria used to date Eur.'s plays, both surviving and fragmentary, see Cropp and Fick (1985); also Devine and Stephens (1981), Stinton (1990) 349–50. The list omits both *Rhesus* and *Cyclops*, in the latter case because it is uncertain whether the stylistic features used to date the tragedies apply with equal force to satyr-plays.

Helen was produced in 412 along with *Andromeda*.¹⁴ The two plays resemble one another in both plot and theme, as the central couples (Helen and Menelaus, Andromeda and Perseus) escape to Greece from a foreign land (Egypt, Ethiopia) after overcoming the opposition of a barbarian king (Theoclymenus, Cepheus). Eur. rings the changes on the story-patterns of rescue and escape, and on the crisis faced by central characters who are in love but threatened with permanent separation. So, whereas Helen (hereafter H.) and Menelaus (M.) are already husband and wife, and must outwit Theoclymenus (Theoc.), H.'s aggressive suitor, to escape from Egypt, Andromeda must first be rescued from a sea monster by Perseus, who falls in love with her, and the young lovers must defy the Ethiopian king Cepheus, who is Andromeda's father. Given the surviving evidence for *Andromeda*,¹⁵ we have no way of knowing which play was performed first,¹⁶ or what the other plays in the tetralogy were.¹⁷

(b) *Helen in its Athenian context*

As with any other work of art, *Helen* is deeply embedded in its own time and place. It is therefore essential that we see (and endeavour to interpret) every Athenian tragedy in its historical and social context. In later sections of this Introduction we shall take into account the various backgrounds (of law, social structure, ethnicity, religion, philosophy, etc.) against which *Helen* is to be read.¹⁸ But it is important that we first consider the political and military climate at the time of the play's production, not because this is the most significant factor for the original audience's response, but because *Helen* has often been (and continues to be) read as an 'anti-war' play.¹⁹

The place and function of tragedy in Athens are subjects which in this context cannot receive the full attention that they deserve, but it is important to consider them,

¹⁴ Cf. scholia to Ar. *Frogs* 53 (*Andromeda* produced eight years before *Frogs*), *Thesm.* 1012 (*Andromeda* produced together with *Helen*), 850 (*Helen* produced one year before *Thesm.*).

¹⁵ Cf. Klimek-Winter (1993) 55–315; Collard, Cropp, and Gibert (2004) 133–68; *TrGF* v pp. 233–7 and frs. 114–56 Kannicht. Sophocles wrote an *Andromeda*, also dealing with the story of her rescue by Perseus, who killed the sea monster with the head of the Gorgon Medusa (for frs. and commentary, see Klimek-Winter (1993) 23–54). Vase-painting suggests a production date c. 450, but such evidence must be used with caution.

¹⁶ For an allusive reference in *Helen* which may suggest that *Andromeda* preceded it, cf. 769n. *Andromeda*'s opening monody begins with an invocation of 'holy Night' (ὦ νύξ ἱερά, fr. 114 Kannicht), but this is no guarantee that the play was performed in the early morning (*pace* Hourmouziades (1965) 44, who inferred from these opening words that *Androm.* was the first play of the tetralogy).

¹⁷ Wright (2005) 43–55 argues that the *IT* was part of the same production (cf. Steiger (1908) 232–7), thus forming a thematically connected 'escape trilogy'. This is, however, extremely unlikely on stylistic and metrical grounds: cf. Cropp and Fick (1985) 5, 60–1, Devine and Stephens (1981) 44, 48, 52. Similar objections apply to other proposed trilogies or tetralogies, such as *Androm.*, *Hel.*, *Ion* (so e.g. Fantuzzi (1990) 22, Zacharia (2003) 3–7), *Androm.*, *Hel.*, and *Cyclops* as satyr-play (Austin and Olson (2004) lxiii–lxiv), or even *Androm.*, *Hel.*, *IT*, and pro-satyric *Ion* (Hose (1995) 17, 69).

¹⁸ For a comprehensive and useful bibliography of recent secondary literature on the play (not limited to English-language discussions), see Knöbl (2005).

¹⁹ Cf. e.g. most recently Pallantza (2005) 275.

albeit briefly, since the various anachronisms at the heart of ‘anti-war’ interpretations of *Helen* have their roots in equally inappropriate models of what fifth-century Attic tragedy is doing and what it is for.²⁰ So let us start by considering what kind of views contemporary scholars take of tragedy’s relationship to the political life of fifth-century Athens. There is of course a wide range of opinion, but it will be helpful to focus on two of the most influential, which also happen to be at opposite ends of the spectrum in the view they take of tragedy’s social and political functions. At one end of the spectrum are those scholars who are reluctant to tie tragedy too closely to day-to-day political issues. They focus instead on tragedy’s aesthetic qualities as poetry and drama, on the pathetic suffering of its characters, and on the moral dilemmas that it poses.²¹ At the other end of the spectrum are critics who see tragedy as fundamentally political – indeed, as fundamentally questioning and interrogatory, even subversive. For them tragedy exposes the core values of fifth-century Athens to glaring scrutiny, and finds them wanting.²² Neither school appreciates the affirmatory impact of tragedy – the former because they take too narrow a view of the political, the latter because they regard the best art as that which challenges or subverts. But did Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides intend to undermine their audience’s sense of identity and core beliefs? Or did they want to appeal to as wide a swathe of the public as possible in the hope of winning first prize?²³

It is against this background that we must view the claim that *Helen* represents a critique of Athenian war policy. For the theme of war is central to many readings of the play, including that of Kannicht, whose commentary is a monument of scholarship.²⁴ Thus studies of the play abound with such comments as ‘the *Helen* delivers an implicit

²⁰ I hope to analyse in greater detail elsewhere the ramifications of ahistorical literary interpretations of tragedy.

²¹ Cf. e.g. Griffin (1998). Such reluctance to recognize tragedy’s political and social functions is often motivated by the idea that political (and affirmatory) literature can be little more than ‘propaganda’ and part of a state-sponsored conspiracy. Yet literature and other forms of art can be political without being propaganda – and it reveals a very anachronistic picture of art (developed after the Romantic era, certainly, but mostly in the wake of Hitler, Stalin, and Mao) to say that art which celebrates the community must be suspect. Have these critics looked at Athenian public art of the fifth century (e.g. sculptures and temple friezes)? It affirms Athenian state ideology quite unabashedly.

²² Cf. e.g. Goldhill (1990), (2000). There is, however, no ancient evidence that tragedy was seen to be subversive of core polis values: indeed, one could say it is precisely tragedy’s lack of such criticism that makes Plato hate it so much. Plato after all certainly did want to challenge and change the Athens of his day, and if tragedy was so questioning of the standard values of the Athenian people, one would expect Plato to like it – but he categorically rejects it: e.g. *Gorgias* 502b–d (tragedy as specious mass rhetoric), *Laws* 817a–d (tragic poets as *rivals* of the philosophers who are to be ejected from the ideal city).

²³ To continue in Platonic terms, one might say that tragedy offers a rival (and, in political terms, positive) *dialectic*. In other words, rather than seeing tragedy as a series of questions that flummox and discomfort the audience, we should see it as a process of questions and answers in which more emphasis is put on the *answers*. Naturally, in arguing that Attic tragedy had an affirmatory function for the watching community, I do not mean to imply that it evades the really hard issues which are not capable of being solved: cf. esp. §§6(a) and (d) below.

²⁴ Cf. esp. Kannicht (1969) I.53–7.

evaluation of the Sicilian expedition²⁵ or ‘Despite its ostensibly comic aspect, the *Helen* is a far more vehement anti-war statement than *The Trojan Women*.²⁶ But does *Helen* reflect the disillusionment of a war-wearied generation? A variety of factors suggest that such an approach is misguided.

Firstly, pity for the waste of war, especially the Trojan War, and sympathy for the defeated are traditional epic (and tragic) themes (cf. especially *Od.* 8.523–31, where Odysseus, weeping at Demodocus’ song of the Trojan Horse and the fall of Troy, is compared to a woman grieving over the corpse of her dead husband as she is dragged off to captivity). Moreover, the specific sentiment expressed by the Chorus of *Helen* – that conflicts should be resolved by diplomacy and reciprocal justice instead of warfare (1151–60) – is itself a traditional idea (e.g. Hes. *WD* 225–9, Aesch. *Supp.* 701–3). To read a chorus or character’s insistence on the foolishness of war (cf. 1151 ἄφρονες ὄσοι . . .) or their yearning for peace (e.g. Eur. *Supp.* 488–93, *Or.* 1682–3, *Bacch.* 419–20, fr. 369 Kannicht) as criticism of Athenian war policy would be exceptionally naïve and anachronistic (for reasons we will turn to in a moment). Those who desire to see *Helen* as a protest against war overlook the fact that M. still wins H. by violence and that the Trojan War is part of a divinely conceived plan for the end of the race of heroes. The notion of Eur. the proto-pacifist or anti-imperialist is no more plausible than the comic caricature of Eur. the immoralist, misogynist, or atheist.

Secondly, the idea that *Helen* is in part a response to alleged Athenian disillusionment with the Peloponnesian War betrays a misconception that lies at the heart of many contemporary readings of tragedy, which is to assume a more or less simple equation between the play world and the world of the audience. No one would now endorse the most simple-minded form of historicism, where events on stage are taken to refer directly to the here and now of the audience.²⁷ Instead it is generally agreed that ‘in an important sense everything that happens on stage is metaphorical, and there is never a literal identification between the world of the drama and the world of the audience.’²⁸ Nevertheless, the full significance of the distance between the heroic world and the contemporary world is not always recognized, as critics map one onto another, thereby revealing (so they claim) the play’s purpose, which is usually to point up some terrible deficiency in Athenian culture. Let us consider, for example, the Messenger’s report of the Argive assembly in *Orestes* (866–956). The current scholarly consensus on this scene might be summed up as follows:²⁹ in depicting the warring voices and factions of the Argive assembly Euripides is covertly expressing his reservations about, and criticisms of, the deficiencies of the contemporary Athenian polis, where democratic debate is hijacked by unscrupulous demagogues and self-interested factions. In *Orestes*, and especially in the Assembly scene, it is often said, Euripides is questioning the ideals of debate and freedom of speech that formed the core of

²⁵ Hose (1995) 77. ²⁶ E. Segal (1983) 248 n. 8.

²⁷ Cf. e.g. Drew (1930) for whom the ten-year Trojan War becomes the ten-year Archidamian War (431–21), and M.’s seven years of wandering are made to stand for the seven years of war from 419–13!

²⁸ Easterling (1995) 80. ²⁹ E.g. E. Hall (1993); cf. Porter (1994) 73–5.

democratic ideology. In other words, by having the Argive assembly, which is simultaneously a kind of law-court, be swayed by vociferous speakers, Euripides is pointing to the negative features of the assembly and popular courts of his day.

In arguing like this critics either explicitly or implicitly make use of what Pat Easterling has called ‘heroic vagueness’, that is, the peculiar idiom and setting of tragedy which ‘enabled audiences to project themselves collectively into a shared imaginative world which was firmly linked with both past and present but strictly represented neither and could be constantly redefined.’³⁰ However, it would be more accurate to speak of *heroic inversion*, since in *Orestes*, as elsewhere in tragedy (and not only in Eur.), we are shown repeatedly how fifth-century Athenian norms do not work in a heroic setting – yet the point is *not* that Athens is a failure, but that the excessive and dangerous figures of heroic myth are the problem.³¹ So whether we talk of ‘heroic vagueness’ or follow Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood and use the cinematic metaphor of ‘zooming’,³² the aspects of tragedy that have a contemporary ring (popular assemblies and law-courts, for example) are not there to provoke the audience into thinking, ‘They are acting just like we do; they get things wrong, so our system must be at fault’, but rather the heroic *inversion* points the difference between the malfunctioning world of the heroes and the way such institutions functioned in the world of the fifth-century Athenian audience. In short, it is not fifth-century Athens or democracy that is at fault in *Orestes*, but it is the inability of the heroic world to accommodate Athenian norms which marks that world as doomed to conflict and ruin.³³

Thus when we interpret those aspects of tragedy which have a contemporary ring, we should consider not only the distance between the two worlds but also the pattern of inversion that marks their relationship.³⁴ In the case of *Helen* the principle of heroic distance applies as much to the issue of Sparta and Spartans as it does to war. There is no anti-Spartan polemic in the play and the references to Spartan cult and ritual (e.g. 228, 245, 1465–75) serve to underline H. and M.’s separation from

³⁰ Easterling (1997a) 24–5.

³¹ *Pace* e.g. Meltzer (2006), fifth-century Attic tragedy does not embody nostalgia for an idealized heroic age, but explores current issues in an imaginary world of the past which is systematically unlike that of the audience, and does so in a way that confirms the validity of contemporary Athenian norms. However, this tragic pattern of heroic inversion does not constitute a simple *dichotomy* of then (all bad) versus now (all good), since many heroic figures are admirable in some respects (especially, it should be added, when their outlook comes closest to that of the fifth-century Athenian audience: e.g. Eur. *Supp.* 429–55). In other words, the heroic and contemporary worlds exist as part of a *continuum* rather than a dichotomy, so that the heroes can be presented as more, or less, removed and different from the watching community; nevertheless, the world of the audience emerges as in most respects better than that of the heroes (cf. nn. 259–60 below).

³² E.g. Sourvinou-Inwood (2003) 25–40.

³³ The notion of Eur.’s ‘disillusion’ with Athenian politics is itself closely connected to exaggerated ideas of cultural ‘crisis’ in the last decades of the fifth century. Such assumptions have in turn contributed to a distorted view of tragedy’s development as a genre in which the plays of ‘late Euripides’ are seen as a symptom of the genre’s ‘decline’ (see §7 below).

³⁴ When the alterity of the heroic world is neglected, a misleading one-to-one mapping between it and the world of the audience is often the result.

their homeland and from one another.³⁵ The heroic distance is missed by critics who argue that 'Euripides' staging a story with a glamorized Spartan heroine who returns home to a gloriously portrayed Sparta must have had a shocking impact upon a late fifth-century Athenian audience.³⁶ Such an approach is gravely misleading: Athens had been at war with Sparta for much of the fifth century, yet tragedy abounds with Spartan and Dorian figures throughout the century, and does so because these heroes stand at the core of the panhellenic tradition of divine and heroic myth. Part of the genius of Athenian tragedy is to draw these Dorian (and also non-Greek, e.g. Cretan and Egyptian) heroes into Attic myth, often showing (especially in those plays where Athens is strongly focalized: e.g. Aesch. *Eum.*, Soph. *OC*, Eur. *Held.*, *Supp.*) how non-Athenian communities lack the benefits of the Athenians. Yet this aspect of tragedy is not foregrounded in *Helen* (where Athens is never mentioned), and Eur. has chosen H. and M. not because they are Spartans (whom he can then use to make a topical point) but because they are central to the myth of the Trojan War which is the raw material of his work. The play itself displays the same patterns of heroic inversion and disaster that we find throughout tragedy, but it does so in a way that is not explicitly anti-Spartan.

Thirdly, and most tellingly perhaps, the interpretation of *Helen* as an anti-war play is profoundly anachronistic. Many tragedies portray the horrors of the Trojan War (among other mythical conflicts), but this does not mean they are criticizing Athenian policy (Athens was at war almost constantly throughout the fifth century).³⁷ Athens was not a militaristic society as Sparta most famously was, but the Athenians were immensely proud of their military skill.³⁸ The centrality of warfare to the Athenian state and the Athenians' lack of sentimentality about it are shown most clearly in the state's practice of presenting *suits of armour* to the sons of men killed in war.³⁹

³⁵ Cf. Taplin (1999) 50 'There is even a notable amount of favourable Spartan material in *Helen*, including the aetiology at 1666–9.'

³⁶ Zweig (1999a) 220.

³⁷ Perhaps the most common example of such misreading is the view that *Trojan Women*, produced in 415, is an indictment of Athenian action on the island of Melos in the winter of 416 (cf. Thuc. 5.84–116). Yet, as van Erp Taalman Kip (1987) has shown, there was too little time between the fall of Melos (around December) and the Dionysia of 415 for *Trojan Women* to be reacting to it. Moreover, this approach exaggerates the peculiarity and topicality of the play (the sack of Troy is a theme of tragedy throughout the fifth century), and disregards both its impact within the trilogy (for which we have substantial information: *TrGF* v pp. 174–204, 596–605, 657–9; cf. Kovacs (1997)) and the tradition of war poetry which it continues. *Trojan Women* is a profoundly Iliadic drama, which combines sympathy for the defeated with a wider framing of the enmities that underlie the war. For a Greek audience raised on Homer, it is self-evident that the *Iliad* poet presents the war as just and that Zeus himself approves of Troy's fall (see Allan (2006)), and these assumptions will have guided the Athenian audience's response to *Trojan Women* (cf. e.g. Aesch. *Ag.* 524–37).

³⁸ Both these points are stressed by Thucydides' Pericles in his funeral oration for the Athenian war dead (2.39, 2.42; cf. also 2.64.3). Public honours for the war dead were a fundamental part of Athenian ideology: see Herrman (2004) esp. 1–9 for the idealized Athens of the surviving funeral orations.

³⁹ Cf. Pl. *Menex.* 248e6–249b2, ending 'After they reach manhood, it [the city] sends them off to their own responsibilities, after equipping them with full armor and reminding them of

Moreover, this was carried out each year as part of the pre-play ceremonies at the City Dionysia itself, and the orphaned sons were paraded in full armour in the theatre and given front-row seats.⁴⁰ Just as no one doubted that war was horrific, so no one doubted that some wars were necessary and worthwhile, an idea embodied in Greek myth by the Trojan War itself, which was both part of a divine plan and beneficial to humans in some ways (cf. *Hel.* 36–41, 453n.). That the majority of Athenians felt the Peloponnesian War could be beneficial to them can only be doubted by critics who are sealed off from history in a literary bubble. For to portray *Helen* as Eur.'s reaction to a particularly bad patch in the war (the final failure of the Sicilian Expedition in the summer of 413),⁴¹ as is often done, overlooks the fact that the majority of Athenians continued to vote for the war;⁴² that they wanted to win it at all costs, and that they did so because each of them believed they had something to gain if they did win.⁴³

Finally, a frequent alternative to the claim that *Helen* is about the futility of the Peloponnesian War is to present it as a 'lighthearted' or 'romantic' escape from the awful present.⁴⁴ Yet this is no more convincing, since quite apart from the dubious assumptions about the tragic genre which underlie interpretations of the play as a 'romantic tragedy', 'tragicomedy', 'escapist melodrama' *vel sim.* (see esp. §7 below), there is no contradiction in a tragedy with an 'upward' movement, or positive outcome for the protagonists, also having serious political, ethical, and religious resonances for the Athens of its day.

their fathers' habits by giving them the tools of their paternal virtue. With good omens it sends them out, decorated in arms, to begin the strong rule of their father's home.' (Trans. Herrman (2004) 61.)

⁴⁰ Isoc. *On the Peace* 82, *Against Ctesiphon* 153–5; cf. Pickard-Cambridge (1988) 59, 67, Csapo and Slater (1995) 117–18.

⁴¹ There is no reason to doubt the tradition that Eur. himself (who will have completed the requisite military training and service for an Athenian citizen of his class) wrote an epitaph in honour of the Athenians who died in Syracuse (Plut. *Nic.* 17.4 = *TGFV* τ 92).

⁴² The Athenians' determination to persevere (albeit with necessary economies) despite the Sicilian disaster is acknowledged by Thucydides (8.1.2–3; cf. 8.15.1, where in 412 they are forced to use the 1000 talents set aside at the start of the war). Though the Persians were supporting the Spartans from 412 onwards (cf. Cawkwell (2005) 139–46), the Athenian regime of 5000 voted in 411 to continue the war, unlike the much narrower (and less representative) regime of the 400, who had earlier in the same year sought peace terms with Sparta (cf. Thuc. 8.70.2, 90.2, 97.3).

⁴³ Besides the literary bubble just mentioned there is the serious problem that many critics remain in thrall to the biased accounts of late fifth-century Athens offered by Thucydides and Plato. For example, the Athenians (*pace* Thucydides) were not simply hoodwinked into fighting by devious self-serving 'demagogues', and various groups had plenty to gain from maintaining and expanding the empire (the aristocrats could get more land, the poorest classes could get paid for rowing in the fleet, etc.). So we must not take these central (in part because they are extant) accounts at face value, and we should also beware of transferring these authors' anti-democratic bias onto others.

⁴⁴ E.g. Post (1964) 118 'For Athenians in the terrible situation produced by the Sicilian disaster, the lighthearted *Helen* was just right.'

2. THE FIGURE OF HELEN IN EARLY GREEK CULTURE

(a) Myth

The story of H. is central to the myth of the Trojan War, one of the best known and most frequently handled in all Greek literature and art.⁴⁵ Since all myths are collective narratives, told by a variety of people for a variety of purposes, there can be no definitive version of any one myth, and the same principle (of purposive variation) applies to the central figures of myth like H. herself. Thus H. is presented in a variety of guises, ranging from the cosmic figure created by Zeus to destroy the race of heroes (cf. *Cypria* fr. 1 Bernabé/Davies, discussed below) to the goddess who confers beauty on girls at Sparta (Hdt. 6.61.2–5). Each manifestation purports to present an aspect of the ‘real’ H., yet each has been created to suit the mentality and objectives of a specific society. Nevertheless, even as the different versions of H. reflect the purposes of particular audiences, so they also share a basic story (H.’s role in the fall of Troy, the defining episode of her life) which it is the poet’s (or artist’s) task to recreate in as compelling a manner as s/he can.⁴⁶

The central themes of the Helen myth in the Greek literary tradition are already present in (and are crucially influenced by) Homer’s presentation of H. and her past. Whether she is presented by later poets as regretful and ashamed or as a calculating and vain adulteress, such characterizations have their roots in Homeric poetry, which presents a variety of perspectives and judgements on H.’s conduct.⁴⁷ The *Iliad* foregrounds her elopement with Paris as a catalyst of the war (e.g. 2.160–2, 354–6, 3.441–6, 9.337–9, 19.324–5), and her great shame and remorse as a result (3.173–6, 242, 410–12, 6.344–8, 24.764).⁴⁸ The principle of ‘double motivation’ means that

⁴⁵ The major poetic cycles (Trojan, Theban, Iolcan, Aetolian-Elean-Pylian) and the connections between them are well discussed by West (1985) 137–8.

⁴⁶ For surveys and discussion of the various versions of H.’s story before Eur., see *RE* 7.2824–35 s.v. Helene (E. Bethe), Roscher (1886–90) cols. 1928–78, Preller-Robert (1894–1926) 2.1077–89, Becker (1939), Lindsay (1974) 13–174, Clader (1976), Homeyer (1977), Prost (1977), Schmid (1982), Backès (1984), Guardini (1987) 24–69, Adams (1988), Suzuki (1989) esp. 18–91, Gantz (1993) 564–76, Austin (1994) 23–136, Fredricksmeier (1996), Gumpert (2001) 3–98, Zajonz (2002) 11–19, Wright (2005) 56–157 esp. 67, 76–7, Pallantza (2005) esp. 34–43, 61–79, 98–123, 265–75. The iconographic tradition of H.’s myth is discussed in detail by L. Kahil, *LIMC* s.v. Helene (= vol. iv.1, pp. 498–563, with further bibliography on p. 501). As Kahil observes (p. 499), there is no evidence of the ‘new’ or Egyptian version of H.’s myth in archaic and classical art. Instead, the artistic tradition is dominated by a few key scenes from H.’s life: her unusual birth figures prominently (*LIMC* nos. 1–13), but the most popular scenes by far are those dealing with her abduction by Paris (nos. 70–185) and her reunion with M. after the war (nos. 210–372). In the latter scenario there is a particular focus on M.’s violent seizure of H., followed by the dropping of his sword (nos. 260–77, all but one of which date from 470–400 bc: cf. Eur. *Andr.* 628–31). For a possible allusion to a feature of Eur.’s new H. myth in fourth-century art, see n. 328 below.

⁴⁷ Cf. Reckford (1964), Groten (1968), Kakridis (1971), Clader (1976) 5–23, Worman (2001).

⁴⁸ H.’s regret, self-condemnation, and disgust at her own behaviour help create an intriguing character, with a vivid interiority. The harshness of her insults (esp. in calling herself a ‘bitch’: 3.180, 6.344, 356; also *Od.* 4.145) contrasts with the poem’s generally positive picture of her as both repentant and sorrowful (cf. Graver (1995)).