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Hanna Roisman

Joseph Roisman

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Essays on the Drama of Euripides

INTRODUCTION

THIS AND THE FOLLOWING issue continue earlier studies of classical literature published by the *Colby Quarterly*. They were preceded by a volume *Essays on Homeric Epic* (September 1993) and a volume *Studies in Roman Epic* (September 1994). The present two issues (March and June 1997) focus on the playwright Euripides. The comic poet Aristophanes, a contemporary of Euripides, criticized him for his modernity. In the modern era it is the relevance of Euripides' plays that makes his among the most researched (and performed) works in classical literature. Euripides has always been accommodating to new approaches and interpretations, mainly because his plots, language, and philosophy have never failed to stimulate readers' minds and emotions. Elizabeth Barrett Browning knew how immediate and wide ranging Euripides could be:

Our Euripides the human
With his droppings of warm tears,
And his touch of things common
Till they rose to touch the spheres!
(*Wine of Cyprus*)

The present collection of studies in Euripides—divided into two issues because of space limitations—is a testimony to the appeal of the poet to ancient and modern audiences.* In the March 1997 issue Fred Ahl discusses how the relationship between actors and roles in Euripides' *Alcestis* affects the staging of the play and the interpretation of its characters. His study suggests that the role of Admetus in *Alcestis* may have been played by the deuteragonist (second actor) rather than the protagonist. Following the scholarly consensus that *Alcestis* uses only two actors, Ahl examines some of the dramatic consequences of assigning the largest role in the play to the “second string” actor, including the need to use a mute “extra” to represent Alcestis in the final episode.

Pietro Pucci looks at the philosophical challenges invoked by Euripides' presentation of Helen and their comic results. The plot of the *Helen* is composed of two “replacements”: in the first part of the play a phantom replaces the “real” Helen and “plays the role” of Helen among men; in the second part

* The editors did not ask the authors to follow a single system of transliterating and spelling Greek names and terms, respecting their individual preferences and normal practices.

the “real” Helen lets herself be replaced by a fake image of herself and, in acting out a feigned love for the king, obtains her rescue. As a result, the “real” Helen remains constantly concealed under one replacement or the other, though she is somehow perceived by the audience through the concealments. In both parts of the play the structure of replacement opens up an ontological question, i.e., the relation between “being” and “appearance,” and accordingly provokes a series of tantalizing topics: whether “being” is knowable through its “appearance” or not, whether it is always knowable only in the “supplement,” and how the “supplement” works. Some of these questions invite the critic to interpret the play as a sort of allegory of theatrical representation, acting, faking the reality. It is a “comic” representation because it produces a happy end.

Ruth Scodel examines Euripides’ representation of the female gaze. In his latest period, Euripides twice presented women (Antigone in *Phoenissae* and the chorus in *Iphigenia at Aulis*) who describe an army for the audience in lyric, while in *Hypsipyle* he had the title character refuse to look at the army of the Seven. These scenes of the female who looks at male spectacles depend not only on the Homeric depiction of women’s view of an army from the walls (*teichoscopia*) but on Sappho as well. The woman who looks naive, and fails to achieve or retain narrative authority, is a figure for tragic spectators who must guard against surrendering completely to spectacle and losing critical distance.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s reference to Euripides’ “droppings of warm tears” is especially apt to the poet’s portrayal of tragic women. One of the most tragic figures in ancient drama is Hekabe, the captured queen of Troy, whose depiction by Euripides is the subject of two studies in this collection. Karelisa Hartigan argues that Euripides’ *Hekabe* presents two female responses to violent deeds committed by men. When Polyxena is chosen as the sacrificial offering to the dead hero, she chooses to die with a grand gesture. Hekabe, betrayed by a *xenos* (a friend in a foreign land) to whom she had entrusted her son and her gold, decides to avenge the wrongs done to her. Each woman’s choice enhances her glory and sullies that of the man who established the context in which the women act. Paul Keyser maintains (in the June issue) that modern critics have faulted the unity of Euripides’ *Hekabe*, claiming that the action senselessly breaks between Polyxena’s sacrifice and Hekabe’s revenge. According to the reading here proposed, those two actions and Polymestor’s prophecy of Hekabe’s canifaction all three advance the same dramatic action, the progressive destruction of Hekabe. As a foreign woman enslaved, she has been wrenched from her familial loci of power; now the sacrifice of her last daughter Polyxena and the murder of her last son Polydoros leave her nothing. Her canifaction, i.e., her loss of body, is the endpoint of her loss of self brought about by deracinating powerlessness. In this view we recover the pity and terror of Hekabe’s tragedy.

Two studies in the June issue focus on the impact of political circumstances as well as poetic tradition on two of Euripides’ plays. Ann Michelini

suggests that the character of the youthful and pious Theseus in the intensely political drama *Suppliants* indicates a relation to the political aims and posture of the Athenian leader Alcibiades in the 420's. The treatment of conflicting political themes lifts the play above propaganda; it more nearly resembles the complex of praise and warning found in epinician poetry. David Kovacs observes that now that the connection between Euripides' play the *Trojan Women* and the massacre of the Melians has been shown to be almost certainly imaginary, we are free to examine the play without the assumption that it is a protest against Athenian policy. Both *Troades* and the fragmentary remains of *Alexandros* and *Palamedes*, the other plays in Euripides' Trojan trilogy, emphasize the role of the gods in the events at Troy. Like the Greek poetic tradition before him, Euripides underlines the instability of fortune, men's profound ignorance of the future (as well as of the present and past), and the surprising and paradoxical character of human life, where often what is welcomed as blessing turns out to be bane, what is feared as bane turns out to be blessing, and living on in the poetic tradition is the only consolation for irremediable disaster.

Patricia Easterling studies the reading of Euripides' plays by one of their chief modern interpreters. Gilbert Murray attracts more interest these days as a "Cambridge Ritualist" than as an interpreter of Greek tragedy, but his work on Euripides—text, verse translations, and critical essays—was outstandingly successful in its own time and for long afterwards. This paper tries to understand Murray's approach to Euripides under four headings: the art of the theater, political and social concerns, poetry, and the relation between human beings and whatever is beyond rational understanding. The most striking feature of Murray's interpretations is the consistent way in which these different aspects are integrated.

Hanna M. Roisman and Joseph Roisman
Guest Editors