Euripides Outside Athens: A Speculative Note

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Oliver Taplin\(^1\) has recently taken a fresh and challenging look at what we can learn from vase paintings about responses to the theatre in the Greek cities of South Italy and Sicily from the fifth to the third centuries B.C. It is not a new idea, of course, that other cities were powerfully attracted by the drama, as by the visual art, of Athens, but what needs to be stressed, as Taplin rightly claims, is the fact that the process begins so early, spreads so widely and involves both tragedy and comedy.

My concern in this paper is with the spread of tragedy outside Athens—not only in the West—in the fifth century. I want to suggest that in addition to the material souvenirs of performances, especially painted pottery, and to the inscriptions relating to city and deme festivals at Athens, which have helped us understand how a “classic” repertoire developed,\(^2\) there is also more to be gathered from the literary sources. It is not just a matter of evaluating what has been transmitted, and often enough distorted, by the ancient biographical and critical traditions; the texts of the plays themselves also have something to offer.

As Taplin notes,\(^3\) theatrical connexions between Syracuse and related cities on the one hand and Athens on the other started early; it is not out of the question that Aeschylus’ Women of Aetna was produced for performance at Aetna as early as 476/5, and there is every reason to think that the links continued during Aeschylus’ lifetime (the ancient Life [68] says he put on a successful revival of Persians in Sicily, and we know that he was at Gela at the time of his death in 456). It would certainly be very odd if there was then a complete break in dramatic contacts between the Sicilian cities and Athens until the tyrant Dionysius won the prize for tragedy at the Athenian Lenaea in 368. One text that can help to fill the gap


\(^3\) Taplin (above, note 1) 2; cf. M. Griffith, “Aeschylus, Sicily and Prometheus,” in R. D. Dawe et al. (eds.), Dionysiaca (Cambridge 1978) 105–06.
is Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, produced at Athens in 415. When the Chorus of that play include Sicilian and South Italian places in the list of destinations to which they can imagine going as captives, the best explanation for the inclusion of these localities is that the play was likely to be performed there. This would be in the same spirit as many references in the lyric poets, whose choral songs often have much to say—and in very positive terms—about the expected place or places of performance. And it would work in exactly the same way as the many passages in tragedy which praise Athens and which critics have always taken as designed to gratify the original audience.

Scholars have long been perplexed by *Troades* 187 ff., which goes out of its way to make pointed reference, favourable or unfavourable, to a number of Greek locations, some of them places that Trojan captives in the heroic age might plausibly name, and others distinctly surprising, though mentioned allusively enough to avoid seeming glaringly anachronistic. Looked at with performance in mind the whole passage makes good sense, and the fact that it is sung by the Chorus is crucial to our understanding of its function.

187–89: τις μ’ Ἀργείων Ἡ Θωμάν
η νησιάν ἄξει χάραν
δύστανον πόρσον Τροίας;

Who will take me to the land of the Argives or the Phthians or to an island land far from Troy in my misery?

This accords with the dramatic situation of the Trojan women and is too general to suggest any specific contemporary allusion (cf. 30 f., 233 f., 242 f., 1092 f.).

202–06: μύχθους <δ’> ἡξο κρείσσους,
η λέκτροις πλαθέως Ἐλλάνων
...
η Πειρήνας ὑδρευμένα
πρόσπολος οἰκτρὰ σεμνῶν ὑδάτων.

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4 Cf. e.g. the opening of Pindar, *O. 13* or *P. 2*. More examples in E. Thummer, *Pindar. Die Isthmischen Gedichte I* (Heidelberg 1968), chapter 4. Eric Handley draws my attention to J. U. Powell, *Collectanea Alexandrina* (Oxford 1925) 138, a Hellenistic paean so composed as to be adaptable to whichever city the occasion required.


I shall have greater tribulations (sc. when I leave Troy), being taken to the beds of Greeks... or drawing water as a wretched servant from the holy fountain of Peirene (sc. at Corinth).

The mention of Peirene hardly does more than evoke a famous Greek landmark, but more pointed allusions now follow.

207–13: 

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{tāν κλείναν εἰθ' ἐλθομεν} \\
\text{Θησέως εὐδαιμονα χώραν,} \\
\text{μὴ γὰρ δὴ δίνας γ' Ἕωρατα} \\
\text{tāν <τ> ἔχθισταν θεράπιναν Ἐλένας,} \\
\text{ἐνθ' ἀντάσω Μενέλαι δύολα,} \\
\text{τοῦ τάς Τροίας πορθηταί.}
\end{align*}
\]

May we go to the famous, fortunate land of Theseus! Not indeed to the eddying waters of the Eurotas and the hated dwelling place of Helen, where as a slave I shall meet Menelaus, destroyer of Troy.

Sparta as object of Trojan hatred suits the dramatic context, but the opposition Athens/Sparta implies the point of view of the Athenian audience.

214–19: 

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{tāν Πηνειοῦ σεμνὰν χώραν,} \\
\text{κρηπίδ' Ὀλύμπου καλλίσταν,} \\
\text{ἄλβων βρυθείν φάμαν ἱκουσ'} \\
\text{εὔθαλείτ' εὐκαρπείαι.} \\
\text{τὸ δὲ δεύτερά μοι μετὰ τὰν ἱερὰν} \\
\text{Θησέως ζαθέαν ἐλθείν χώραν.}
\end{align*}
\]

I have heard that the holy land of the Peneus, the very beautiful foundation of Olympus, is rich in prosperity and abundant fruitfulness; this is best for me after going to Theseus' sacred, holy land (sc. if I don't go to Athens).

Mention of such landmarks as the river Peneus and Mt. Olympus would not be inappropriate for Trojan captives expecting to be allocated to victorious Greeks from Thessaly (cf. Φθιωταί at 187 and Hecuba’s references to Thessaly and Phthia at 242–43). But the laudatory tone is no more suitable for the Trojan women here than it is in the praise of Athens, and the reference to Olympus is similar to that at Bacchae 409–11 (οὐ δ' ἄ καλλιστευμένα / Πειρία, μούσεως ἔδρα, / σεμνὰ κλείτις Ὀλύμπου, “where is the very beautiful Pieria, home of the Muses, the sacred slope of Olympus”), which critics have taken as meant to gratify a potential Macedonian audience.\(^7\) The river Peneus, though, seems to imply a reference to the area south of Mt. Olympus, and we should perhaps be thinking of Euripides’ alleged Magnesian connexions. The reference in the

ancient *Life* to Euripides as *proxenos* of the Magnesians looks like one of the few possibly authentic scraps of information among the fictional constructions identified by scholars.\(^8\) It would certainly be normal for persons of Euripides' social standing to have links outside Athens through *xenos* and *proxenos* networks, as Gabriel Herman's work has shown,\(^9\) and there is no need to regard such connexions as unlikely, for Euripides any more than for Pindar.

220-29: καὶ τὰν Ἀἰτναίαν Ἡφαιστοῦ
Φοινίκας ἀντήρη χώραν,
Σικελῶν ὄρεων ματέρ', ὄκοιὼ
καρύσσεσθαι στεφάνοις ἀρέτας,
τάν τ' ἀγχιστεύουσαν γάν
† Ιονίωι ναύται πόντωι †,
ἀν ὑγραίει καλλιστεῦων
ὁ ξανθὸν χαίταν πυρσαίων
Κράθης ξαθέας παγαία τρέφων
ἐπιανδρόν τ' ὀλβίζων γάν.

And I hear that the Aetnaean land of Hephaestus opposite Phoinike, mother of Sicilian mountains, is proclaimed as winning wreaths for valour.

(And I hear the same of) the land next to the Ionic Sea . . . [text uncertain],\(^10\) which is watered by the beautiful Crathis, the river that makes hair golden, nourishing the land with its holy streams and making it prosperous and rich in men.

The first of these sentences must refer to Sicily, but the phrasing “Aetnaean” and “opposite Phoinike,” i.e. (presumably) Carthage,\(^11\) leaves unclear exactly where is intended. The second reference is more precise: The river Crathis locates it as Thurii on the Tarentine gulf, as Athenian a place as one could expect to find outside Attica, and a very appropriate place for the performance of an Athenian tragedy.\(^12\)

If Euripides was composing the play with future performances in mind at some Sicilian location and at Thurii the references are entirely understandable, far more so than if we have to take this stanza as referring


\(^10\) No convincing emendation has been suggested for line 225, but the overall point is clear enough.

\(^11\) Phoenicia itself seems too far away; cf. Westlake (above, note 6) 183 on contemporary Athenian interest in the geography of Sicily in relation to Libya. As to the most likely Sicilian venue, John Graham points out to me that any of the three Ionian cities under Mt. Etna, viz. Leontini, Naxos or Catane, would be possible candidates.

\(^12\) Cf. Taplin (above, note 1) 14–16.
in some specifically political way to the proposed Sicilian expedition.\textsuperscript{13} Of course Athens was buzzing with talk of Sicily at the time (cf. Thucydides 6. 24–26), and a general topical reference would be quite compatible with the interpretation suggested here. We should not be put off by the thought that Athenian relations with Sicily were soon to be hostile; not all Sicilian cities regarded the Athenians as potential enemies, and Taplin has shown that despite all the tensions the period between 415 and 390 was a time of great Athenian artistic and dramatic influence in the area.\textsuperscript{14} If Euripides could be sent as an ambassador to the Syracusans (after the failure of the Sicilian Expedition?: Ar. \textit{Rhet.} 1384b16–17, with schol.) the implication might be that his work was admired by the Syracusans, as the famous anecdote recorded by Satyrus and Plutarch certainly suggests.\textsuperscript{15}

There is a comparable passage in \textit{Hecuba} (444–83), where the Trojan women imagine going to a “Dorian land,” to Phthia, “where men say the father of beautiful waters, Apidanus, enriches the plains” (451–54), to Delos, where they think of themselves joining local girls in the worship of Artemis (455–65), and to Athens, where they look forward to decorating the robe for Athena (466–74). The least to be got out of this passage would be a complimentary reference to Athens for the benefit of the Athenian audience, and agreeable associations with other places to point up the superiority of the Greek world. But it is worth taking a closer look at some of the detail.

The language of the passage just quoted from \textit{Hecuba} is rather closely echoed in the Second Stasimon of \textit{Bacchae} (560–75), where most critics have seen a clear compliment to Euripides’ Macedonian patrons.\textsuperscript{16} The maenads here are calling Dionysus to witness what Pentheus is doing to his devotees, and in the context it is perfectly appropriate for them to mention places where the god is likely to be, such as Nysa, Parnassus or Olympus (556–64), but their elaborate evocation of Pieria and the Macedonian rivers suggests that there is a more pointed allusion to be understood:

\begin{verbatim}
565–75: μάκαρ ὑπ' Πιερία,
σεβεταί σ' Ἐὔιος, ἠεῖει
tε χορεύσαν ἀμα βακχεύ-
μασι, τὸν τ' ἅκυρόναν
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{13} Cf. Westlake (above, note 6) and the commentaries of Lee (above, note 6), W. Biehl (Heidelberg 1989) and S. A. Barlow (Warminster 1986) for a review of interpretations, none of them persuasive.

\textsuperscript{14} Taplin (above, note 1) 97–99.

\textsuperscript{15} Athenian captives released on the strength of their capacity to teach Euripidean lyrics to the sons of the Syracusans: Satyrus, \textit{Life of Euripides} fr. 39 XIX1–10; Plutarch, \textit{Nicias} 29. On the embassy to Syracuse, see Stevens (above, note 8) 91. Satyrus also makes one of the speakers remark that the Athenians were outdone by the Macedonians and Sicilians in their recognition of the greatness of Euripides. On Satyrus, see M. R. Lefkowitz, “Satyrus the Historian,” in \textit{Atti del XVII Congresso di Papirologia} (Naples 1984) 339–43.

\textsuperscript{16} See Roux ad loc.; Dodds on 568–75; R. P. Winnington-Ingram, \textit{Euripides and Dionysus} (Cambridge 1948) 81–82.
O blessed Pieria, Euios reveres you and will come to celebrate you in the dance with his revelry. Bringing his whirling maenads he will cross the swift-flowing Axius and the Lydias, the prosperity-giving father of happiness to mortals, who, as I have heard, enriches the land with his lovely waters and makes it famed for horses.

This is Diggle’s text, which adopts F. Ferrari’s neat emendation of the problematic line 573. On this reading the stanza deals with only two rivers, the Axius and the Lydias, and not also with an unnamed third, the “father,” who enriches the land and makes it good for horses. The language of 574–75 recalls the description of the Apidanus at Hec. 451–54, but this river would be too far to the south to suit the context, and Ferrari’s reading at 573 is very attractive. At all events there is clear insistence on the Macedonian location, and all the elements in the description are matched by the passages from Trojan Women and Hecuba that we have been considering. There seems almost to be a typology of encomiastic themes: the abundance and prosperity of the land and the fertilising effect of rivers with their beautiful waters, to which the motif “as I hear tell” gives further emphasis. Here are the references:


Rivers fertilising: Tro. 228–29 τρέφων εὐανδρόν τ’ ὀλβίζων γάν; Hec. 454, Ba. 575 λιπαίνειν.

“Most beautiful” (whether waters or other features): Tro. 226 καλλιστεύων (the river Crathis); Hec. 452 καλλίστων ὕδατων; Ba. 574–75 ὕδασιν καλλίστοις; cf. Med. 835 τοῦ καλλινίκου τ’ ἐπὶ Κηφισοῦ ῥοαῖς. Tro. 215 κρηπίδ’ ὕλλυμπου καλλίσταν; Ba 409–10 ἀ καλλιστευομένα Πιερία, μούσειος ἔδρα κτλ.

“As I hear”: Tro. 216, 222 ἣκουσ’, ἀκοῶ; Hec. 454 φασίν; Ba. 573 ἐκλυον; cf. Med. 831 λέγουσι.

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17 Euripidis Fabulae III (Oxford 1994).
These references are quite different from the evocation of places in escape odes like the one at Hipp. 732–51, where the emphasis is on the remoteness or other-worldliness of the locations. It may be that in giving appropriate mention to a fairly limited number of places that were actual or possible venues for his plays Euripides had found a way of linking his patrons (individuals or communities) outside Athens with the increasingly panhellenic medium of Attic drama. It is disappointing that we have only fragments of Archelaus and cannot examine in detail the way he handled a more directly encomiastic commission, but there is at least a possibility that Andromache, with its concluding prophecy about the Molossian kings, is to be connected with the patronage of the Molossian Tharyps, who was probably at Athens in the 420s and was granted Athenian citizenship. But the play offers few clues other than Thetis’ remarks about the future prosperity of the Molossian royal house (1243–49). The Thessalian setting is not given any specially detailed attention, and the lyrics look back to Troy rather than evoking new locations. The only external evidence we have is the scholion on 445, which simply remarks that the play was not produced at Athens, adding that Callimachus said it was ascribed to Democrats in the didaskaliai.

If we are willing to make this general approach to Euripides’ output, allowing not only for growth in the frequency of performance outside Athens but also for references on the poet’s part to places where a production might be staged, then there may be new light to throw on a couple of puzzling passages in other plays. The famous reference to the “Sicilian Sea” at the end of Electra (1347–53) might take on a new significance, and perhaps we should have another look at Cyclops, with its insistent references to the (untraditional) setting near Mt. Etna. What if this play was composed for performance at Syracuse (or Catane?) and the rather pointed allusion to the absence of buildings in Cyclops’ time (115)

21 D. L. Page, “The Elegiacs in Euripides’ Andromache,” in C. Bailey et al. (eds.), Greek Poetry and Life (Oxford 1936) 223–24 has some robust comments on this scholion, worth quoting for their general applicability: “This is expert and unambiguous evidence; but it is fashionable to despise the scholarist and accuse him of stupidity... it seems unreasonable that, in this instance at least, modern scholars should spend time and energy in inventing a muddle and then attributing it to the learned men of antiquity... There is no reason why Euripides should not have had a play produced in a foreign city; and, if he did so, it is natural that he should have entrusted its production to a friend in that city.”
was meant as a teasing compliment to the audience? There is no reason why they should have been offended by the idea that before the Greek cities of Sicily were founded the place was the home of the uncivilised Cyclopes; they might rather have felt some satisfaction in learning that their place figured in the world of the *Odyssey*. At the end of the play Odysseus says he will “sail over the Sicilian Sea to my own country” (702–03). Perhaps *Cyclops* was designed to travel from west to east, while *Electra* was intended to go in the opposite direction?  

If these suggestions broadly carry conviction they have interesting implications which need to be seriously explored. Perhaps we ought to be less inclined to define the ideology of fifth-century tragedy as almost obsessively Athenocentric and pay more attention to the potential interest and relevance of Attic drama to contemporary audiences elsewhere. The shift of perspective could be liberating.

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24 Peter Wilson has particularly urged on me the importance of the ideological implications. Three further possible references might be worth considering. (1) The mention of Delos at *Hec.* 455–65 has been taken to recall the purification of the island by the Athenians in 426; but perhaps we should be thinking more specifically of performance at the Delia: Thucydides (3. 104) mentions a continuing tradition, and it is not out of the question that odes from plays were performed at an early date (this certainly happened later, as we know from an inscription recording an ἂσμα μετὰ χοροῦ Διόνυσου καὶ κιβάσμα ἐκ Βαυκτῆν Εὐριπίδου at Delphi in 194 B.C., SIG3 648B). (2) When the maenads at *Ba.* 402 express a longing to go to Cyprus there may be more point to their song than the evocative reference to the worship of Aphrodite. By the time this play was composed Cyprus under Evagoras was a place with close Athenian connexions (Evagoras himself was made a citizen; cf. M. J. Osborne, *ZPE* 9 [1972] 55–56); it would not be absurd, surely, for Euripides to think of a possible performance at Salamis. (3) Some of Euripides’ lost plays have western settings: *Melanippe in Chains* at Metapontum and *Aeolus* (presumably) at Lipari. In view of what is known about the theatrical interests of these places in slightly later times we should at least give thought to the possibility that Euripides had links with them.

In order to test the plausibility of this paper I have consulted a rather large number of colleagues, and I am grateful to Paul Cartledge, James Diggle, John Graham, Alan Griffihs, Eric Handley, Richard Janko, Alan Johnston, Tim Ryder, Oliver Taplin and Peter Wilson for their expert comments and advice.