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Heracles' Honours: Re-shaping (or Anticipating?) Athenian Politics on Stage

Context: Athenian honorific decrees — which used to encourage citizens to emulate the honorands and to maintain the great image of the city in Greece — could stipulate a public proclamation to be held in the orchestra of the theatre during the Dionysia. This practice began in 410/9 B.C. — with the honours on Thrasyboulus of Calydon (*IG I³ 102*) — and it served to praise the virtues and deeds of Athens' benefactors through public conferrals of crowns, honours, and privileges. The ceremony had a strong political value: through such rewards Athens was establishing social relationships among Greece in order both to display its magnanimity and to secure future favours and alliances.

Topic: Euripides was a great critic of Athenian political ideology, but the results of scholarly considerations of his engagement with Athenian politics and ideology have often been negative, rendering him a mere social critic rather than someone with a positive contribution to make. As a different approach to 'tragic politics', I argue that Euripidean tragedy also had a subtle and nuanced way to talk about Athenian politics: through ethical praises related to specific tragic characters, Euripides revised and dramatised Athenian diplomacy, stating and staging his opinion about the rising honorific system. In my talk, I will focus on Euripides' *Heracles*, in order to show the relationship between Euripides, Athenian foreign diplomacy, and one of the Dionysia's pre-play ceremonies (the proclamations of honours, *i.e.* public celebrations of honorific decrees).

Throughout the play, Heracles (105: ἀνὴρ ἄριστος) and his family are in need of φίλοι ('friends'; 55–6, 84–5, 561) — which in Athenian diplomatic rhetoric meant also 'allies' (135, 1171) — but no one is about to help them. On the other hand, many virtues of Heracles are praised: *eukleia*, *eugeneia*, *prothymia*, *aidôs*, *philia*, *eupraxia*, *euergesia* (all that is needed to be a benefactor of people/countries). However, the hero will receive help only in the last part of the play. It is Theseus (representative of Athens) who speaks of exchange of favours (1169–71); he calls Heracles εὐεργέτης and φίλος (1252); also he gives Heracles gifts and honours — a gesture that, in turn, will assure a crown to the Athenians (1324–37). Attention will be paid to the honorific formulae and virtues used both within the tragic play and contemporary honorific decrees, in order to highlight such a rhetorical correspondence. This kind of formulaic language — which clearly refers to Athenian honorific decrees for foreigners — also anticipates those which stipulated a public conferral of honours/crowns in the theatre. Thus, given that *Heracles* was staged approximately in 424–20 B.C., it emerges that Euripides was 1) conferring to Heracles' honours a highly political charge, since Athens was depriving Thebes (against which Athens was currently fighting during the Peloponnesian War) a great εὐεργέτης/ξύμμαχος, 2) de-legitimising the Doric character of Heracles by including him in the Athenian socio-political mechanism of exchange of favours, and 3) anticipating the fourth-century B.C. established 'monumentalised diplomacy' of honorific decrees by staging it ἐναντίον τῶν Ἑλλήνων, like a proper public conferral of crowns/honours in the theatre.

It has often been assumed that Euripides was influenced by the historico-political context, but what if, in our case, it was Euripidean tragedy to 1) influence politics by using its honorific rhetoric and 'building' new (though mythical) alliances, and 2) 'prophecy' a political ceremony such as the proclamation of honours?

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