

Thugs in Rags. The Political Dimension of Euripidean Tetralogy

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Classical Greek tragedies were written in sets of four, each of which was performed on a single day at the Great Dionysia. According to the *communis opinio*, the plays of a tragic tetralogy only in the early times, and then only occasionally, had a semantically meaningful interrelation, e.g. by way of dealing with mythical figures belonging to the same family, as is the case with Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the largest fragment of a tetralogy we possess.

This paper suggests a fresh perspective on the tragic tetralogy and in so doing attempts to shed light on the political dimension of Greek tragedy. As a case study, I take a look at the remnants of one of the few securely attested Euripidean tetralogies, namely the one staged in 438 BCE that comprised *Cretan Women*, *Alkmeon in Psophis*, *Telephus*, and *Alcestis*. By sketching a parallel reading of the four plays that takes Schadewaldt's and Del Frio's studies as its starting point, I propose, as far as is possible given the fragmentary state of the tetralogy, that the tragedies were bound together by centering around the same abstract ethical question, but that each play presented a different answer to it by instantiating the same generic plot pattern in four different mythical settings, with the result of four characteristically distinctive, yet comparable courses of tragic action.

Insofar as, in general, ethical questions relate to how human beings decide to act in specific situations, I propose that the entire tetralogy as a text of higher order served as a complex poetic device that had the purpose of, in the mirror of myth, playing through consequential decisions in the mode of (backward- or forward-looking) potentiality and, at the same time, implicitly comparing them to one another. Given that ethical questions often have a political dimension insofar as they relate to, or have ramifications for, the entire social community; and given that tragic tetralogies were staged at the Great Dionysia and thus at one of the main public gatherings of the Athenian *polis*, I further propose that at least this Euripidean tetralogy might have had a (deliberative or reflective) political function within the realm of democratic decision-making at Athens. If so, the political dimension of Euripidean tragedy might have been more complex and sophisticated than common political interpretative approaches might suggest.