CHAPTER 19

Euripides

*Evert van Emde Boas**

Introduction

One of the basic tenets of this chapter will be that Euripides' practice of characterization is—as so many aspects of his dramatic technique are—not uniform: his method varies within plays and from play to play.[1] This lack of uniformity, compounded by the large number of extant plays, makes hazardous any attempt to capture Euripidean characterization technique in the span of a brief survey chapter.[2] On the other hand, several general points about characterization in Greek tragedy that have been made in the preceding chapters on Aeschylus (→) and Sophocles (→) are equally applicable to Euripides, and need not be repeated here at length: the fact that all the characterizing techniques used in narrative are found in drama as well, but without the direction of a primary narrator to provide authoritative access to motivations, beliefs, and traits; the significance in tragedy of multiple perspectives on characters' motivations provided by those characters themselves and by other characters—views which are all part of their intradramatic communication and therefore open to questioning; the difficulty of simple ethical evaluations of characters' behaviour in the face of this multiplicity of voices and the complex moral texture of the plays; and the fact that drama's focus on short, emotionally charged

* I am grateful to Bill Allan, Felix Budelmann and Koen De Temmerman for their probing and insightful comments.

1 For the diversity within Euripides' oeuvre, cf. e.g. Michelini 1987, Mastronarde 2010: esp. ch. 2–3.

2 I do not know of any work, either article- or book-length, that attempts to survey Euripides' characterizing techniques in all the plays. Much of use may of course be found in general works on Euripides (e.g. Grube 1941, Conacher 1967, Mastronarde 2010), as well as general works on tragedy (e.g. Heath 1987: esp. 115–123, Gregory 2005a). Wider debates about characterization in tragedy of course pertain also to Euripides (e.g. Gould 1978, Easterling 1990, Goldhill 1990, Pelling 1990c, Seidensticker 2008, Rutherford 2012: ch. 7, Thumiger 2013). Particularly useful are several works whose relevance extends well beyond the individual Euripidean plays which they have as their subject: Griffin 1990 (on *Hipp.* and *IA*), Mossman 1995: ch. 4 (on *Hec.*), Allan 2000: ch. 3 (on *Andr.*), Thumiger 2007 (on *Ba.*).

© EVERT VAN EMDE BOAS, 2018 | DOI:10.1163/9789004356313_021
This is an open access chapter distributed under the terms of the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license.

episodes complicates the presentation of long-term character traits and character development.

In lieu, therefore, of a full (but shallow) survey of characterization techniques, I will in this chapter concentrate on two specific themes which have played a major role in the appreciation of Euripidean characters—realism' and 'ideas'—and on a few plays as case studies. These case studies are meant to be representative not necessarily of Euripides' practice as a whole, but at least of the diversity and range within that practice. In deference to the series' narratological focus I will end with some points about characterization in embedded narratives (prologues, messenger speeches, etc.—narratives according to a stricter definition),[3] and a brief examination of how such characterization interacts with other parts of the plays.

'As They Are': Realism and Character

From antiquity onwards, Euripides has been associated with a realistic portrayal of his characters. The *locus classicus* is an anecdote about Sophocles related by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, as an example of a possible defence that a tragic poet might raise against criticism:

> Next, if a poet is accused of creating falsehoods, a possible defence is to say that things are being portrayed as they ought to be. Sophocles, for instance, said that he himself made his poetic characters to reflect people as they ought to be (*hoious dei*), while Euripides made them as they are (*hoioi eisin*).[4]
>
> ARIST. *Po.* 1460b33–34

This notion has persisted, and many modern handbooks point to realism as a defining feature of Euripides' technique. Yet critics can mean very different—if not necessarily mutually exclusive—things when they refer to Euripidean 'realism'.[5] In some cases it denotes the opposite of idealism or heroization: on

3 The definition of narrative in drama as conceived in this volume is discussed in the Introduction (→).

4 Translations here and below are my own.

5 To be fair, many scholars point out that realism is not a straightforward concept, cf. e.g. Gregory 2005b: 260–265, Burian 2010: 133–134, Mastronarde 2010: 13. Some attempts to 'unpack' (Euripidean) realism are Michelini 1987: 111–114, Goff 1999/2000, Csapo 2010: ch. 4, Budelmann 2013.

this account, Euripides' characters are qualitatively different from the larger-than-life figures that we find in the other tragedians, and he has a particular penchant for portraying lower-class characters, women, and weak men, as well as a taste for the everyday and the mundane (this view can be traced back to Aristophanes' comic portrayal of Euripides;[6] it is, however, an only partly accurate reflection of what we find in the extant plays). On another approach, what makes Euripides' characters realistic is their psychological depth and the sense that we get of their inwardness, of the turbulent shifts and extreme emotions taking place within the mind of, for instance, a Medea, a Phaedra, or a Pentheus.[7] Yet another conceptualization of realism is prevalent among scholars arguing *against* its prominence in Euripidean (or generally, tragic) characterization: these scholars contrast realism with formalism, and argue that 'the experience of dramatic persons is stylized, simplified, and modified in ways which prevent [a] sense of a simple continuity or overlap between their experience and our own.'[8] On this reading, the constraints of the genre (masks, stylized language, etc.), combined with the rapid shifts of tone and the systematized use of distinct *Bauformen* (prologues, *agōn* scenes, stichomythia, etc.) which typify Euripides' oeuvre, make it impossible that any naturalistically consistent psychological portrait could be gleaned from any of the plays.

This sketch of the various dimensions of realism (still more could be added) goes some way towards explaining how Euripidean characters can have struck audiences and readers as both intensely familiar and wholly alien. Phrased in terms of the cognitive model outlined in the Introduction (→), some of the notions associated with realism, particularly those of the everyday and the 'low', have more to do with the kinds of knowledge schemas that are accessed by audience members as 'top-down' input (that is to say, Euripidean characters are believed to have reminded typical audience members more of people

---

6 Especially in *Frogs*: cf. Ar. *Ra*. 842, 948–963, 1058–1064; also e.g. *Pax* 146–148, *Ach*. 410–479. Both the Aristotelian and Aristophanic evidence needs to be placed firmly in its context: see e.g. Csapo 2010: 120–125, Halliwell 2011: ch. 3.

7 In *Med*., *Hipp*., and *Ba*., respectively. It is no coincidence that, Pentheus aside, this notion has been particularly associated with Euripides' portrayal of women (as Michelini (1987: 112) and Goff (1999/2000: 194) point out, this often speaks as much to critics' perceptions of female psychology as it does to Euripidean practice). The image of Euripides as a master at portraying psychology/emotions, too, can be traced back to antiquity: cf. e.g. [Longin.] *De subl*. 15.1–3.

8 Gould 1978: 49. Gould reiterated this position in his entry on Euripides in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2012 [1996]): 'there are strands of "realism" in Euripides' writing for the theatre … But these are strands only in an extremely fragmented whole'.

they knew in their everyday lives than of kings and queens or the heroic figures they knew from other literature). Other dimensions of realism, specifically those of consistency and plausibility, rather pertain to the cognitive processes of character-interpretation themselves—processes which in the case of Euripides are thought by some to be so unlike those involved in the perception of 'real' people that the experience ends up being, at least to modern audiences, jarring.

All of these dimensions of (anti-)realism are in fact detectable in the plays, but in varying degrees and never sustained throughout an entire play. A more significant point is that the clustering of realism effects and variation in their use typically have dramatic effect, as a discussion of a single play may bear out.

Medea: A Case Study in Realism(s)

The first scenes of *Medea* provide a good example of how Euripides modulates his characterization techniques to achieve various effects. The play opens with a monologue by Medea's Nurse, quickly followed by a dialogue between the Nurse and the Tutor to Medea's children, who discuss Medea's present unhappy state and the further misfortunes that will be added to it.[9] These two figures are instantly characterized by group membership (class and age); presumably dress, masks and acting will have contributed to this.[10] Uniquely in tragedy, we see here two such lower-class characters talking together. The characterization is developed through various touches. The manner in which they address each other emphasizes their age and status: the Tutor addresses the Nurse as 'old house-slave (lit. possession, *ktēma*) of my mistress' (49), and the Nurse calls him 'old man, companion of Jason's children' (53) and later again 'old man' (63), referring to herself as 'fellow slave' (*sundoulon*, 65). Characterization by speech style may be detected in both slaves' use of generalizations (14–15, 35, 48, 54–55, 61, 85–86) and in the Nurse's somewhat rambling syntax (1–15, a single sentence); more generally we may note the 'loose' form of the dialogue between the two, which shifts in and out of stichomythia. Details of content add much to the effect: both slaves emphasizing their loyalty to their master (54, 61); the

9 On this scene, cf. Yoon 2012: 42–46 (a valuable discussion), Mossman 2011: *ad* 1–48, 49–95. On the Nurse, cf. also Willink 1988: 316–317, Luschnig 2007: 157–175 (overstated in some respects); for the Tutor, Page 1938: xiii.

10 That characterization in tragedy depends significantly on acting is self-evident, but beyond the narratological scope of this volume.

Nurse noticing that the children return 'having finished with their running' (46) and explaining to the Tutor that she is outside to vent her frustrations 'to the earth and the sky' (57);[11] the Tutor refusing to yield his news until persuaded by the Nurse (63–66), and then relating that he heard it 'while pretending not to listen, going to a game of draughts, where the old men sit' (67–69). All these touches do create a 'realistic', homely effect; yet it may be argued that this effect is not created for its own sake, but to provide, at the outset of the play, a poignant view of the domestic life that will be so comprehensively shattered, as well as a sympathetic perspective on Medea and her plight (though not one without ominous hints)[12] from two characters—one female, one male—who are not among the 'principals' yet operate within their *oikos*. Offering such a perspective on Medea before she appears seems, in fact, to be the main function of these two deftly characterized figures.

The touches of everyday realism fade with Medea's first appearance. The next few scenes focus on a series of interactions between the protagonist (who, like several of Euripides' female characters, dominates the stage for most of the play)[13] and various other figures (the chorus, Creon, Jason, and Aegeus). Before we see Medea, however, we only hear her, uttering curses and groans from within the house (96–165, Medea sings anapaests, interspersed with more composed chanted anapaests from the Nurse; the chorus join in in song at 131, the start of the parodos). When Medea finally enters the stage, she sounds radically different: in a long, carefully constructed speech, full of highly sophisticated rhetoric, and marked by the ingenious use of generalizations to assimilate herself to the chorus of women, she convinces that chorus to keep silent about her plans (214–270). Next, when faced with Creon, Medea again uses subtle rhetoric (although the arguments are very different) as well as effective supplication, in order to extract from him the single-day reprieve from exile that she needs to execute her plans (271–356). She sounds different again in her bitterly emo-

11 A scholiast (*schol.* E. *Med.* 57) commented that this is typical of 'those who are in dire circumstances and do not dare tell anyone about their misfortunes'. For scholia on this kind of realism, cf. Nünlist 2009: 252–253; such scholia typically relate behaviour to universal types rather than individual psychologies.

12 The Nurse mentions some troubling details about Medea's past and present in her opening narrative (36–45), and adds some more at the end of the dialogue with the Tutor (90–95).

13 E.g. Hecuba in *Hec.*, Electra in *El.* But this is certainly not a consistent trait of Euripides' oeuvre: in other plays the dramatic focus shifts from character to character in the course of the action (e.g. *Supp.*, *Ph.*), or sees one character initially dominant, who then disappears or fades before the play ends (e.g. *Andr.* and 'escape-plays' such as *IT* and *Hel.*). In other plays several of these tendencies overlap.

tional *agōn* with Jason (446–626; a typically Euripidean set piece), and then again in her confident supplication of Aegeus (663–763).

These striking shifts of tone and register proved too much for some scholars, who saw in them a challenge to any notion of consistent character-portrayal. Gould (already cited above) spoke of a variety of 'Medeas', who together make up an 'extremely fragmented whole' (2012 [1996]: 551); more trenchantly, Gellie found it 'most disturbing' that

> the reasons for [these switches] are to be found in the organisation of the surface processes of the play rather than in any attempt by the dramatist to let those processes emerge from a unitary personality structure. Medea seems to turn into whatever will ensure that the next thing will happen … Medea just escapes us.
>
> 1988: 17, 22

Yet such readings make too much of formalism. What they miss is that it is possible to construct a coherent sense of a character not only in spite of, but (in this case, at least) precisely because of, the different emotional and rhetorical registers which we see him or her employ. Medea's initial shift from extreme emotion to composed rhetoric can plausibly be taken as 'a first and forceful sign that Medea is able to subordinate her wildest emotions to her outstanding intelligence whenever it seems necessary for the achievement of her goals', and the subsequent variations in her rhetoric, similarly, as a display of her 'supreme skill at persuasion, at being all things to all men (and women)'.[14] This reading finds support in the various moments where Medea herself states that she has adapted, or will adapt, her speech and behaviour to suit her needs (368–370, 776–779); it is further reinforced by a sense that Medea is a something of a hyperactive mind-reader, supremely skilled at gauging and manipulating other people's desires, and obsessed with others' views of her herself (e.g. 9, 44–45, 292–305, 383, 1049).[15] Medea is characterized, in sum, from the outset by emotion, by focalization (i.e. the ways in which we see her perceive her

14 Citations from Seidensticker 2008: 342 and Mossman 2011: 44, respectively.

15 For mind-reading as dramatized in tragedy, cf. Budelmann and Easterling 2010; for this aspect of Medea, cf. Sluiter et al. 2013. Medea's 'heroic' fear of mockery by others was famously discussed by Knox 1977 (this article gave rise to the idea that Medea should be seen as masculinized, or that a feminine and a masculine side of her character are in conflict: Mossman 2011: 32–36 usefully critiques this, and at 36–48 discusses how Medea is characterized by her gender).

situation and others), and by speech—but by the modulations in that speech as much as by repeated patterns.[16]

Rhetoric, form, and character are, then, deeply interconnected in the first half of *Medea*, and these in turn are as deeply interconnected with plot/action: the opening scenes lay the groundwork for the play's murderous conclusion, but in the process reveal much about the subtle and dangerous character that fuels these developments. This characterization is supplemented by moments of direct and indirect characterization of Medea by other characters: some ominous comments by the Nurse have already been referenced above; later she warns the children to watch out for their mother's 'wild character, and the hateful nature of her self-willed mind' (*agrion ēthos stugeran te phusin phrenos authadous*, 102–104); Creon justifies his fear of Medea by saying 'you are clever by nature and experienced in many evils' (*sophē pephukas kai kakōn pollōn idris*, 285); Jason, too, comments on Medea's 'subtle mind' (*leptos nous*, 529). Of course, in each of these cases the aims and background of the speakers should be taken into account (Jason's comments about Medea, in particular, might be seen as problematic given his own questionable character); but taken together they reinforce the image of Medea as a dangerous, sophisticated user of persuasion.

To return to realism, we have seen that Euripides can use moments of social, everyday realism for dramatic effect, and that notions of realistically coherent characterization need not be seen as necessarily in conflict with Euripides' formalist tendencies.[17] What, then, about the third dimension of realism outlined above, that associated with psychological depth and a sense of inwardness? Here, too, Medea provides a powerful example, one which is suggestive of ways in which Euripides is actually different from the other two tragedians (insofar as extant, and it must be said that Medea is an extreme case even within the Euripidean oeuvre). The *Medea* offers a uniquely intimate view of the interior conflict of its eponymous heroine by outwardly dramatizing that conflict at several points in the play. The key scenes are Medea's famous 'great monologue' (1019–1080, not properly a soliloquy) and her later, shorter, reprise after the messenger speech and immediately before the filicide (1236–1250). These moments are prefigured at various earlier points in the play: in a

16 Although such patterns may be detected as well: see Mossman 2011: 46–48 (with further references).

17 Not all cases in Euripides permit explanation along the lines offered for Medea here: even so, it is not necessary to see shifts of formal mode as in themselves suggestive of 'fragmentation'. Rather, such shifts can often be seen to suggest 'different perspectives from which a problematic situation might be explored.' (Easterling 1990: 93)

way, the shift from emotion in the parodos to composure in the first episode, already mentioned, is one such moment; more directly relevant is Medea's self-exhortation after being granted her one-day reprieve:

> Come, now, Medea, spare nothing of what you know, scheming and plotting:[18] proceed to the terrible deed. Now courage is being tested: do you see what you suffer?
>
> 401–404

And the first time that she mentions filicide:

> I groan at the deed I must perform next: I will kill my children … I will leave the country … having steeled myself to do a most unholy deed (*ergon anosiōtaton*).
>
> 791–796

These moments show us a Medea in dialogue with (and within) herself,[19] and aware of the conflicting impulses under whose influence she makes her decisions. Medea's great monologue and her exit speech before the filicide expand these strands into full set pieces, the former speech in particular providing a remarkable view into Medea's emotionally tormented mind, as she decries her own destructive traits—'miserable that I am for my stubbornness (*tēs emēs authadias*)', 1038—and as she gives voice to different considerations (or even different 'sides' of her character)[20] in swift succession, particularly at 1042–1063 (note the frequent and varying use of psychological terms):[21]

18 The collocation of these two participles (*bouleuousa* and *tekhnōmenē*) with Medea's name (*Mēdeia*) in 402 is suggestive of a link between another verb meaning 'devise', *mēdomai*, and that name: a subtle instance of characterization by 'speaking' names, a technique which Euripides employs occasionally (like Aeschylus (→), and more frequently than Sophocles (→): cf. Collard 1975 on *Supp*. 496–497a, with addenda p. 442).

19 Medea reports another interior monologue—a specious one—to Jason at 872–883: a unique case of such a self-address being quoted in direct speech in the first person.

20 The notion that the speech dramatizes a conflict between Medea's reason and passion has fallen out of favour; the idea that it represents a struggle between her heroic (masculine) and maternal (feminine) instincts, both of which involve rational *and* emotional aspects, seems to be more widely accepted. There is vast bibliography on the speech, for which see Mastronarde 2002: *ad locc*. and Mossman 2011 *ad locc*., supplemented with Rutherford 2012: 315–322 (perhaps most influential is Foley 1989; I would single out Gill 1996: 154–174, 216–226 as an outstanding reading).

21 For such 'composite mind' terminology in Euripides, cf. Thumiger 2007: 65–74. I pass over

> Aiai! What must I do? My heart (*kardia*) fails me, women … I couldn't do it! Farewell my former plans! … Yet what is the matter with me? Do I want to make myself a laughing stock …? I must dare to do these things; what cowardice on my part (*tēs emēs kakēs*), even to admit soft words to my mind (*phreni*) … Ah ah! Don't, my soul (*thume*), don't do this! Leave them be, wretched one, spare the children! …

In the exit speech, we see this same internal division:

> Come, arm yourself, heart (*kardia*)! Why do I delay to do the terrible and necessary evil? On, my unhappy hand, take up the sword … Do not play the coward (*mē kakisthēis*) and do not think of how dear your children are, how you bore them …

These moments show us a playwright at work who is, at the very least, interested in exploring conflict that occurs not *between* people but *within* people, and in portraying the extreme reactions of characters subject to extreme, competing, impulses—this is inwardness, to be sure (whether one wishes to call it 'psychological realism' will depend on one's view of psychology, particularly female psychology), and it is a form of inwardness which, with its emphasis on violent shifts, seems to be distinctively Euripidean.

Euripidean Characters and their Ideas: *Heracles* and *Phoenician Women*

Just as Euripides' characters have been seen as slaves to the playwright's formalism, they have been seen as nothing more than mouthpieces for his intellectual and philosophical interests. *Heracles* offers a celebrated example. Towards the end of the play, Heracles, who in a bout of madness has killed his wife and children, intends to commit suicide. Theseus arrives and attempts to console the hero:

> No one among mortals is untouched by fortune, nor among gods, if the stories of poets are to be believed. Have they not slept with each other in unlawful unions? Have they not dishonoured their fathers by throwing

---

the textual issues in the speech, for which cf. Mastronarde 2002: *ad locc.* with appendix, Mossman 2011 *ad locc.* (both with further references).

> them in chains for the sake of power? Yet they still live on Olympus and have borne their crimes. What then will you say, if you, a mortal, complain excessively about your fortune, while the gods do not?
>
> 1314–1321

Theseus proceeds to offer Heracles sanctuary and honours in Athens (1322–1339). Heracles replies:

> Ah! All this is besides my troubles, and I do not believe that the gods are content in illicit unions or that they bind each other's hands, and I have never accepted it and will not be persuaded of it, nor that one god is master over another. For a god, if he is truly a god, needs nothing. Those are the miserable stories of poets.
>
> 1340–1346

But, he goes on, he will accept Theseus' offer and keep on living, from fear that suicide might bring with it the charge of cowardice; 'I must,' Heracles consents, 'be a slave to fortune.' (1357)

Heracles' rejection of stories about gods' adulterous relationships is remarkable, since the madness which afflicted him earlier in the play was the direct consequence of Hera's jealousy over precisely such an amorous escapade by her husband Zeus (with Heracles' mother Alcmena). This theological principle is thus at odds with the very premise of the play (one of those 'miserable stories of poets'?); it also contradicts Heracles' earlier, and later, acceptance of his divine parentage and Hera's enmity (e.g. 1263–1264, and at the end of this very speech, 1392–1393).

These contradictions have been variously interpreted,[22] and the extent to which they reveal Heracles' character variously assessed. Some scholars have been happy to conclude that this is an expression of Euripidean, not Heraclean theology. We have then a Euripides who imposes his own novel ideas[23] on his characters, and who inserts these lines 'without regard for their consistency or

22 A few scholars have attempted to resolve the paradox: e.g. Burnett 1971: 176 (Hera is not actually motivated by jealousy), Stinton 1976 (Heracles' expresses disapproval rather than disbelief); the text does not favour such readings, however.

23 Euripides' work clearly shows an interest in, and influence from, contemporary intellectual currents in fifth-century Athens, although straight lines of direction of influence are never easy to draw: see e.g. Allan 1999/2000, Egli 2003; Heracles' rejection of anthropomorphic gods appears to reflect the ideas of the philosopher Xenophanes (for details see Bond 1981: ad loc.). For Euripides as 'philosopher of the stage', see also Wright 2005: ch. 4.

suitability in the mouth of Heracles simply because they represent a cherished belief of his own which he is concerned to express at this point in the play.'[24] Such a view of Euripidean poetics is problematic in general; in this particular instance it is all the more unhelpful because it divorces from its context something which is clearly closely integrated into it: Heracles answers Theseus point for point, and his theological statement forms part of a carefully constructed argument (see below). Others have argued that Heracles' rejection should be seen only as an expression of 'what the rhetoric of the situation demands' to refute Theseus' argument, and as irrelevant to the rest of the play or our view of Heracles as a person.[25] This seems intolerably weak: indeed, the incompatibility of Heracles' views mirrors the chaotic universe of the whole play, which is reflected also in its dramatic reversals of fortune and its unusual structure (with a divine appearance midway through the play).[26]

It appears, then, that the contradictions are not so easily resolved, and the question remains what brings Heracles to utter claims which run counter to the facts of his life. Are psychology and/or characterization part of the answer? It is significant that Heracles' rejection of the gods leads directly up to his acceptance of Theseus' offer of sanctuary. His initial proviso that 'all this [i.e. Theseus' consolation and offer] is besides my troubles' (1340) makes it clear that Heracles is concerned with framing that acceptance as one undertaken solely on his own terms:[27] he is not swayed by Theseus' divine *exempla* (which he pointedly refuses to accept), but rather by his own standards of virtue (the avoidance of a reputation of cowardice). We might then see his theological claims as 'the outburst of a proud man',[28] or even as the rationalization of someone yearning for some higher form of divinity—a rationalization which (although belied by personal experience) forms a necessary stage in Heracles'

24 Brown 1978, following Wilamowitz 1895 (among many others); Bond 1981: ad loc. agrees that the lines 'may well reflect Euripides' considered own view', but rightly sees this as an insufficient explanation in itself. A stronger view, that Heracles expresses not only what Euripides privately held to be true, but the rational, true world of the play (whose gods are then unreal) was famously expressed by Verrall (1905: 134–198, in weaker form at Greenwood 1953: 59–91); it has rightly met with near-universal rejection. For fuller discussion of such views, cf. Papadopoulou 2005: 88–92.

25 Bond 1981: ad loc.; similarly, Heath 1987: 61.

26 Cf. Mastronarde 2010: 69–71.

27 This reading depends on the reference of 'all this' (*tade*), and to a lesser extent on the supplement to a monosyllabic lacuna in the text of 1340. Halleran 1986 well discusses these issues, and the overall rhetorical structure of the speech.

28 Halleran 1986: 177; similarly, Papadopoulou 2005: 85–116.

shift away from suicide.[29] What is clear in any case is that Heracles' theological innovations are a desperate reaction to the extremity of his situation: they are the product of a superior will confronted with, and eventually forced to accept, utterly impossible circumstances. Heracles' speech, then, does invite speculation about what is going on in his mind; it will, however, not easily be understood as a window on his 'normal' thought patterns. If this moment is revelatory of stable character traits, it is so only very indirectly.

It is instructive to compare the revolutionary ideas of another Euripidean character, Eteocles in *Phoenician Women*. In the debate scene of that play (446–637), Eteocles utters a long speech (499–525) defending his continued rule over Thebes, in violation of the pact agreed with his brother Polynices. The speech subverts a host of reasonable norms which were presumably cherished by a majority of the original audience: Eteocles argues against the stability of moral concepts ('nothing is similar or the same for mortals, apart from the name given to it', 501–502), he professes exclusive fidelity to Monarchy (*Turannis*) as the 'greatest of the gods' (503–508), and defends wrongdoing in the service of single rule (524–525). Dangerous in themselves, such claims are all the more disconcerting because they are used to rationalize the violation of an apparently equitable pact (69–74) and, worse, fraternal strife. All this, in what are almost the first words that Eteocles speaks, casts a bleak light on the character. Both in content and in style, moreover, the speech aligns Eteocles with a problematic group familiar to contemporary Athenians: young men trained in sophistic technique and with their own self-interest at heart, who uprooted the traditional beliefs of their elders.[30] Characterization by speech in this case maps onto metaphorical characterization (implicit comparison).

Eteocles' shocking rhetoric, then, in contrast to Heracles', and coming at a very different kind of moment in the play and the character's part in it, seems straightforwardly indicative of a set of defining and troubling characteristics. The chorus immediately point out the ethical failings of Eteocles' rhetoric in their reaction ('this is not good', *ou … kalon tout'*, 526). And Jocasta, in her subsequent attempt at arbitration, underlines her son's problematic traits, by contrasting her own wisdom and experience with his youthful folly (529–530),

29 This is the reading ('optimistic rationalist') of Mastronarde 1986: 207–208, 2010: 169. It strikes me as not necessarily in conflict with one which foregrounds Heracles' pride (*pace* Halleran 1986: 177 n. 25).

30 As attested in e.g. Aristophanes' *Clouds*, Thucydides (e.g. 6.12–13), and Plato (e.g. *Ap*. 23c, *R*. 539b–c). For the sophistic elements of the speech, cf. Mastronarde 1994: ad loc., and (for the entire *agōn*-sequence) Lloyd 1992: 83–93.

and berating him for his pursuit of Ambition (*Philotimia*, 531–532), his excessive pursuit of single rule and 'happy injustice' (549–550), and his desire for wealth (553–558).

The conclusion to be drawn from this discussion of *Heracles* and *Phoenician Women* is twofold: first, while it is true that a 'distinctive intellectualism … characterizes Euripidean characters of various ages and both genders',[31] individual expressions should be read not merely as tokens of a general Euripidean predilection, but as the words of particular characters in particular circumstances. Secondly, as stated at the outset of this chapter, Euripidean technique varies: the expression of novel ideas in one instance may be a straightforwardly significant characterizing cue, but in another may rather express a character's extreme reaction to his or her misfortunes.[32] Mastronarde puts it well:

> No instance of the modern, scientific, or sophistic within the plays should be treated as inorganic or as a private expression of the poet. Each must be evaluated in terms of speaker and situation and of its role in the dialectic of viewpoints and ideas that runs through an entire play.[33]

The Nature of Euripidean Character

At this point some brief observations may be made concerning the nature and connotations of character which were thematized in this volume's Introduction (→). To take the question of individuation versus typification first: it has been argued, for Euripides as for the other tragedians, that 'it seems more fruitful to discuss … characters in terms of classes … than in terms of individuals'.[34] It is assuredly the case that certain societal and familial roles (mother, son, king) and categories such as age and gender[35] play a considerable role

31 Gregory 2005b: 263. Lloyd argues (1992: 36) that rhetorical sophistication in *agōn*-scenes is suggestive of character (in portraying speakers as skilled) more in Euripides' earlier extant plays than in his later ones, where rhetorical influence is more pervasive.

32 These explanations map onto the different kinds of attribution (in the technical, psychological sense)—dispositional, situational—outlined in the Introduction (→). The very different circumstances that Euripides places his characters in invite correspondingly different kinds of interpretative reaction.

33 Mastronarde 2010: 214.

34 Gregory 2005b: 261.

35 Euripidean women (a notorious topic) and men of different age classes are helpfully discussed in Mastronarde 2010: ch. 7–8 (with further references).

in patterning Euripidean characters. Yet individually, characters are not constricted by such typologies: Medea is a mother, a scorned wife, a foreigner, but through the combination of these roles and the addition of other traits (implacable anger, an overdeveloped sense of honour, dangerous sophistication) transcends simple categorization. Eteocles shares with other young men in Euripides (e.g. Hippolytus, Pentheus in *Bacchae*) a certain intransigence, but is little like these men in other respects, such as his use of sophistry for personal gain.

As for questions surrounding the permanence, shapeability, and observability of character: Eteocles' remark about the instability of moral concepts is illustrative of a wider concern among Euripidean characters with distinguishing truth from appearance and innate nature from convention. This unease extends to issues of character: Medea, Theseus in *Hippolytus*, and Orestes in *Electra* all lament the lack of external signs from which to glean easily a man's true character;[36] Orestes' long speech on this topic also rules out class, wealth, and beauty as determinants of morality. A lack of access to characters' interior is, then, not only fundamental to the genre of tragedy (which continually presents us with indeterminacies or conflicts of motivation and reasoning), but also something which is explicitly thematized by Euripidean characters. As always, however, it is important to remember that it is the characters speaking: Medea, Theseus and Orestes have all recently been disabused of previously held views about others (Jason, Hippolytus, and Electra's farmer husband, respectively), and their utopian wish for clear signs of character should be taken first and foremost as their emotional reactions to these reversals, rather than as expressions of an overarching Euripidean theory of character. Moreover, as we have seen in the case of Medea, Euripides perhaps more than any other dramatist from antiquity is concerned with providing, through outward dramatization, a window to the inner world of his characters.

Characterization in Embedded Narratives

I conclude this chapter by looking at techniques of characterization employed by Euripidean characters in embedded narrative portions—prologue narratives, messenger speeches, etc.[37] Characterization plays a role of varying importance in such embedded narratives, and characterizing material occurs in them

36 *Med.* 516–519, *Hipp.* 925–931, *El.* 367–400; cf. also *HF* 655–668.

37 For different varieties of embedded narrative in Euripidean drama, see *SAGN* 1: 269–280

with varying density. Much of this variation depends in rather predictable fashion on the place and function of such narratives in their plays. Thus, some agonistic narratives (i.e. narrative portions of *agōn*-speeches) are designed specifically to justify or condemn a character's past actions, and elaborate characterization can play a large role in such narratives. In *Trojan Women*, for example, both Helen and Hecuba present competing versions of Helen's abduction and subsequent behaviour at Troy, and as part of this, competing portrayals of Helen herself (914–965, 969–1032).[38] Helen's self-characterization is in fact rather thin, and this appears to be a deliberate ploy: she emphasizes her passivity in the face of the gods' irresistible power and so leaves little room for blame to be assigned to herself. She raises the question of her own agency in the rape ('What was I thinking when I went with the visitor?' 945–946) only to reject its validity ('Punish the goddess … I should be forgiven', 948–950). There are only a few touches of more affirmative self-characterization: by action (repeated but aborted: Helen's alleged attempts to escape Troy after Paris' death, 951–958), and by appearance (the few references to her beauty: 929, 936). Hecuba, for her part, reverses the situation by denying the Judgement of Paris and Aphrodite's role in Helen's abduction (another rationalizing rejection of anthropomorphic gods' roles in established mythological episodes) and filling the remaining vacuum of causation with Helen's contemptible character, marked by fickleness, lust, greed, and vanity:

> Seeing him [Paris], decked out in his oriental fineries and glittering with gold, you went out of your mind. You lived in Argos with few possessions, and you expected that if you left Sparta you would swamp the city of Troy, flowing with gold, with your extravagances. Menelaus' palace was not enough for you to revel in your luxurious tastes.
>
> 987–997

> And when you had come to Troy, … if news reached you that Menelaus' side was winning, you would praise him so that my son would be tormented in having such a great competitor for your love. But if the Trojans did well, Menelaus was nothing to you.
>
> 1002–1007

(Lowe). As is stressed there, embedded narrative is in fact a much more fluid category than a narrow focus on set pieces like prologues and messenger speeches would suggest.

38 For the women's rhetorical strategies, cf. Lloyd 1992: 99–112, Croally 1994: ch. 3. Similarly competing narrative conceptions of characters are found in e.g. *Med.* (Jason), *Hec.* (Polymestor), *El.* (Clytemnestra), and *HF* (Amphitryon and Lycus on Heracles).

The use of the Greek imperfect to represent typical/repeated behaviour and attitudes (e.g. 'was enough', *ēn hikana*, 996; 'you would praise him', *ēineis*, 1005) is a common instrument in such characterizing moves. Hecuba also uses counterfactual narration to demonstrate that more noble traits were lacking in Helen:[39]

> You say that … it was against your will that you stayed here. Where, then, were you found hanging yourself from a noose or whetting a sword—which is what a noble woman (*gennaia gunē*) would do if she were longing for her previous husband?
>
> 1010–1014

Such agonistic characterizations are, as always, to be evaluated in their dramatic context: Helen and Hecuba's speeches are designed to have an effect on the internal narratees (the chorus and especially Menelaus, who is present as judge); for the external audience, the characterizing strategies adopted by the two women are character cues in and of themselves.

Prologue narratives can serve to delineate not only the antecedents of a play's plot, but also some of the central traits of its characters. There is considerable variation between these narratives in the amount and techniques of characterization, although some patterns may be detected depending on the type of prologue speaker. For instance, none of the three title characters who perform this role (in *Andromache*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Helen*) do much in the way of explicit self-characterization (Andromache does note her resistance to her concubinage and her care for her son, *Andr.* 36–38, 47–48; Helen emphasizes her marital propriety, *Hel.* 64–67). Of course, audiences are still able to infer much about these women from how they present their plight and the other characters involved in it, as well as by reflecting on the speakers' earlier literary lives (Andromache hints at her former life as Hector's wife, 5–6, activating connotations from her virtuous Iliadic presentation).[40]

The explicit ascription of traits, attitudes and motives to characters plays a greater role in prologue narratives delivered by anonymous minor figures (the Nurse in *Medea*, Electra's farmer husband in *Electra*, although the latter says much more about Aegisthus and Clytemnestra than about his wife), and in

39 Similar counterfactual narrations with a characterizing function at e.g. *Alc.* 633–635, *Med.* 490–491, *Andr.* 607–609, *Hec.* 1208–1213, *El.* 1088–1093.

40 For the 'skilful blend of the traditional and invented' in Euripides construction of Andromache in the prologue, cf. Allan 2000: 94–97.

some of the prologue speeches by gods[41] (see also below). In further cases, such as the suppliant plays *Heraclidae* and *Suppliant Women*, the prologue narrative teaches us little about any of the major characters' traits.

Messenger narratives, too, are generally sparing with the explicit ascription of characteristics, but the narration of characters' actions (valiant combat, strategic leadership, deceit, etc.) can contribute much to their overall presentation. Characterization is most pronounced in the case of messengers who are clearly on the side of or against one of the narrative's characters:[42] thus, in the messenger narrative of *Andromache* (1085–1165), the messenger portrays his master Neoptolemus as a valiant and impressive warrior (there are notable references to his appearance: 'a fearsome warrior to behold' 1123, 'shining in his bright armour' 1146, 'his handsome body' 1154–1155), who in spite of his pious behaviour at Delphi (1106–1108, 1111–1113) is mercilessly killed in an ambush arranged by a deceitful Orestes (1088–1096, 1109–1110, 1115–1116). Neoptolemus is an interesting case in that he does not appear onstage as a (living) character, so that the only way in which the audience is able to form a view of his character is through the words of others.[43] A more complex instance of this is Aegisthus in *Electra*, who also appears onstage only as a corpse, but who is characterized extensively throughout the play by the farmer, Electra herself, the messenger, and even Clytemnestra.

Aegisthus is also a good example of how it is impossible to separate characterization in embedded narratives from that in other parts of the play, and how character information can be presented in a piecemeal fashion. In the farmer's prologue narrative (1–53), Aegisthus' dominant trait is a (typically tyrannical) fear of overthrow, leading to his various schemes to eliminate Agamemnon's heirs and prevent the birth of further ones. This characterization is fleshed out in the long stichomythia between Electra and the 'stranger' (Orestes) (215–289), and particularly in Electra's message to her brother (300–338), which references rumours of Aegisthus' drunken outrages at Agamemnon's grave (323–331). The messenger speech (774–858) paints Aegisthus as an unsuspecting victim who unwittingly and hospitably welcomes his own killers into his

41 Particularly in *Hippolytus* (Aphrodite on Hippolytus and Phaedra) and *Bacchae* (Dionysus on Pentheus); less so in *Alcestis* (Apollo, though see below on Admetus' piety), *Trojan Women* (Poseidon), *Ion* (Hermes). There is also little characterization in the prologue speech by Polydorus' ghost in *Hecuba*.

42 For a comprehensive demolition of the notion that messengers are 'objective' narrators, cf. de Jong 1991: esp. ch. 2.

43 For such 'offstage characters', cf. de Jong 1990.

inner circle, but it also shows further hints of his fearful attitude (831–832).[44] Electra then launches the most sustained effort to characterize Aegisthus in her invective over his corpse (907–956, with narrative moments similar in kind to the agonistic narratives discussed above), adding traits such as cowardice, submissiveness, greed, effeminacy, and sexual lust. Even Clytemnestra, in her brief dialogue with Electra following the *agōn* (1102–1141), is forced to accept that Aegisthus has treated Electra cruelly, saying that 'such are his ways' (*tropoi toioutoi*, 1117), although she still sees room for change and predicts—in a moment of cruel dramatic irony—that he will no longer trouble Electra in the future (1119). All these presentations of Aegisthus—some in properly narrative portions of the play, some outside them[45]—are coloured by the perspective of their respective speakers; together they continually shape the audience's image of the character.

Similarly, for characters who do have onstage speaking roles as well as appearing in embedded narratives, characterization in the narrative parts can interact in significant ways with non-narrative parts. Onstage and offstage presentations are not always consistent: this is so for obvious reasons in the case of characters who are mad or possessed offstage (Heracles and Agave in the messenger narratives of *Heracles* and *Bacchae*); a more difficult and controversial case is Admetus in *Alcestis*, who is described by Apollo in the prologue narrative as a 'pious man' (*hosiou … andros*, 10), but appears to violate several standards of piety in the course of the play.[46]

Elsewhere, too, there is a delicate interaction between a character's presentation in a prologue narrative and their acted role: we have already seen that the prologue narrative of *Medea* hints at some of Medea's dangerous aspects, which will inform how she is perceived once her acted part begins. Hippolytus' onstage actions and speeches in *Hippolytus* are bookended by a prospective narration by Aphrodite (1–57) and a retrospective one by Artemis (1282–1324)—two very different divine perspectives on his actions (Aphrodite claims that she will 'punish Hippolytus for the wrongs he has done me (*hēmartēke*)', 21–22, whereas Artemis comes to Theseus to 'reveal your son's mind (*phrena*) as just (*dikaian*)', 1298–1299). In both these examples, the prologue speakers'

44 Some scholars (most strongly Arnott 1981) have argued that the messenger's portrayal of Aegisthus is wholly in conflict with that of others, and vindicates him; this view is rightly moderated by e.g. Cropp [1988] 2013: 4.

45 A case can be made that 215–289 and 300–338 are narrative even according to a strict definition. For narrative in Euripidean stichomythia, see Schuren 2014.

46 For the implications of the term *hosios*, cf. Peels 2016 (on this passage: 156–158 with n. 33). For the controversy about Admetus, cf. e.g. Parker's commentary (2007).

descriptions prepare the ground for the title characters' first appearances: the Nurse's description of Medea's behaviour (*Med.* 20–33) materializes in Medea's cries (96–167), while Hippolytus' first song and dialogue (*Hipp.* 58–120) bear out his hostility to Aphrodite as described by the goddess (10–19). This allows the characters' first actions to be interpreted as instances of a more typical, repeated behaviour,[47] and thus to have considerable characterizing force at the outset of a play.[48]

Conclusion

The genre of tragedy imposes a particular set of constraints on the presentation of character:

> There is … no privileged access for the audience to the interior world of any character; all actions have to be performed, and all thoughts spoken aloud, in the public space of the stage … There are no degrees of access to a character's thoughts or actions, beyond the black-and-white choice of whether a particular speech or action takes place on- or offstage (and, if the latter, in what form it is made known onstage) … [T]he tragic audience must use their … skills of hearing the private thought behind the public word to make human sense of the players' motivation.[49]

But 'constraints' is in some ways a misleading term: the dramatic form also affords unique opportunities, by inviting audiences to reflect on people's reactions to others and to their circumstances. 'Far from being a source of irritating obscurity, this ambiguity expands the intellectual and emotional significance of the drama.'[50]

Each of the Greek tragedians uses these opportunities in slightly different ways, and Euripides' approach is distinctive in several respects. First, he allows his characters to shift rapidly between sometimes widely divergent modes of 'the public word', complicating the effort 'to make human sense of the players' motivation' (there is no need, however, to give up that effort altogether, as

47 For such iterativity as a recurring feature of Euripidean prologues, cf. *SAGN* 2: 302–304 (Lloyd).

48 Cf. the notion of 'primacy' discussed in the Introduction (→).

49 Lowe 2000: 176–177.

50 Allan 2000: 88.

some scholars have argued). Second, he seems particularly interested in exploring conflict *within* characters, and dramatizing outwardly the tugs-of-war and reversals which take place in their interior worlds. Third, he embeds many of his characters' public words in the rhetorical, intellectual and philosophical discourses of his time, the effect of which is not only to frame the individual action or problem as part of wider human experience, but also to explore how the use and abuse of rhetoric and philosophy reflects on individual speakers at particular moments. Finally, Euripides' frequent and to some extent formalized use of embedded narrative passages offers scope for an even greater variety of perspectives on characters' actions and motivations.

What is also distinctive about Euripides, however, is the great variety in his technique: it is perhaps this above all which makes him a sometimes elusive, and often controversial author.[51]

51 This is not to say that there is no such variety in the work of the other tragedians. The notion that there is such as thing as the 'Sophoclean hero', for instance, obscures the considerable variation between Sophocles' (→) central characters. And the fact that many more plays by Euripides are extant than by Aeschylus or Sophocles inevitably contributes to the perception that his oeuvre was more diverse.