Introduction: The Life of Euripides

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Antiquity has handed down several texts that purport to supply information about the life of Euripides. All have their genesis in the scholarly activities of the Hellenistic era (ca. 323–31 BC). The best known is the Γένος Εὐριπίδου καὶ βίος (Origin and Life of Euripides), a compilation of older accounts assembled in the Byzantine period (ca. 4th–15th century AD) and transmitted in some manuscripts of Euripides’ tragedies.¹ Also important are: the entry on Euripides in the encyclopedia Suda (10th century AD); the summary of Euripides’ life by the Byzantine scholar Thomas Magister; the brief report on the tragedian’s life and times by the Latin author Aulus Gellius (ca. 125–180 AD) in Attic Nights (15.20); and the fragmentary remains of a dialogue concerning the life of Euripides by the Greek Peripatetic philosopher Satyrus of Calliatis, who was active in the late 3rd century BC.² Biographical details surface as well in works by Greek writers such as Plutarch (ca. 45–120 AD) and Diogenes Laertius (ca. 3rd century AD), and by Roman authors such as Cicero (106–43 BC) and Vitruvius (ca. 80–15 BC). Another useful source is the Parian Marble, which dates to the late 4th century BC.³ In addition, five letters attributed to Euripides, which scholars currently date to the 2nd century AD, present ‘autobiographical’ information from a fabricated first-person perspective.⁴

The Lives and the other biographical materials concerning Euripides form part of a larger tradition, already established in the classical period (5th–4th century BC), that was concerned with the origins, formative experiences, associations, achievements, travels, and deaths of famous men who made an impact in the areas of politics, poetry and the arts, culture, and philosophy. As is obviously the case with the biographical writings concerning Euripides, this tradition drew on a range of materials, some of which nowadays might

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² The Greek texts and English translations of these sources, including the principal fragments of Satyrus’ Life, can be found in Kovacs (1994a) 2–29; Campos Daroca et al. (2007) 253–91 supply annotated Spanish translations of the same materials. For the complete fragments of Satyrus’ Life, see Schorn (2004) 86–113.
³ See the testimonia in Kovacs (1994a) 29–141.
⁴ Gosswein (1975) 6–12 discusses questions concerning the letters’ authorship and dating.
not be deemed reliable sources of facts. Modern scholarship calls attention to the many fictive aspects of the Lives and other ancient biographical writings, and it is abundantly apparent that ancient writings about the life of Euripides, like the extant biographies of other prominent individuals, contain “many embellishments with which a later tradition, stimulated by the wondrous world of the plays, saw fit to garnish the little they knew.”

The remark just quoted underscores the fact that ancient biographical works concerning an artist like Euripides were in their essence acts of reception, springing from the interest of later generations in the works of a past master. The Lives and other biographical materials concerning Euripides have in themselves become objects of interest. They have attracted welcome scholarly attention in the past century, especially since the discovery in the early 1900’s of the papyrus fragments of Satyrus’ dialogue. Euripides’ life has moreover been the subject of works aimed at non-specialist as well as specialist audiences; we might single out Gilbert Murray’s Euripides and His Age (1913), Marie Delcourt’s La Vie d’Euripide (1930), and the chapter on Euripides in Edith Hamilton’s The Greek Way (originally published in 1930) as examples of texts that seek to engage broad audiences by reconstructing the tragedian’s personal experiences and showing how his dramas might be interpreted as products of a life lived in Athens from its mid-5th-century heyday through the Peloponnesian War. Curiosity about ‘Euripides the man,’ and hence about the life of Euripides, is also piqued by works both scholarly and general that do not have explicit interests in biography or the ancient biographical tradition. In particular, investigations of the tragedies’ perspectives on religion, such as A. W. Verrall’s influential Euripides the Rationalist (1895), and discussions of Euripides’ ‘modernity’ and ‘iconoclasm,’ which associate his dramas with works by modern authors whose lives and views are well documented, give leave to wonder about Euripides as an individual with experiences, aspirations, beliefs, political opinions, intellectual commitments, and personal as well as professional disappointments.

5 In accounts concerning Euripides’ life, reliance on 5th-century comedies by Aristophanes and others is conspicuous. See e.g. Fornaro (1979); Leftkowitz (1979) 188–9 and 194–6; Kovacs (1994b) 3 and 11–2; Knöbl (2008) 17.
7 Regarding this, in addition to the works already cited, see Delcourt (1933); Fornaro (1977).
8 For example, George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Luigi Pirandello, Bertold Brecht, and Edward Albee.
9 E.g. Salter (1911); Hamilton (1993) 205–14; Segal (1968) esp. 10–1; de Romilly (1986); Walton (2009). Ford (2005) examines the wide-ranging influence of Verrall (1895), and Hall/