PART TWO

EURIPIDES AND HIS FRAGMENTARY PLAYS
CONSOLATION IN EURIPIDES’ HYPsipYLE

JAMES H. KIM ON CHONG-GossARD

The fragments of the Hypsipyle constitute the largest surviving portion of all Euripides’ lost plays, with entire scenes surviving in relative completion. The nature of this survival allows us to indulge in thematic interpretations in a way that is simply impossible with other fragments whose preservation is woefully less complete. One theme in the Hypsipyle that has not received enough attention is consolation. It has long been recognized that the Hypsipyle fragments contain consolatory gestures which, along with their underlying doctrines, would become standard in the later genre of the consolatio letter.¹ The present study focuses on the theme of consolation itself, and how the play explores the positive and negative implications and results of consolation by its enactment. This theme is first broached in Hypsipyle’s lullaby to Opheltes, then sustained in the chorus women’s attempt to console Hypsipyle by advice-giving (παραίνεσις). Her refusal to take the chorus’ advice hints that consolation will be ineffective in this play, as one might expect in any tragedy. Yet in midplay, when Hypsipyle is about to be killed on suspicion of murdering the queen’s baby, Amphiarous attempts to console the queen, and thereby secures Hypsipyle’s release. This successful effort at consolation was so famous in antiquity that Amphiarous’ lines were preserved not only on papyrus, but were also quoted centuries after Euripides’ day by Marcus Aurelius, Clement of Alexandria, and others. The fragmentary Hypsipyle therefore seems to make consolation a thematic issue by featuring both felicitous and infelicitous attempts at consolation, by illustrating more than one way of handling grief, and thereby engaging an audience in a reconsideration of tragic revenge.

Because it is quite unlike any other genre in ancient literature, Greek tragedy has distinct advantages for exploring the theme of consolation. Firstly, tragedy is already about grief, narrating the stories of mythical heroes who endure terrible sufferings, often the loss of loved ones, in

¹ Kassel 1958 and Ciani 1975 are the most comprehensive studies on consolatory gestures in tragedy. References to the Hypsipyle fragments are made at Kassel 1958: 11–12, and Ciani 1975: 105–110, 120.