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Euripidean Geras and the Theme of Escape

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Summary
The purpose of this study is to explore the representation of old age throughout the extant Euripidean plays, providing an overview of significant aspects relating to the dramatic function of the old characters within diverse tragic plots and focussing on self-reflective scenes of aged heroes. On closer examination the geras-scenes reveal that the elderly wish to escape the reality of ageing either by recalling their lost youth in the past, by forgetting the misery of great age through a religious ecstatic experience in the present or even by anticipating their death in the future.

“In their ancient wasted bodies crouch the souls/ of old people (...)/the distressed and comically tragic souls,/imprisoned in the ruined flesh (...).”
C. Cavafys, Souls of Old Men

The concept of geras evolves from an allegorical personification in Greek art into the realistic representation of a human physical predicament in Greek tragedy. Euripides differs from the other classic playwrights in that he transplants the antithesis between geras and youth from the realm of appearances to the inner conflict between psychological power and physical weakness. Thus beyond the visual dimension of lifelike scenes demonstrating bodily decline he creates a mental image of geras signalled by the oxymoron ‘weak strength’ (Heracl. 648f. ἀσθενὴς ῥώμη).

A further clear distinction between Euripides and Aeschylus, as well as Sophocles, lies in the fact that the former engenders short geras-episodes in his plays portraying how the self, body and mind, has changed over the course of time. His old heroes behold themselves from within, thus becoming interpreters of how they feel and think.

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1 This paper is the revised text of my talk ‘The lesser the body, the greater the pathos: geras on the Euripidean stage’ given at the AMPAL conference (08. - 09.09.2012) ‘Bodily Functions: The Corpus and Corpora in Ancient Literature’, in Oxford.
3 On the caricature of Heracles (Geras painter, Louvre G 234) clubbing an emaciated Geras depicted on a Pelike from Capua (second half of the 5th century) illustrates the struggle between youth and old age, see Richardson: Figure 1.
4 Cf. the oxymoron ‘like a dream in strength’ (ὄνειρον ἱσχύν) in Phoen. 1718-22.
about their ageing.\(^5\) By portraying his aged characters in their vulnerability\(^6\) the poet provides a ‘version of the other’\(^7\) and summons up a tense atmosphere aiming at the intensity of an emotional response.\(^8\)

Behind a dramatic representation of old age that combines a melancholy about the process of ageing and a nostalgia for lost youth, a philosophical reflection of geras can be detected throughout Euripides’ plays. Old age can be interpreted as a representation of Time, which is both young and old, existing and non-existing.\(^9\) In this sense the relationship of the elderly to their body undergoes three states of mind; whether it is life leaving the body, as in the passages of the first category below (I), or the elderly themselves abandoning the painful reality of an aged life as in the passages of the second and third categories (II, III), a ‘theme of escape’ is suggested.

I. The theme of escape as a nostalgic reminiscence of the past

The idea of the courageous elderly is not a Euripidean novum. The Homeric epics provide the model of strength at great age, namely Nestor, impersonating the ‘superannuated hero’ and ‘gerontocrat’ (Ili. IV.313-16).\(^10\) Nevertheless in Euripides’ relevant scenes the seemingly contradictory combination of courage and old age appears more stressed, given that the the term gerôn itself becomes a synonym of weakness (Heracl. 636 γέροντες ἐσμὲν κοῦδαμῶς ἐρρώμεθα),\(^11\) while a praise of youth is delivered,\(^12\) compensating for its irreversible loss. Old heroes escape into the past wishing to recover their youth. The poet focusses upon the antithesis between weakness (ἀσθένεια φύσεως)\(^13\) and strength.

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\(^6\) On the notion of vulnerability and its relation to pathos and sentimentality see the inspirating article of M. S. Silk: 78-111, esp. 78-87.

\(^7\) Mastronarde: 296-7.

\(^8\) Falkner 1989a: 41 defines this ‘a pathos of age’.

\(^9\) Falkner 1989a: 40.

\(^10\) Ilias XI, 670-71.

\(^11\) Cf. Teiresias’ self-portrayal in Phoen. Τει...ἀσθενής πατήρ.../843...ώς ἐμὸν κάμνει γόνυ,/ τυχήν δὲ βαίνων ἥδυσιν μόλις περώ...852 Τει. κότως παρέμαι.

\(^12\) On the praise of youth as a Euripidean characteristic see Harbsmeier: 122-124.

\(^13\) The model for these concepts could be traced back to the Homeric Nestor in II. 7, 132-58; see Falkner 1989a: 30-33.
In addition, the term gerôn alludes to nearness of death. That is why neither the death of the elderly nor the grief about it can be equal to the demise of the young. This question, first raised in Alc. 711,14 recurs in Heracl. 466.15 In Alcestis self-sacrifice signifies an act of courage. The fact that Pheres,16 although he approaches death chooses to survive thus overturning the expected plot-scheme,17 reveals how hard it would have been for his son to part from life. In this respect, the old man’s refusal to die elucidates the unwillingness of the young man to act in this manner. The unsympathetic and unheroic (Alc. 955-9, 656-7, 717) Pheres who is not willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of his son, is the reversal of the veteran-motif (Peleus and Iolaos). Thus, his true weakness is not geras but rather cowardness (ἀψυχία, δειλία).

Although as an old man he is at the end of life (643...κάτι τέρμ᾽ ἡκων βίου),18 a thought expressed later in Andr. 1081, he does not complain about his long life (Alc. 670) as conventional elderly do.19 Pheres believes that his life will still continue. Thury observes correctly that for Pheres ‘the individual is the measure of all things’.20 Euripides introduces thereby the theme of a gerôn praising life which has not yet been perfected (cf. Adrastos in Supplices 775 ff., 953). Pheres, as a gerôn, that is as a ‘personificated opposite to life’,21 praises life (Alc. 722, 703, 693) and not youth as Iolaos (Heracl.) and Peleus (Andr.) will in the relevant plays. He stresses the shortness and sweetness of living (Alc. 693 ...τὸ δὲ ζῆν σμικρὸν ἀλλ᾽ ὀμώς γλυκύ;) thus manifesting the innate love of life (φιλοψυχία) in every human being22 – an

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14 Alc. 711 τάυτὸν γὰρ ἡβῶντ᾽ ἄνδρα καὶ πρέσβυν βανεῖν;
15 Heracl. 466 Δὴ, τί γὰρ γέροντος ἀνδρὸς Εὐρυσθεῖ πλέον/θανόντος;
17 Murnaghan: 112-4.
18 Cf. Alc. 649-50...βραχὺς δὲ σοι...ἀ λοιπὸς ἦν βιώσιμος χρόνος.
19 Euripides does not seriously considers Admetus’ comments, as Seeck: 147 explains, but Admetus rather declares e contrario the normal case of a gerôn, when he diagnoses the elderly with no true wish to die or honest lamentation for their long lives: Alc. 669-72 μάτην ἀρ᾽ οἱ γέροντες εὐχονται βανεῖν./ γῆρας ψέγοντες καὶ μακρόν χρόνον βίου./ ἦν δ᾽ ἐγγύς ἔλθη θάνατος, οὐδὲς βούλεται/θησκεῖν, τὸ γήρας δ᾽ οὐκέτ᾽ ἔστ᾽ αὐτοῖς βαρὺ; the only conventional feature in Pheres’ behaviour is that he resents a childless geras, a most dreadful fact.
22 Alc. 691 χαίρεις ὑδών ψῶς· πατέρα δ᾽ οὐ χαίρειν δοκεῖς;/ Alc. 703 ...εἰ σὺ τὴν σαυτοῦ φιλεῖς/ψυχήν, φιλεῖν ἀπαντάς / Alc. 722 φιλόν τὸ φέγγος τοῦ θεοῦ, φιλόν;
objective opinion expressing a universal truth, even if atypical of a *gerôn*.23 Moreover, in dramatic terms Euripides differentiates in Pheres’ scene the motif of a *gerôn* grieving over death (chorus) from the motif of a *gerôn* praising life (Pheres) by interrupting the funeral procession of Admetus and the chorus through Pheres’ entrance. Riemer is correct in interpreting Pheres’ role as a counterpart to the chorus of the Thessalian old men. Nonetheless, one could read into this scene not only a contrast between Admetus’ friendly attitude towards the chorus and the hostile behaviour towards his father but also a deliberate clash of the traditional motif of an old hero mourning with the uncommon motif of an old hero who surprisingly praises life within the frame of a burial ritual.24

In *Heraclidae* Euripides makes use of the effect of doubling. On the one hand Iolaos, who is emblematic of male old age,25 yearns for a ‘double youth’, on the other hand Alcmene, the female old character of the play (*Heracl*. 39), wishes the ‘death of their enemy more than once’ (*Heracl*. 959-60). The question raised in this tragedy is whether a *gerôn* is capable of acting (δυνατὸς δρᾶν) and of regaining the strength of a mature man (*Heracl*. 711 ἀνδρῶν ἀλκή). The chorus describes the reality by clearly expressing the ἀμήχανον, the futile effort of ever regaining youth (*Heracl*. 703 ff. τί πονεῖς ἄλλως...χρή γνωσιμαχεῖν σὴν ἠλικίαν,/ τὰ δ᾽ ἀμήχαν᾽ ἐὰν· οὐκ ἔστιν ὑπως/ ἠβην κτήσι πάλιν αὐθίς),26 a belief which recurs later in *Suppl*. 775 in the form of a praise of the uniqueness of life.27

The motif of absolute infirmity is being highlighted both in Iolaos’ case (685, 688) and in Alcmene’s case (*Heracl*. 648ff.) providing a sharp contrast between Iolaos’ inner strength (*Heracl*. 653) and an aged body (*Heracl*. 702-3 λημα...ἡβα, σῶμα δὲ φρούδον), or between actually acting and being solely willing to act (*Heracl*. 692 δρᾶν μὲν σὺ γ᾽ οὐχ ὀδὸς τε, βούλεσθαι δ᾽ ἵσως, 735 ὀρῶ δοκοῦντα μᾶλλον...)28 – a technique which culminates to his rejuvenation occurring later in the play. Against the

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23 Against this thought see Seeck 1985:106 who detects a subjective love of life in this scene; cf. Zürcher: 34-5 who notices in this passage a universally accepted opinion.
24 Riemer: 142-44.
25 Falkner 1989b: 115; about the structure of Iolaos’ prologue rhesis see Erbse: 119-121.
26 On the meaning of γνωσιμαχεῖν as ‘fight against one’s own opinion’ or ‘give way to’ see Wilkins: 141.
27 *Suppl*. 775 Αδρα....τοῦτο γὰρ μόνον βροτοῖς/ οὐκ ἔστι τάναλωμι’ ἀναλωθὲν λαβεῖν,/ ψυχὴν βροτεῖαν•(...).
28 On the comic tone in Iolaos’ character development see Falkner 1989b: 119.
awareness of strength (ῥώμη) having definitely vanished (Her. 688)\(^{29}\) the poet places the longing for rejuvenation, in order to create a balance of forces. Hence, in a short soliloquy (740) Iolaos apostrophises his arm recalling its past strength: Io. εἴθ’, ὦ βραχίων, οἷον ἡβήσαντά σε/ μεμνήμεθ’ ἡμείς (...). His fighting spirit proves to be more than a matter of humour,\(^{30}\) since he succeeds by virtue and divine intervention to be the captor of his rival, thus leading the audience to a reversal of their expectations.\(^{31}\)

Nevertheless Iolaos’ frailty (Her. 23 ἀσθενῆ) is not merely the result of geras, but rather of his status as a foreigner, a refugee and a supplicant. Although he is introduced as a victim, being violently abused by the sheer force of his rival (Her. 78-79, 127-9), he is far from being passive. He has once tried to save his life by voluntarily going into exile (Her. 15) indicating his love of life (φιλοψυχία)\(^{32}\) – a theme which has previously been discussed in Alcestis and is later mentioned in Suppl. 722, 775 ff. Moreover, Iolaos, a rescuer being himself in need of rescue (Her. 11), is determined to harm his enemies acting as an uncompromising avenger (Her. 66, 851). It is primarily due to the requirements of the plot that Euripides enables Iolaos to fulfil his vengeful ambitions by granting him a second youth in the form of a godsent ‘miraculous metamorphosis’\(^{33}\) which in the play is presented as a reward for his prayer to Zeus and Hebe.\(^{34}\)

The motif of the aged protector, a common pattern, as Thury correctly observes,\(^{35}\) which involves the interaction of young and old as well as a rejuvenation plot, recurs in Andromache. Both Iolaos and Peleus can be regarded as suffering agents.\(^{36}\) In the first part of the play Peleus as a brave man (Andr. 764 εὐψυχος) is more than a gerôn, whereas in the second part of the play as a lonely man (Andr. 1216 ἔρημος), Peleus is less than a gerôn; in the end through his apotheosis, a marked inversio of

\(^{29}\) Her. 688 Θερ. οὐκ ἔστιν, ὦ τὰς, ἤ ποτ’ ἡν ῥώμη σέθεν.
\(^{31}\) Mastronarde: 293.
\(^{32}\) On the use of the term in Euripides see Wilkins: 119.
\(^{33}\) Falkner 1989b: 114, 118.
\(^{34}\) Falkner 1989b: 121.
\(^{35}\) Thury 1988b: 300-301.
\(^{36}\) Harbsmeier: 59.
the motif of grief, he, who was tormented by the ills of mortality (gers and grief), is to become more than mortal (Andr. 1255ff. ἀθάνατος, ἀφθιτος).

Peleus, who is addressed by the chorus repeatedly as a glorious veteran (κλεινὸς) (Andr. 791f., 795, 800) and is even compared to Heracles, does not deny his infirmity (Andr. 717 ἐγὼ καίπερ τρέμων, 754 ἀσθενῆ). Menelaus’ abusive remarks, when comparing him to a mere shadow with a voice incapable of doing anything except talking (Andr. 745) are to be understood as exaggerations only to a certain extent. However, he has not only the power to command, being fully aware of his political authority, but equally the power of words, as his long verbal confrontation with Menelaus reveals.

Furthermore Peleus is an atypical ‘upright standing’ gerôn (Andr. 761 ἡμεῖς δ’ ἔτ’ ορθοὶ κοῦ γέροντες). The question Euripides raises hereby is whether a strong body (εὐσωματεῖν) or a strong spirit (εὐψυχεῖν) is of more value. What compensates Peleus’ geras, is his bravery (εὐψυχία) which shows itself by his prompt reaction to the urgency of the situation (Andr. 552).

The reason for the sharp reversal in his physical and mental condition in the exodos of the play (Andr. 1076ff.) is grief not geras; although grieving is a typical tragic role for the aged. He suffers ‘double grief’ for his son (Andr. 613/14) and for his grandson (Andr. 1216). Therefore, even the last token of the gerôn’s existence, his voice, fades away. He considers himself to be already dead (Andr. 1176f.), fading to

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37 See also Lloyd: 135.
38 Andr. 745 σκιὰ γάρ αντίστοιχος ὃς φωνὴν ἔχεις, ἀδύνατος οὐδὲν ἄλλο πλὴν λέγειν μόνον; cf. Andr. 689 Με...σοὶ μὲν ἡ γλωσσαλγία/ μείζων, (…); on the metaphor cf. fr.509N; see also Lloyd: 141.
39 His skêptron functions at the same time as a symbol of his royal power, a walking stick for his old body and a weapon of a hand-to-hand-combat; about the stick see also Harbsmeier: 113-4.
40 Mastronarde: 293.
41 See Lloyd: 141 who refers to the ‘vigorous old men’ of Aristophanes’ Wasps 1066-70.
42 Cf. Andr. 993 θάρσει γέροντος χεῖρα
43 Andr. 762...πρέσβυς περ ὡν...πολλῶν νέων γάρ κάν γέρων εὐψυχος ἢ/κρείσσων...τί γάρ δεί δειλόν ὄντ’ εὐσωματεῖν;
44 Andr. 552 Πη...ἄλλα...ἀνηβητηρίαν/ρώμην μὲ καὶ νῦν λαμβάνειν, εἴπερ τοτε’
45 Cf. the urgent situation in Ion 1041, when the old servant apostrophises his foot wishing it would become young again and swifter (ὦ γεραιὲ πούς, νεανίας γενοῦ/ἐργοίστι, κεί μὴ τώι χρόνωι πάρεστι σοι).
46 Mastronarde: 294, n. 45.
a nothing (οὐδέν). Of similar significance are Hecabe’s words of despair as she mourns over Polyxena’s death.\textsuperscript{47}

Another old veteran, Amphitryon, in \textit{Heracles} laments about the lessening of his strength and feels unmanly (\textit{Her.} 41). He moans about the ills of geras (\textit{Her.} 228ff.) himself being weak (άσθενῆ), a sheer voice (\textit{Her.} 229 οὐδέν ὡντα πλήν γλώσσης ψόφον) echoing the physical powerlessness already expressed by the chorus of the elderly in the \textit{parodos},\textsuperscript{48} without strength (\textit{Her.} 230-31 ῥώμη γὰρ ἐκλέλοιπεν...κάμωρόν σθένος, ‘the force I once had has left me and in my old age I have shaky limbs and diminishing strength’\textsuperscript{49}), the limbs weighing heavily on him. Nevertheless, he treasures life (\textit{Her.} 90) and as an old soldier he believes in rescuing the body in battle (\textit{Her.} 203 σώζειν τὸ σῶμα). However, being conscious of his present frailty, he threatens to fight (\textit{Her.} 232-4). Moreover, against Lycus’ insults about the old ‘having merely words’ he proves, throughout the play, to be an eloquent supporter of his cause.\textsuperscript{50} He resents failing in his rescue mission and like Iolaos he is willing to sacrifice himself (\textit{Her.} 322). In the second episode he manifests the shortness of life (\textit{Her.} 503-7 σμικρὰ μὲν τὰ τοῦ βίου,...ὁ χρόνος...διέπτατο); a reminiscence of Pheres’ words (\textit{Alc.} 693) foreshadowing at the same time Adrastos’ remarks (\textit{Suppl.} 775ff.).

In \textit{Supplices} Iphis, an image of helpless weakness,\textsuperscript{51} views geras most negatively (\textit{Suppl.} 1108-1111 ὃ δυσπάλαιστον γήρας, ὡς μισῶ σ’...μισῶ). To him ‘not dying’ (μὴ θανεῖν) or ‘not prolonging one’s life’ (ἐκτείνειν βίον) means inevitably ‘growing older’. He expresses the desire to be young twice (\textit{Suppl.} 1081 νέους δὶς εἶναι). Not because he yearns for youth in order to be able to punish his enemies or to rescue the weak, as Iolaos and Peleus did, but rather in a moral sense as a second chance to improve his lapses. (\textit{Suppl.} 1084-6...εἰ δ’ ἦμεν νέοι/ δίς...διπλοῦ βίου λαχόντες ἔξωρθούμεθ’ ἄν). Once more Euripides lays emphasis on the effect of doubling. In this sense Iphis suffers a ‘double grief’ for the death of his son \textit{and} his daughter (\textit{Suppl.} 1035 διπλοῦν πένθημ’) which explains his longing for death (\textit{Suppl.} 1105-6).

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Hec.} 621 Ἐκ...γεραιά θ’ ἕδ’ ἐγὼ μὴ ὑπὲρ τέκνων,...ὡς ἐς τὸ μηδὲν ἡκομεν,(...).
\textsuperscript{48} S. A. Barlow: 130, 137.
\textsuperscript{49} S. A. Barlow: 39.
\textsuperscript{50} Mastronarde: 292; about Amphithron’s scene see Harbsmeier: 80-84, esp. 82; see also Scodel: 131-4.
\textsuperscript{51} Mastronarde: 295.
In this spirit he devalues the existence of the elderly in favour of the young (Suppl. 1113 θανόντας ἔρρειν κἀκποδών εἶναι νέοις) by renouncing his own right to live.

Euripides in this play stresses the value of life by a gerôn-role mourning (women chorus) as well as by gerôn-roles both grieving over the loss of children and praising life (Iphis, Adrastos). Even while he mourns over his child desiring to die (Suppl. 769 συνθανεῖν) and weeping over his loneliness (Suppl. 775 ἔρημα κλαίω), Adrastos, the aged father (Suppl. 166 πολιὸς ἀνήρ), counterbalances the resigned behaviour of the old women of the chorus when he philosophises about the uniqueness of life (Suppl. 775 ff. τοῦτο γὰρ μόνον βροτοῖς/ οὐκ ἔστι τἀνάλωμ᾽ ἀναλωθὲν λαβεῖν/ ψυχὴν βροτείαν) and its brevity (953f. σμικρὸν τὸ χρῆμα τοῦ βίου‧) echoing Pheres’ words (Alc. 693). His comments are not simply a cliché; they definitely add to Adrastos’ ‘good moments’. Euripides employs hereby the theme of an aged man praising life in order to intensify the pathos of the scene.

II. The theme of escape as obliviousness of the present

If in the cases of Iolaos, Peleus and Amphitryon solely courage could compensate for geras, in Bacchae it is faith. In the following scene the old body seems temporarily forgotten. Obliviousness summoned up by Dionysiac dance numbs the ‘wound’ of old age. The scene of Teiresias and Cadmus, while they escape their present state, discusses the faith in god. Euripides focuses upon their courage to act against the restrictions of their great age.

Given that geras is a wound causing algos, it is obvious that the aged seek ways to lessen this suffering. By dancing and worshipping Dionysus, geras is forgotten (Bacch. 188-9 Κα. ἐπιλελήσμεθ᾽ ἡδέως/ γέροντες ὤντες). Of crucial dramatic importance in this play is the omnipotence of the god, who ought to be revered by everyone young and old, females and males without exceptions (Bacch. 208 ἔξι ἀπάντησαν). In this spirit the two gerontes (Bacch. 325 πολιὰ ξυνωρίς), representing

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52 Storey: 95-98, esp. 98.
54 Bacch. 190 Τει. κάνω γὰρ ἥβω κάπιστηρίσω χοροῖς, 324...καὶ χορεύσαμεν; on the scene see Diller: 371-3
55 Seaford: 167 is right in seeing in the dance of the old the all-inclusiveness of the festival.
the male participants in the Dionysiac ritual, as Seaford correctly states, will dance as servants of Dionysus, a quality still preserved in old age as the Heracles-chorus, the servant of the Muses, evidences. Their appearance while they are trembling leaning on their sticks, helping each other to keep their body upright, with Cadmus guiding at the opening of the episode and the blind Teiresias leading at the end of the scene, is undoubtedly comic. This reminds the reader that Dionysos is the god of both tragedy and comedy. It would have been even more comic if the old men would have fallen down. This is their greatest fear which, however, does not come true: this would bring dishonour upon them, not simply because of their geras but in fact because of their being tragic characters. Indeed this fear is the only element that distinguishes them from the gerontes of Greek comedy.

On the one hand Pentheus, serving with his negative reactions as an internal spectator in the dance scene of the old men, and on the other hand Teiresias, serving as an internal commentator of Pentheus at the end of the episode, mirror the true dimensions of the event. Thus the old seer diagnoses in Pentheus’ case the madness of the non-believer who defines as a wonder to be taken seriously; his laugh is to be understood, as Seaford convincingly argues, within the festive mood of the play evidencing the ‘hostility of the uninitiated’, rather than simply reduced to a comic effect. Because in taunting the dancing old couple the young king mocks at Dionysus. Contrary to scenes of Ancient and New comedy, where the

56 Seaford: 166.
57 Harbsmeier: 111.
58 On a sceptical approach of the comic element of the scene see Gregory 2000: 62, n. 18-21, 72; already Deichgräber: 327-8 mentions a 'Zwiespältigkeit des Eindruckes’ combining comic and dishonour and being Euripides’ intention; cf. Dodds: 86-87 who also doubts the comic intention; cf. Segal: 254-6, 330, 346; cf. Seaford: 167; on the metatheatrical meaning of this tragedy see Mills: 76-77, 101-2. Against this view see Seidensticker: 303-20.
59 The term εὖ φρονεῖν is a synonym of the faith in god (cf. 196, 253). Only Pentheus as a theomachos, is far from εὖ φρονεῖν.
60 Seaford: 167 stressing the rejuvenating effect of Dionysiac dance with particular reference to Pl. Laws 665-6
old were ridiculed through dancing, Cadmus and Teiresias are willing to dance, except that they do not wish to give reason to be mocked, thus literally denying the comic effect of their performance. Their self-reflection can be read metatheatrically as an underlining of the fact that they are tragic gerontes.

III. The theme of escape as anticipation of the future
While Simone de Beauvoir introduces old age as a 'state of an individual's life for which there is (...) no initiation ceremony’, Euripides stresses in the following passages the liminality of old age by focussing upon the 'notion of the threshold’, the transition to another dimension of being: a motif which is already expressed by the Homeric Laertes (Od. 24,233), who prays daily for his release (Od. 15.353-55). Euripidean aged characters differ from the living. If in Homer one can cross the boundaries to the underworld as 'a head without a soul' (Od. 521, 536, λ 29, 49), in Euripides the only thing still connecting the elderly with life is their soul – an emphasis on the limitation of human life. Thus, their physical existence seems totally diminished; their body is gone. The theme of escape is projected into the future evoking the nearness of death. The elderly are only shadows of their former selves (Her. 107-13) or faded images, living dead, fleeting dreams (Phoen. 1540-5) or remainders of human beings (El. 553ff.). They feel already as beings beyond real life. The most extensive examples are to be found in Heracles (chorus of old men) and in Supplices (chorus of old women).

In Supplices the motif of a childless geras is enacted once by women (chorus) and twice by men (Adrastos, Iphis). While to old men geras means the loss of their warrior-status and the lessening of their manhood, to childless aged women it means a complete self-alienation, the loss of their womanhood and the waste of their

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63 On the expression τέλος γήραος...θανάτοιο (Mimnermos Fr. 2, 6-7 West) cf. S. Galhac: 70.
64 Falkner 1989a: 40.
66 Phoen. 1540 Οἰδ. τί μ'; ὦ παρθένε, βακτρεύμασι τυφλοῦ/ ποδὸς ἐξάγαγες ἐς φῶς/ λεχήρη σκοτίων ἐκ τῆς φῶτος/ πολιὸν αἰθέρος ἀφανὲς εἴδωλον ἠ/ τῶν ἀνασίων νεκρῶν ἄνδρων/ μεῖζον...θανόν τεκνά/ ἔσωθαί.
67 Hel. 553 ὡς καίρη, τοῦ ποτ' Ἰλέκτρα, τὸδε/παλαιόν ἀνδρός λείψανον φίλων κυρεί; 68 Cf. Suppl. 13, 169-70, 809-10 τέκνων ἀπαίθα, 959 ἀτέκνους, 1120ff...μείζον...θνητοῖς/πάθος...τέκνα ἔσωθαί.
motherliness. Morwood in Suppl. 966-70 refers to the old women, the childless hoary mothers (Suppl. 35 πολιὰς ἄπαιδας…μητέρας τέκνων/ 100… γυναῖκες…μητέρες τέκνων) as ‘displaced’ persons, keeping themselves apart (Suppl. 970 χωρὶς), existing neither among the living or the dead ‘having some sort of fate, distinct from both’. They feel as if they were already dead (Suppl. 1141), or like fleeting clouds (Suppl. 961 πλαγκτὰ δ᾽ ὡσεὶ τὶς νεφέλα). The old women (Suppl. 9 γραῦς, 265, 275f. ταλαίνας χέρας γεραιάς) who can hardly move (Suppl. 172 μόλις γεραιὰ κινοῦσαι μέλη) are weak not because of geras but rather because of their grief for the loss of their children (Suppl. 1116... οὐ γὰρ ἔνεστιν/ ῥώμη παίδων ὑπὸ πένθους). The idea that only death could be a liberation from grief and misery (Suppl. 86 θανοῦσα τῶν δ᾽ ἀλγέων λαθοίμαν) evokes a sense of desolation.

In Heracles, at the beginning of the parodos, the chorus of old men - for which the chorus of Aeschylus’ Agamemnon serves as an example - provides a self-portrait; they are like a ‘white-haired bird’ (πολιὸς ὀρνις), namely a swan, or merely empty words or an image of a ‘night vision’ (Her. 107-115), old singers (γέρων ἀοιδὸς) walking laboriously leaning on their sticks and on each other (Her. 119-25, 126 γέρων γέροντα παρακόμιζ᾽), reminding the reader of the scene of Cadmus and Teiresias. Despite their selflessness in wishing to save Heracles’ children (Her. 254-6, 261-2...έμοι γὰρ ζῷντος οὐ κτενεῖς ποτε/ τοὺς Ἡρακλείους παῖδας) they are aware of their frailty (Her. 268-9 ὃ δεξιὰ χείρ, ὃς ποθεῖς λαβεῖν δόρυ,/ ἐν δ᾽ ἀσθενεία τὸν πόθον διώλεσας), a fact which reaches its climax with the feeling of being ‘nothing’ (Her. 312-4 εἰ δὲν σθενόντων τῶν ἐμῶν βραχιόνων/...νῦν δ᾽ οὐδέν ἐσμεν). In the first stasimon they feel imprisoned in their present weakness. That is why they indulge in memories of youth (Her. 436-41 εἰ δ᾽ ἐγὼ σθένος ἡβων/....νῦν δ᾽ ἀπολείπομαι/ τάς εὐδαίμονος ἤβας); or forgetting their tears (Her. 449-50 δακρύων...γραίας ὄσσων πηγάς). They sing in the second stasimon a hymn to youth (Her. 637-72) when they were active as warriors, exultant over Heracles’ triumphant return; nonetheless still regretting and loathing geras (Her. 649f. λυγρὸν φόνιον τε γήρας μισῶ).
IV. Conclusion

Geras – although it never features as the main theme in a play - recurring in combination with the motifs of revenge or mourning, is being deliberately used by the poet to add pathos to emotive scenes. Nevertheless Euripides does not treat geras as a sheer symbol of suffering by simply reproducing Homeric models, such as Priam and Laertes. The seeming incongruities evidenced in some of his plays are to be read in the context of his entire theatre production, which reveals a marked reversal regarding the case of geras. The earlier plays present old age in a positive way. The male heroes rebel against geras striving bravely to overcome their mortal fate by their action. Strong-willed, they justify the value of life against all expectations; not only do they desire to live (Pheres) but, what is more, they yearn to be active by selflessly protecting weaker companions (Iolaos, Peleus) and they treasure life even in their deepest grief (Adrastos, Iphis).

On the contrary, in later dramas characters occur whose life fades away and who deliberately resign themselves to a more passive state of being, realising its limitations (chorus of Supplices, chorus of Heracles, Oedipus in Phoenissae). Another shift comes about at the end of the poet’s work when geras is closely linked with religious faith (Cadmus and Teiresias in Bacchae). Hence, geras in Euripidean tragedy functions like a mirror reflecting life in its impermanence.

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77 Priam beseeches Achilles primarily as a gerôn, not as a king (Il. XXII 419-21, 515-6) moving him to pity, see Falkner 1989a: 30, 37.
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