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Euripidean *Geras* and the Theme of Escape¹

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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 (...).”²*
C. Cavafys, *Souls of Old Men*

The concept of *geras* evolves from an allegorical personification³ 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. ἀσθενῆς ῥώμη).⁴

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

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.

² ‘The Souls of Old Men’ (The Canon) by C. Cavafys, Transl. by John C. Cavafy, Poems by C. P. Cavafy, Ikaros 2003.

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 ἰσχύον) in *Phoen.* 1718-22.

about their ageing.⁵ By portraying his aged characters in their vulnerability⁶ 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’ (*Il.* IV.313-16).¹⁰ Nevertheless in Euripides’ relevant scenes the seemingly contradictory combination of courage and old age appears more stressed, given that the term *gerōn* itself becomes a synonym of weakness (*Heracl.* 636 γέροντες ἔσμεν κούδαμῶς 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.

⁵ Like Cavafy’s old man knowing ‘he’s aged a lot’ or his old poet confessing that ‘the ageing of my body...is a wound from a merciless knife’, see ‘An Old Man’ and ‘Melancholy of Jason Cleander, Poet in Kommagini A.D. 595’, transl. by E. Keeley /Ph. Sherrard, in: C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, Ed. by G. Savidis, rev. ed. Princeton UP, 1992.

⁶ On the notion of vulnerability and its relation to pathos and sentimentality see the inspiring 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 Falkner 1989a: 30; *Iliad* VII, 132-4; *Iliad* XI, 670-71.

¹¹ Cf. Teiresias’ self-portrayal in *Phoen.* Τει ...ἀσθενῆς πατήρ·.../843...ὡς ἐμὸν κάμνει γόνου,/ πυκνήν δὲ βαιῶν ἦλυσιν μόλις περῶ...852 Τει. κόπῳ παρῆμαι.

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 *Il.* 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...κάπι τέρμ' ἤκων 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. Adrastus in *Supplices* 775 ff., 953). Pheres, as a *gerôn*, that is as a 'personified 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' ὅμως γλυκύ;) thus manifesting the innate love of life (φιλοψυχία) in every human being²² – an

¹⁴ *Alc.* 711 ταῦτον γὰρ ἡβῶντ' ἄνδρα καὶ πρέσβυν θανεῖν;

¹⁵ *Heracl.* 466 Δη. τί γὰρ γέροντος ἀνδρὸς Εὐρυσθεῖ πλέον/ θανόντος;

¹⁶ On the discussion of the dramatic function scene see Riemer: 139-144, n. 328 and 329, esp. 144 who views Pheres rather as a counterpart of the chorus of old men, shifting the stress from the duel of words between him and his son; cf. Seeck 2008: 38, 149 on the ancient generation justice; cf. Seeck 1985: 102-108; see Gregory 1991: 35-36; Walton: 47-48; Lloyd 1992: 37-41; Zürcher: 34-5.

¹⁷ Murnaghan: 112-4.

¹⁸ Cf. *Alc.* 649-50...βραχύς δὲ σοι/...ὁ λοιπὸς ἦν βιώσιμος χρόνος.

¹⁹ Euripides does not seriously consider 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 ἄρ' οἱ γέροντες εὐχονται θανεῖν,/ γῆρας ψέγοντες καὶ μακρὸν χρόνον βίου·/ ἦν δ' ἐγγύς ἔλθῃ θάνατος, οὐδεὶς βούλεται/θνήσκειν, τὸ γῆρας δ' οὐκέτ' ἔστ' αὐτοῖς βαρὺ; the only conventional feature in Pheres' behaviour is that he resents a childless *geras*, a most dreadful fact.

²⁰ Thury 1988a: 206-27.

²¹ Falkner 1989a: 30; *Ilias* VII, 132-4; *Ilias* XI, 670-71.

²² *Alc.* 691 χαίρεις ὀρῶν φῶς· πατέρα δ' οὐ χαίρειν δοκεῖς;/ *Alc.* 703 ...εἰ σὺ τὴν σαυτοῦ φιλεῖς/ ψυχὴν, φιλεῖν ἅπαντας / *Alc.* 722 φίλον τὸ φέγγος τοῦ θεοῦ, φίλον;

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 ἀκλή). The chorus describes the reality by clearly expressing the ἀμήχανον, the futile effort of ever regaining youth (*Heracl.* 703 ff. τί πονεῖς ἄλλως...χρὴ γνωσιμαχεῖν σὴν ἡλικίαν,/ τὰ δ' ἀμήχαν' ἔαν· οὐκ ἔστιν ὅπως/ ἤβην κτήσῃ πάλιν αὔθις);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.* 648f.) providing a sharp contrast between Iolaos' inner strength (*Heracl.* 653) and an aged body (*Heracl.* 702-3 λῆμα...ἡβᾶ, σῶμα δὲ φροῦδον), or between actually acting and being solely willing to act (*Heracl.* 692 δρᾶν μὲν σύ γ' οὐχ οἶός τε, βούλεσθαι δ' ἴσως, 735 ὁρῶ δοκούντα μᾶλλον...)²⁸ – a technique which culminates to his rejuvenation occurring later in the play. Against the

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 τάνάλωμ' ἀναλωθὲν λαβεῖν,/ ψυχὴν βροτείαν·(...).

²⁸ On the comic tone in Iolaos' character development see Falkner 1989b: 119.

awareness of strength (ῥώμη) having definitely vanished (*Heracl.* 688)²⁹ the poet places the longing for rejuvenation, in order to create a balance of forces. Hence, in a short soliloquy (740) lolaos apostrophises his arm recalling its past strength: *Io. εἴθ' ὦ βραχίων, οἶον ἠβήσαντά σε/ μεμνήμεθ' ἡμεῖς (...)*. 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 lolaos' frailty (*Heracl.* 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 (*Heracl.* 78-79, 127-9), he is far from being passive. He has once tried to save his life by voluntarily going into exile (*Heracl.* 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, lolaos, a rescuer being himself in need of rescue (*Heracl.* 11), is determined to harm his enemies acting as an uncompromising avenger (*Heracl.* 66, 851). It is primarily due to the requirements of the plot that Euripides enables lolaos 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 lolaos and Peleus can be regarded as suffering agents.³⁶ In the first part of the play Peleus as a brave man (*Andr.* 764 εὔψυχος) 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 *Heracl.* 688 Θερ. οὐκ ἔστιν, ὦ τᾶν, ἢ ποτ' ἦν ῥώμη σέθεν.

³⁰ On the comic element in lolaos' presentation see Walton: 73-74; cf. Thury 1988b: 301.

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 (*geras* and grief), is to become *more* than mortal (*Andr.* 1255ff. ἀθάνατος, ἄφθιτος).

Peleus, who is addressed by the chorus repeatedly as a glorious veteran (κλεινός) (*Andr.* 791f., 795, 800) and is even compared to Heracles, does not deny his infirmity (*Andr.* 717 ἐγὼ καίπερ τρέμων, 754 ἀσθενῆ).³⁷ Menelaus' abusive remarks, when comparing him to a mere shadow with a voice incapable of doing anything except talking (*Andr.* 745)³⁸ 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,³⁹ but equally the power of words, as his long verbal confrontation with Menelaus reveals.⁴⁰

Furthermore Peleus is an atypical⁴¹ 'upright standing' *gerôn* (*Andr.* 761 ἡμεῖς δ' ἔτ' ὀρθοὶ κοῦ γέροντες).⁴² 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)⁴³ which shows itself by his prompt reaction to⁴⁴ the urgency of the situation (*Andr.* 552).⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ 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

³⁷ See also Lloyd: 135.

³⁸ *Andr.* 745 σκιὰ γὰρ ἀντίστοιχος ὡς φωνῆν ἔχεις, ἀδύνατος οὐδὲν ἄλλο πλὴν λέγειν μόνον; cf. *Andr.* 689 Με...σοὶ μὲν ἢ γλωσσαλγία/ μείζων, (...); on the metaphor cf. fr.509N; see also Lloyd: 141.

³⁹ His *skēptron* 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 ὦν./πολλῶν νέων γὰρ κἂν γέρων εὐψυχος ἦ/κρείσων· τί γὰρ δεῖ δειλὸν ὄντ' εὐσωματεῖν;

⁴⁴ *Andr.* 552 Πη...ἀλλ' ἀνηβητηρίαν/ρώμην με καὶ νῦν λαμβάνειν, εἴπερ ποτέ·

⁴⁵ Cf. the urgent situation in *Ion* 1041, when the old servant apostrophises his foot wishing it would become young again and swifter (ἄγ', ὦ γεραῖε πούς, νεανίας γενοῦ/ἔργοισι, κεί μὴ τῷ χρόνῳ πάρεστί 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.⁴⁷

Another old veteran, Amphitryon, in *Heracles* laments about the lessening of his strength and feels unmanly (*Her.* 41). He moans about the ills of *geras* (*Her.* 228ff.) himself being weak (ἀσθενῆ), a sheer voice (*Her.* 229 οὐδέν ὄντα πλὴν γλώσσης ψόφον) echoing the physical powerlessness already expressed by the chorus of the elderly in the *parodos*,⁴⁸ without strength (*Her.* 230-31 ῥώμη γὰρ ἐκλέλοιπεν...κάμαυρον σθένος, 'the force I once had has left me and in my old age I have shaky limbs and diminishing strength'⁴⁹), the limbs weighing heavily on him. Nevertheless, he treasures life (*Her.* 90) and as an old soldier he believes in rescuing the body in battle (*Her.* 203 σώζειν τὸ σῶμα). However, being conscious of his present frailty, he threatens to fight (*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.⁵⁰ He resents failing in his rescue mission and like Iolaos he is willing to sacrifice himself (*Her.* 322). In the second episode he manifests the shortness of life (*Her.* 503-7 σμικρὰ μὲν τὰ τοῦ βίου,/...ὁ χρόνος...διέπτατο); a reminiscence of Pheres' words (*Alc.* 693) foreshadowing at the same time Adrastus' remarks (*Suppl.* 775ff.).

In *Supplikes* Iphis, an image of helpless weakness,⁵¹ views *geras* most negatively (*Suppl.* 1108-1111 ὃ δυσπάλαιστον γῆρας, 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 (*Suppl.* 1081 νέους δις 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. (*Suppl.* 1084-6...εἰ δ' ἤμεν νέοι/ δις...διπλοῦ βίου λαχόντες ἐξωρθούμεθ' 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 *and* his daughter (*Suppl.* 1035 διπλοῦν πένθημ') which explains his longing for death (*Suppl.* 1105-6).

⁴⁷ *Hec.* 621 'Ἐκ...γεραία θ' ἦδ' ἐγὼ μήτηρ τέκνων,/ ὡς ἐς τὸ μηδὲν ἤκομεν,(...).

⁴⁸ S. A. Barlow: 130, 137.

⁴⁹ S. A. Barlow: 39.

⁵⁰ Mastronarde: 292; about Amphitryon's scene see Harbsmeier: 80-84, esp. 82; see also Scodel: 131-4.

⁵¹ Mastronarde: 295.

In this spirit he devalues the existence of the elderly in favour of the young (*Suppl.* 1113 θανόντας ἔρρειν κάκποδῶν 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 πολιοῦς 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 τάνάλωμ' 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'.⁵² 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 age⁵³. 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' ἠδέως/ γέροντες ὄντες).⁵⁴ 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 ἐξ ἀπάντων).⁵⁵ In this spirit the two *gerontes* (*Bacch.* 325 πολιά ξυνωρίς), representing

⁵² Storey: 95-98, esp. 98.

⁵³ 'Melancholy of Jason Cleander, Poet in Kommagini A.D. 595', transl. by E. Keeley /Ph. Sherrard, in: C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, Ed. by G. Savidis, rev. ed. Princeton UP, 1992.

⁵⁴ *Bacch.* 190 Τει. κάγῳ γὰρ ἠβῶ κάπιχειρήσω χοροῖς, 324...καὶ χορεύσομεν; 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,⁵⁶ will dance (*Bacch.* 365 ἴτω δ' ὄμως) as servants of Dionysus (*Bacch.* 366 δουλευτέον), a quality still preserved in old age as the *Heracles*-chorus, the servant of the Muses, evidences (*Her.* 673-5).⁵⁷

Their appearance while they are trembling leaning on their sticks (*Bacch.* 363 βάκτρου μέτα), helping each other to keep their body upright (*Bacch.* 364 ἀνορθοῦν σῶμ'), with Cadmus guiding (*Bacch.* 193) at the opening of the episode and the blind Teiresias leading (*Bacch.* 363) at the end of the scene, is undoubtedly comic. This reminds the reader that Dionysos is the god of both tragedy *and* comedy.⁵⁸ 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 (*Bacch.* 365 αἰσχρὸν) 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 (*Bacch.* 332 φρονῶν οὐδὲν φρονεῖς, 359 ἐξέστης φρενῶν, 369 μῶρα γὰρ μῶρος λέγει).⁵⁹ What Pentheus ironically defines as a wonder (*Bacch.* 248 θαῦμα) is to be taken seriously; his laugh (*Bacch.* 250 πολὺν γέλων) is to be understood, as Seaford convincingly argues,⁶⁰ 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 (*Bacch.* 286). 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 Eindrucks' 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.⁶¹ 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',⁶² Euripides stresses in the following passages the liminality of old age by focussing upon the 'notion of the threshold',⁶³ 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).⁶⁴

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.* k 521, 536, λ 29, 49),⁶⁵ 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)⁶⁶ or remainders of human beings (*El.* 553ff.).⁶⁷ 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).⁶⁸ 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

⁶¹ Against Harbsmeier: 52; cf. Mills: 38, 72-73.

⁶² Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age* transl. P. O'Brian, London 1972: 4.

⁶³ On the expression τέλος γήραος...θανάτοιο (Mimnermos Fr. 2, 6-7 West) cf. S. Galhac: 70.

⁶⁴ Falkner 1989a: 40.

⁶⁵ Falkner 1989a: 38-39.

⁶⁶ *Phoen.* 1540 Οιδ. τί μ', ὦ παρθένε, βακτρεύμασι τυφλοῦ/ ποδὸς ἐξάγαγες ἐς φῶς/ λεχήρη σκοτίων ἐκ θαλάμων οἰκ-/ τροτάτοισιν δακρύοισιν,/ πολὺν αἰθέρος ἀφανὲς εἶδωλον ἦ/ νέκυν ἔνερθεν ἦ/ πτανὸν ὄνειρον;

⁶⁷ *Hel.* 553 Ορ. χαῖρ' ὦ γεραιέ, τοῦ ποτ' Ἥλέκτρα, τόδε/παλαιὸν ἀνδρὸς λείψανον φίλων κυρεῖ;

⁶⁸ Cf. *Suppl.* 13, 169-70, 809-10 τέκνων ἄπαιδα, 959 ἀτέκνους, 1120ff...μεῖζον...θνητοῖς/πάθος..τέκνα θανόντ' ἐσιδέσθαι.

motherliness. Morwood⁶⁹ in *Suppl.* 966-70 refers to the old women, the childless hoary mothers (*Suppl.* 35 πολιάς ἄπαιδας...μητέρας τέκνων/ 100... γυναῖκες...μητέρες τέκνων) as 'displaced' persons, keeping themselves *apart* (*Suppl.* 970 χωρίς), 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).⁷⁰ The old women (*Suppl.* 9 γραῦς, 265, 275f. ταλαίνας χέρας γεραίας) who can hardly move (*Suppl.* 172 μόλις γεραία κινουῖσαι 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).⁷¹ The idea that only death could be a liberation from grief and misery (*Suppl.* 86 θανοῦσα τῶνδ' ἀλγέων λαθοίμαν) evokes a sense of desolation.⁷²

In *Heracles*, at the beginning of the *parodos*, the chorus of old men⁷³ - for which the chorus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* serves as an example⁷⁴ - provides a self-portrait; they are like a 'white-haired bird' (πολιὸς ὄρνις), 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...ἐμοῦ γὰρ ζῶντος οὐ κτενεῖς ποτε/ τοὺς Ἡρακλείους παῖδας) they are aware of their frailty⁷⁵ (*Her.* 268-9 ὦ δεξιὰ χεῖρ, ὡς ποθεῖς λαβεῖν δόρυ,/ ἐν δ' ἀσθενεῖαι τὸν πόθον διώλεσας), a fact which reaches its climax with the feeling of being 'nothing' (*Her.* 312-4 εἰ μὲν σθενόντων τῶν ἐμῶν βραχιόνων/...νῦν δ' οὐδὲν ἔσμεν). 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 ἦβων/...νῦν δ' ἀπολείπομαι/ τὰς εὐδαίμονος ἦβας); or forgetting their tears (*Her.* 449-50 δακρύων...γραίας ὄσσων πηγὰς). 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 φόνιόν τε γῆρας μισῶ).⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Morwood: 9, 35, 218.

⁷⁰ *Suppl.* 960 Χο. δυσαίων δ' ὁ βίος,/ πλαγκτὰ δ' ὡσεὶ τὶς νεφέλα/ πνευμάτων ὑπὸ δυσχίμων ἀίσσω.

⁷¹ On their mourning stance see Kavoulaki: 308-310

⁷² Cf. Harbsmeier: 102.

⁷³ On the chorus providing an example of an exaggerated theme of old age see Mastronarde: 101.

⁷⁴ Harbsmeier: 102-104.

⁷⁵ Harbsmeier: 105.

⁷⁶ Harbsmeier: 109.

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.⁷⁷ 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 *Supplikes*, 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.

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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