Sympathy for the Common in Euripides?

In *Frogs*,Euripides claims to have made his plays democratic (952), and Aeschylus’ (1071-72) and Dionysus’ (1076/7) comments that Euripides has prompted rowers to talk back to their superiors and refuse to row suggests that there was at least a common perception that the lower classes felt empowered by his plays. Indeed,Euripides’ plays are peppered with ostensibly sympathetic and respectful portrayals of poor men who maintain dignity despite their difficult circumstances (*Supp.* 871-77; *El.* 253, 262,380-82) or who are likened to χρηστοί or εὐγενεῖς, terms with strong upper-class connotations, despite their humble statuses (*Andr.* 639-41; *Ion* 834-35; fragments 336, 362.27 [cf. 362.8-9], 473, 495.41-43, 739.3, and 953.19 N2). Such depictions of noble proletarians are common enough in Euripides’ works that Dodds (1960) claims that he “may well have felt at times a deeper kinship with the intuitive wisdom of the people than with the arid cleverness of the intellectuals.”

Yet immediately following Euripides’ line in *Frogs* about the democratic quality of his plays, Dionysus retorts that democracy is not a subject on which Euripides should be expounding (*Ran*. 953). Commentators on this line speculate that Dionysus’ jab might have to do with Euripides’ supposed retreat to Macedonia (Sommerstein 1996; Dover 1993) or his oligarchic connections (Stanford 1958). However, many of his plays, upon closer examination, reveal consistent patterns that suggest that any “kinship” Euripides felt with members of the lower class was perhaps contingent in part on two main factors: their being of elite descent, and their being unthreateningly on their own, rather than in groups.

The emphasis on the farmer’s nobility in *Electra*, for example, actually says much more about the enduring benefits of good birth than the virtues that the poor can cultivate despite their circumstances. The farmer claims in the prologue that, though poor, but he descends from a distinguished family (35-38). Fragments 232 and 739 N2 further praise the ongoing value of noble birth even when the wealth that accompanied the family has disappeared. Thus the contrast between low birth and noble behavior at points in Euripides is hardly a rule, but rather seemingly a trope that is periodically useful.

Fragment 362 N2 further illuminates the attitude toward the lower classes in Euripides’ tragedies. At line 26, Erechtheus advises his son against dishonoring the honorable poor. But just preceding this exhortation, Erechtheus reveals that his recommended approach is not just respectful, but self-preserving: a person can be strangled or stabbed for trying to take sexual advantage of commoners (**δημόται**).

The sense of danger Erechtheus notes as implicit in **δημόται** is precisely what distinguishes that term from φαῦλος and πένης, which Euripides uses when referring complimentarily to common people. For all their connotations of low social class, φαῦλος and πένης, even in the plural, are not terms that any Fifth-Century author, including Euripides, uses to imply the sort of threat that people of higher classes can feel from those who are below them in wealth, and thus whom need and resentment might move to violence. But his plays of the Peloponnesian War, a time of heightened class conflict, use a preponderance of terms like **δημόται—far more than Sophocles does, and much more like Aristophanes and the Old Oligarch do—**to represent groups of non-elites who take destructive action against legitimate powers and sympathetic individuals.

It is the common soldiers, whom Menelaus calls **δημόται (*IA* 340), who force Agamemnon to sacrifice his innocent daughter.**  This same group of dangerous commoners are elsewhere in the play called an ὄχλος (450, 517, 526), one of the terms commonly used during the Peloponnesian War to refer to “the mob” (Ober 1989). This same term also describes the members of the army who demand Polyxena’s sacrifice (*Hec*. 521, 533, 605, 607, 868), the women who blind Polydorus (*Hec*. 880), the Argives that condemn Orestes (*Or*. 612, 871, 884), and the Bacchants **who rip Pentheus limb from limb (***Bacch*. 117, **1058, 1130)**. These groups are also called πλῆθος (*Hec*. 884, 1167; *Or*. 908; *Bacch.* 430), δῆμος (*Or*. 696), and οἱ πολλοί (*Hec*. 257; *Or*. 772), also common terms for “the mob.”

In short, Euripides’ plays at times do seem to show sympathy for the poor and powerless, yet such a portrayal is far from the rule. His plays often prefer their noble poor actually to be down-and-out elites, and his plays show anxiety about the power of the poor when they band together as one that is much more like that of an oligarchic sympathizer than a democrat.

Works Cited

Dover, K. J. 1993. *Aristophanes:* Frogs. Oxford.

Ober, J. 1989. *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*. Princeton.

Sommerstein, A. H. 1996. *Aristophanes:* Frogs. Warminster.

Stanford, W. B. 1958. *Aristophanes:* The Frogs. London.