Reconsidering Genre in *Rhesus*

Critics have long observed that *Rhesus* does not look like other tragedies by Euripides: the play dramatizes an entire book of the *Iliad* and that book, *Iliad* 10, is itself problematic in the Homeric canon. The Euripidean play is set at night; the characters speak bombastically; divine intervention rather than human conflict moves the play's action forward at key moments; and the meter is used differently than in other plays by Euripides. Critics like A.P. Burnett (1985) have even wondered whether there are comic elements in the play. Burnett's suggestion points in turn towards questions raised about genre in Euripides, an issue Justina Gregory (2000) explores in the essay "Comic Elements in Euripides." In that essay Gregory examines passages in plays that might be construed as comical, cautioning readers to beware of retroactively concluding that a topic that seems funny to us would necessarily have been funny in the fifth-century B.C. She writes that "…when we find a passage irritating or disruptive, incongruous or bizarre, the fault may lie not in Euripides but in ourselves" (74).

Gregory's advice regarding modern reactions to tragedy might also be inverted when looking at plays that have been labeled "tragedy" and which are then faulted for failing to adhere to modern notions about the constitution of the tragic genre. Generic categories may not have been as tight in the fifth century as either Aristotle in the *Poetics* or as modern scholarship teaches. Euripides's own *Alcestis*, first produced in 438 B.C., is a genre-defying play, sometimes called "proto-satyric" because it was offered in place of a satyr play. Additionally, Bieber (1971: 129), in a chapter on the so-called *phlyakes*, refers to a South Italian vase painting showing Dolon caught by Odysseus and Diomedes which she suggests is a parody of the story from *Iliad* 10 and the *Rhesus*. While current scholarship such as Liapis (2009) or Mattison (2014-2015) prefers to view *Rhesus* as the work of an unknown fourth-century dramatist, there may be no

need to adopt this thesis, if one refrains from forcing the extant *Rhesus* into a generic framework imagined to be standard for fifth-century tragedy. If, rather, the *Rhesus* were not seen as a substandard fifth-century tragedy, but as a play more akin to *Alcestis* or *Cyclops*, Euripides's extant "proto-satyric" and satyr play, which, in fact, it resembles in length and diction, some of the problems diminish. Actual theatrical production would provide the opportunity to test this theory and explore the hints in the text of *Rhesus* that point to its unique theatrical character. While *Rhesus* deals with an essentially serious matter, the fatal collision of two nocturnal military operations, it also uses characters that are transformed through dress or action into animal or animal-like beings (Dolon's wolfskin cloak; Odysseus and Diomedes as wolf-like raiders) and the plot is unusually concerned with the acquisition of teams of horses (those of Achilles and those of Rhesus). The boasting of a character like Rhesus recalls the self-aggrandizing claims of Silenus in *Cyclops*, and the dodgy misinformation that Odysseus gives to his enemies falls short of heroic rhetoric. Thus, even if satyrs do not appear in *Rhesus*, one might argue that in this play Euripides has substituted men disguised as animals for the usual satyrs and has involved them in the action of horse theft and horse wrangling in the middle of war, not exactly the high subject matter of tragedy; and yet he manages to have the play address questions about the nature of reality, truth, loyalty, and ethics, all topics addressed in extant high tragedy.

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