Descent from the Earthborn: The Exemplar of Erechtheus within Euripidean Tragedy

The Athenian hero Erechtheus has remained a rather mysterious figure, his explicit role historiographically muddled and partially lost because of his placement in the mythological genealogy between the autochthonous founding monarchs of Athens and the celebrated figure of Theseus. Due to the survivorship bias of available primary source material regarding his role in the self-identity of the Athenians, modern scholarship often exhibits extensive gaps and inconsistences. Only once the lens through which Erechtheus is viewed is refocused to reflect specifically how he was conceived by Athenians in their own time can a general picture of his importance to them in the fifth century BCE emerge. The aggrandizement of the cults of Athena Polias and Poseidon-Erechtheus through the construction of the Erechtheion atop the Acropolis has been discussed at length in secondary scholarship, such as through the prominent visibility of the new temple from the agora and the Panathenaic Way (Gerding 2006, 399). Nevertheless, a closer examination of the role of Erechtheus in Euripidean tragedy can allow even deeper insights into how Athenians perceived him as a moral exemplar in light of the developments of the Peloponnesian War.

One avenue to explore how the Athenians interpreted their situation during the Peloponnesian War through the myth of Erechtheus is the Euripidean tragedy *Erechtheus*. Whereas Joan Breton Connelly has recently brought attention to how the extant fragments of this drama illustrate the significance of Erechtheus within fifth-century Athenian religion and potentially in relation to the Parthenon, her specific insights into the play itself may be further examined in light of the timing of their composition (Connelly 2014, 165). Performed most likely in 422 BCE on the eve of the Peace of Nicias, *Erechtheus* portrayed the necessity of the

losses associated with warfare to maintain Athenian sovereignty (Eur. Fr. 360.1–55 = Lycurg. 1.100). In accordance with the cathartic purpose of tragedy espoused by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, Euripides called on his audience to empathize with Erechtheus's willing sacrifice of his daughter synonymously with the loss of their own sons in the decades-long conflict of the Peloponnesian War (Arist. *Poet*. 1449b.21–29). Yet, true to his nature as a voice of discontent against the expectations of the Athenians, Euripides furthermore presented *Erechtheus* as a commentary on the meaning of the Peloponnesian War itself. In the fragments of *Erechtheus* preserved within the *Florilegium* of Stobaios, the namesake protagonist fiercely denounces the committing of unjust actions and the desire for plunder in warfare (Eur. Fr. 352–54 = Stob. *Flor*. 4.13.12–13, 4.31.105). This theme must have rung true for the Athenians as a result of the questionable methods by which Athens had attained her empire, seized the treasury of the Delian League for its own building purposes, and neared committing a massacre during the Mytilenian Debate.

However, Euripides authored a vivid counterpoint to *Erechtheus* in his *Ion*. Staged circa 414–412 BCE following the destruction of Melos and either contemporaneously with or immediately following the Sicilian Expedition, this play bypassed his prior discussion of just war in order to highlight the grimmest consequences of Erechtheus's actions. The lament over the death of youth in war was transformed into an abomination, for Euripides deliberately selected the alternate version in which Erechtheus sacrificed three daughters. Rather than him grudgingly offering a single child for the sake of defending his city, Kreousa proclaims that Erechtheus "dared to slay the maidens, sacrifices for the earth" (Eur. *Ion* 278). Despite this transformation in his actions, the significance of Erechtheus as a foundational hero for Athenian identity remains a constant theme throughout the play, as descent from Erechtheus was perceived as crucial to Athenian claims to autochthony. Kreousa ultimately responds to the revelation that Ion is her son

through the lens of autochthony, declaring that "Erechtheus grows young again, and the earth-begotten house no longer looks upon night" (Eur. *Ion* 1465–1466).

Thus, the narrative of Erechtheus provided significant meaning to the Athenians in the fifth century BCE, as demonstrated by Euripides's use of his mythology to explain the realities of the Peloponnesian War. Through his position as a foundational hero, however subtle, Erechtheus not only inspired the building projects atop their Acropolis and multiple works of literature, but also conferred upon them their nickname as a people: the *Erechtheidai*. The Athenians perhaps felt no need to comment at length on their affinity toward Erechtheus outside these few sources, for to them, it was obvious.

Bibliography

Collard, Christopher, and Martin Cropp, trans. and eds. 2008. *Euripides VII: Fragments Aegeus–Meleager*. Loeb Classical Library 504. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Connelly, Joan Breton. 2014. *The Parthenon Enigma*. New York: Random House LLC.

Gerding, Henrik. 2006. "The Erechtheion and the Panathenaic Procession." *American Journal of Archaeology* 110, no. 3: 389–401.