Euripides and his prologues: a reappraisal

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Abstract

The Euripidean prologue, systematic (though not per se objective) and addressed indirectly to the audience, has had a decisive influence on European drama but has never been very popular with literary critics. This paper investigates Euripides' possible intentions with and model for this device. Its summarizing and genealogical structure, reporting on one character after another, resembles the style of the mythographical handbook which was emerging in the playwright's time. Framing his plays with narratives Euripides seems to call attention to their nature as myths, as representations of the past, rather than as 'reality'.

Keywords

Tragedy – prologue – ancient narrative – myth – Euripides.

Introduction

If there is one element of Euripidean drama which has been criticized more than appreciated, it is the prologue. In this paper I undertake a reappraisal, trying to uncover Euripides' inspiration for and intentions with this device. Before doing so I start with three introductory sections, on the form of the Euripidean prologue, its place in the history of European drama, and its evaluation by literary critics.

1. The form of the Euripidean prologue

Aristotle defines the prologue of Attic drama as the part before the entrance of the chorus.[1] In the case of Euripides this prologue consists of a speech of some 60-80 lines spoken by one speaker who is alone on stage, sometimes followed by a dialogue.[2] My discussion will focus on the first, monological part.

The prologue speech indicates where the scene is set, sketches the events which have led up to the situation at the beginning of the play, and gives some clues about

[1] Aristotle, *Poetics* 12.
[2] See Schmidt 1971, 3-11.

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the plot.[3] Prologue-speakers may be gods, protagonists, or minor characters. Sometimes they partake in the ensuing action, but often they disappear after the prologue not to be seen anymore.[4] A paraphrase of the prologue of the *Andromache* may give an idea of its typical form:

> (*past*) I once came from Thebes to Troy to marry Hector, I unhappy Andromache. I used to be enviable but now I am the most wretched of all, since I saw my husband Hector and my child Astyanax killed and have come to Greece as a slave. (*setting*) I dwell near Phthia, in the place Thetideion, as a concubine of Neoptolemus, Achilles' son, to whom I bore a son. Ever since Neoptolemus married Hermione I am persecuted, because she claims that I am making her barren. Together with her father Menelaus, she wants to kill me. (*critical present*) Menelaus is now in the palace and I have taken refuge on this shrine of Thetis. (*hint about the plot*) Neoptolemus cannot protect me and his son since he is away in Delphi trying to pacify Apollo.

The prologue-speaker Andromache offers a well-organized, clearly structured, and systematic — though not exhaustive or purely objective — introduction to setting, past and present, and plot.[5] This systematic structure will turn out to be characteristic of Euripides.

2. The place of the Euripidean prologue in the history of European drama

According to the *Vita Euripidi*, Euripides was the inventor of the monological prologue speech, but these 'biographies', though influential, are unreliable sources of information. Another ancient source, the 4th-century Themistius, credits Thespis, the 'inventor' of drama, about whom we, unfortunately, know virtually nothing.[6] A quick survey of the plays we have (which are only a fraction of what was actually

[3] General discussions on the Euripidean prologue include: Méridier 1911; Dalmeyda 1919; Imhof 1957; Strohm 1977; Erbse 1984.

[4] Protagonist: *Andr.*, *IT.*, *Hel.*; minor character: *Med., Heracl., Suppl., HF, El., Ph., Or.*; god: *Alc., Hipp., Hec., Tro., Ion, Ba.* See Méridier 1911, 68-71; Imhof 1957, 24-25; Schmidt 1971, 9-11.

[5] It has often been argued that the prologues offer a complete, objective, reliable, in short factual view of the past, see e.g. Leo 1908, 15, 23; Schadewaldt [1926] 1966, 8; Nestle 1930, 6, 23, 125-127 ('stets überwegt die blosse Erzählung'); Pohlenz [1930] 1954, 432-433 ('in bewusst nüchternem, rein sachlichem Tone'); Lesky [1956] 1972, 507; and Erbse 1984, 289 ('Die Aussagen des Prologs sind aber nicht nur sinnvoll, sie sind auch wahr'). In my view, however, the prologues are more focalized, and hence subjective and biased than would seem at first, see Méridier 1911, 68-71; Kitto [1939] 1961, 276-282; Grube [1941]1961, 67 ('It [the prologue] is not, for the most part, a mere statement of fact. The speaker displays his own emotions, and by so doing awakens our first emotional response.'); Strohm 1977; Segal 1992, 87. This topic lies, however, outside the scope of my paper.

[6] *Vita Euripidis* 8; Themistius *Oratio* 26, 316d. Themistius' suggestion is taken up e.g. by Lesky [1956] 1972, 53. Perhaps we may reconcile both ancient testimonia by assuming that the *Vita* refers to the *specific form* which Euripides gave to the prologue; cf. Leo 1908, 15; Lucas 1963, 9 ('he is the originator of the thing in its modern sense of an introductory monologue addressed directly to the audience'). The word *prologos* is first attested in Aristophanes (in connection with Euripides) and Aristotle.

written) presents the following picture.[7] Aeschylus' *Persians* and *Suppliant Women* open with a choral song, *Agamemnon* and *Eumenids* with a monologue, *Seven* and *Libation Bearers* with a speech by one speaker addressed to other persons, who do not answer, and *Prometheus* with a dialogue. Sophocles with one exception (*Women of Trachis*) opens with a dialogue. Euripides always opens with a monologue which, even if other characters are on stage (as is the case e.g. in *Suppliants*, *Heraclids*, *Hecuba*), does not address them but talks about them in the third person.

From this survey it appears that for the Euripidean monologue prologue there are (only) three parallels: *Agamemnon*, *Eumenids*, and *Women of Trachis*.[8] Upon closer inspection, however, there are major differences.[9] The two monological prologue speeches of Aeschylus are emotional outpourings rather than well-organized and systematic introductions of place, prehistory, and plot. The monologue at the opening of the *Trachiniae* does have the kind of systematic structure of the Euripidean prologue but is intended to be overheard by another character on stage.[10] What singles out the Euripidean prologue is the combination of systematic structure and absence — or non-observance — of onstage addressees.

In his earliest plays Euripides still took care to motivate his prologue monologues, by giving them the shape of *Selbstgespräche* or prayers.[11] Gradually such motivations disappear and characters simply deliver their speeches for no apparent dramatic or text-internal reason.[12] From antiquity onwards it has been suggested that the prologue-speaker is in fact (indirectly) addressing the spectators in the theatre. Thus a scholion on *Trojan Women* 36 runs: 'νῦν δὲ ψυχρῶς τῷ θεάτρῳ προσδιαλέγεται', 'now he [Poseidon] in a insipid manner speaks to the audience', and a modern scholar, Danek, writes:

> *Die in ihnen [Prologen] enthaltenene Informationen sind deutlich, ja oft überdeutlich als Informationen markiert, die im inneren Kommunikationssystem keine Funktion haben, also als Adressaten — auch wenn nie eine ausdrückliche Wendung* ad spectatores *erfolgt — das Publikum ansprechen.*[13]

[7] See Schmidt 1971.

[8] The lost play by Phrynichus *Phoenissae* also opened with a monologue, which according to Nestle (1930, 23), was the prototype of the Euripidean type of prologue. The scarcity of the fragments does not allow proving or disproving this claim.

[9] Cf. Leo 1908, 15 and Pohlenz [1930] 1954, 432. Differently Segal (1992, 88), who considers all monologue prologues as very similar.

[10] For arguments, see de Jong 2007.

[11] *Selbstgespräch: Med.*; prayer: *Suppl.*

[12] See Leo 1908, 14-26; Méridier 1911, 143-144; Schadewaldt [1926] 1966, 8-11; and Nestle 1930, 23-24.

[13] 'The information contained in them is clearly, often very clearly, characterized as information, which has no function in the internal communication, and is addressed — even if no explicit audience address is involved — to the spectators': Danek 1992, 19-20. Cf. Lessing [1767] 1963, chapter 48; Leo 1908, 25; Méridier 1911, 60-63; Schadewaldt 1926, 10; Nestle 1930, 5, 23; Pohlenz [1930] 1954, 432, 436 (*'Im Prolog wendet sich der Dichter unmittelbar an die Zuschauer'*).

In a recent paper I worked out this idea, and pointed out various linguistic and narratological elements which presuppose an addressee, which, in the absence of an onstage listener, can be no other than the spectators.[14] A clear example is *Orestes* 11-17 (Electra is speaking):

τοῦ δ' Ἀτρεὺς ἔφυ,
ὧι στέμματα ξήνασ' ἐπέκλωσεν θεὰ
Ἔρις Θυέστηι πόλεμον ὄντι συγγόνωι
θέσθαι· τί τἄρρητ' ἀναμετρήσασθαί με δεῖ;
ἔδαισε δ' οὖν νιν τέκν' ἀποκτείνας Ἀτρεύς.
Ἀτρέως δέ (τὰς γὰρ ἐν μέσωι σιγῶ τύχας)
ὁ κλεινός, εἰ δὴ κλεινός, Ἀγαμέμνων ἔφυ…

and from him Atreus was born,
to whom the goddess Eris,…, spun it
to make fight with Thyestes his own brother.
Why need I recount those obscenities?
Anyway, Atreus feasted him on his slaughtered children.
From Atreus — *I say nothing of intervening events* —
the glorious Agamemon sprang, if glorious he be…

The style which this prologue-speaker uses in telling her story, the use of a rhetorical question ('Why need I') and a metanarrative comment ('I say nothing'), points to an addressee. Likewise, when Andromache in her prologue speaks of 'this shrine of Thetis here' (Θέτιδος … ἀνάκτορον … τόδ'), the deictic pronoun τόδ' indicates that she makes a gesture, which again implies an audience for whom this gesture is intended.

The next step, prologues which *directly* address the audience, will be taken by New Comedy, e.g. Menander *Dyscolus* 1-46:

τῆς Ἀττικῆς νομίζετ' εἶναι τὸν τόπον,
Φυλήν, …
τὸν ἀγρὸν δὲ τὸν ἐπὶ δεξί' οἰκεῖ τουτονὶ
Κνήμων, ἀπάνθρωπός τις ἄνθρωπος σφόδρα
καὶ δύσκολος πρὸς ἅπαντας, οὐ χαίρων τ' ὄχλωι…
νεανίσκον τε καὶ μάλ' εὐπόρου
πατρὸς γεωργοῦντος ταλάντων κτήματα
ἐνταῦθα πολλῶν, ἀστικὸν τῆι διατριβῆι,
ἥκο]υτ' ἐπὶ θήραν μετὰ κυνηγέτου τινὸς
[ ]υ κατὰ τύχην παραβαλόντ' εἰς τὸν τόπον
[ ]. ἔχειν πως ἐνθεαστικῶς ποῶ.
ταῦτ' ἐστὶ τὰ κεφάλαια, τὰ καθ' ἕκαστα δὲ
ὄψεσθ]' ἐὰν βούλησθε — βουλήθητε δέ.

[14] de Jong 2007.

Imagine that the scene is set in Attica.
It is Phyle…
This farm here on the right is
where Knemon lives, a hermit of a man,
peevish to everybody, loathing crowds….
There is a boy
whose father is very rich and farms land here
worth many talents. This boy lives in town,
but he has come with a sportman [friend?] to hunt
and incidentally reached this very spot.
I have put him under a spell.
That is the synopsis. Now you'll see
the details, if you like: you'd better like!

We see not only the gestural deictics ('this farm here on the right') and metanarrative comments ('that is the synopsis') we already encountered in Euripides, but also a direct address to the audience ('imagine that', 'you'll see', 'you'd better like'). It is clear that such direct addresses are a breach of the dramatic illusion. More particularly, a verb like 'imagine' lays bare the make-believe or suspension of disbelief inherent in a literary work of art.

Via Seneca this kind of programmatic prologue monologue, whether indirectly or directly addressing the spectators, enters modern European drama history, for example Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* 1-31:

In Troy, *there lies the scene*. From isles of Greece
the princes orgulous, their high blood chafed,
have to the port of Athens sent their ships…
And hither am I come,
a *prologue* arm'd, but not in confidence
of author's pen or actor's voice, but suited
in like conditions as our argument,
to tell you, fair beholders, that *our play*
leaps o'er the vaunt and firstlings of those broils,
beginning in the middle, starting thence away
to what may be digested in a play.
Like, or find fault: do as your pleasures are:
now good, or bad, 'tis but the chance of war.

Here the development set into motion by Euripides has come full circle: the prologue-speaker sets the scene, sketches past and present, gives hints about the plot, directly addresses the audience ('To tell you, fair beholders', 'Like, or find fault: do as your pleasures are'), and above all makes so many metanarrative comments ('there lies the scene', 'a prologue', 'our play', 'beginning in the middle') as to leave no doubt that what the spectators are watching is a work of art, not reality.

This brief historical sketch leaves no doubt that Euripides bequeathed his type of prologue to European drama. But even if Shakespeare, Corneille, Racine, Molière, or Goethe, on occasion open their plays with a prologue-speaker,[15] they more often do not. The type of exposition via a monologue by one speaker has caught on much less than that which takes the more natural form of a dialogue between two speakers.

3. Criticism of the Euripidean prologue

Playwrights may have had many reasons to prefer the dialogical exposition to the monological, but one factor will certainly have been that the Euripidean type of prologue monologue had met with severe criticism from antiquity, indeed from his own times onwards. Critics found fault with Euripides mainly on three points: his prologue monologues are monotonous, undramatic (in that they consist of narrative), and artless, since, as playbills directed to the spectators, they break the dramatic illusion and reveal the content of the play. The following two quotations, deriving from not the least of European critics, are representative:

> *Überdies machen diese Prologe die Anfänge der Euripideischen Stücke sehr Einförmig; es hat ein grosses Ansehen von Kunstlosigkeit, dass einer herauskommt und sagt: ich bin der und der, dies und das ist bis jetzt vorgefallen, und folgendes wird geschehen.' (August Schlegel);*[16]

> *Nichts kann unserer Bühnentechnik widerstrebender sein als der Prolog im Drama des Euripides. Dass eine einzelne auftretende Person am Eingange des Stückes erzählt, wer sie sei, was der Handlung vorangehe, was bis jetzt geschehen, ja was im Verlaufe des Stückes geschehen wird.' (Friedrich Nietzsche).*[17]

In the eyes of most critics the Euripidean prologue is nothing less than an enigma: how could such a fine dramatist develop such an undramatic device?[18]

[15] Corneille *Clitandre*, *Cinna*; Racine *Esther*, *Plaideurs*; Molière *Amphitryon*; Goethe *Iphigenie auf Tauris*. For the prologues of Shakespeare, see Bruster & Weimann 2004.

[16] 'Moreover, the prologues make the opening of Euripides' plays very monotonous; it is highly artless that someone steps forward and says: I am so and so, this has happened so far, and that will follow.'; Schlegel 1802-1803, 297.

[17] 'Nothing can be more opposed to our own dramatic technique than the prologue in Euripidean drama. That one solitary character tells at the beginning of the play who he is, what went before, what has happened until now, and what will happen in the course of the play.'; Nietzsche [1872] 1895, chapter 12. See further (monotonous) Aristophanes' *Frogs* 1119-1250 and *Acharnians* 47-52; Leo 1908, 23 ('eine Schablone'); Pohlenz [1930] 1954, 432-433; Grube [1941]1961, 66; (undramatic) Nestle 1930, 27; Pohlenz [1930] 1954, 432.

[18] Meridier 1911, vii ('les prologues d'Euripide ont arrêté de tout temps, à la façon d'une énigme, la curiosité de la critique'); Murray [1918] 1965, 196, 207 ('this strange prologue'); Kitto [1939] 1961, 279 ('these most characteristic and most puzzling features of Euripidean drama').



Figure 1. Terracotta mask of Dionysos, H. 12.2 cm, 2nd–1st centuries BC, from Myrina (modernTurkey); Louvre, Department of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Antiquities (Myr 347); Wikimedia Commons

In the course of time other critics have come to Euripides' defence. Most attention has been paid to the point of his prologues giving away the plot of his plays. Here scholars have demonstrated that they do not reveal the whole plot, and even sometimes deliberately misdirect the audience, giving false clues.[19] As for the idea that narrative would be undramatic — which seems due to the all-powerful influence of Aristotle, who states in his *Poetics* (Chapter 6) that tragedy is 'a representation of an action…in the mode of dramatic enactment, not narrative' — here a spirited defence was undertaken by Gotthold Lessing:

> *Was will man endlich mit der Vermischung der Gattungen überhaupt? In den Lehrbüchern sondre man sie so genau voneinander ab, als möglich; aber wenn ein Genie,*

[19] See Méridier 1911: 77-81; Stuart 1918; Dalmeyda 1919; Pohlenz [1930] 1954: 432-433; Kitto [1939] 1961, 280-282; Grube [1941]1961, 71-73; Segal 1992, 96-97 ('mixture of suspense and prediction').

> *höherer Ansichten wegen, mehrere derselben in einem und eben demselben Werke zusammenfliessen lässt, so vergesse man das Lehrbuch und untersuche bloss ob es diese höhere Absichten erreicht hat. Was geht mich es an, ob so ein Stück des Euripides weder ganz Erzählung, noch ganz Drama ist?… Weil der Maulesel weder Pferd noch Esel ist, ist er darum weniger eines von den nutzbarsten lasttragenden Tieren?*[20]

I fully agree with Lessing that in the case of the narrative prologue, as in that of the messenger-speech which has likewise suffered from the bias against narrative in drama, critics have underestimated the potential of this mode of presentation. Moreover, it should be noted that dialogical openings also have a predominantly narrative content. The anti-illusionistic nature of the prologue, finally, has remained unacceptable to most critics, even to Lessing:[21]

> *Folglich müsste den Kunstrichtern hier eigentlich weiter nichts anstössig sein, als nur dies, dass er uns die nötige Kenntnis des Vergangenen und des Zukünftigen nicht durch einen feinern Kunstgriff beizubringen gesucht; dass er ein höheres Wesen, welches wohl noch dazu an der Handlung keinen Anteil nimmt, dazu gebracht und dass er dieses höhere Wesen sich geradezu an die Zuschauer wenden lässt…*[22]

Perhaps we may come to a better understanding of the prologue when we turn to what arguably is the heart of the matter: what induced the playwright to develop this specific type of prologue monologue? What was his model and what were his intentions?

4. The aim(s) and origin of the Euripidean prologue

Most critics argue that the Euripidean prologue functions as a kind of playbill, more in particular that Euripides being the mythographical iconoclast he is, needed it in order to inform his spectators about the particular version of a myth which he was following and about the changes he had introduced: 'Da er oft alles bisher bekannte und gewohnte umstiess, so wurden ihm dadurch die Prologe

[20] 'Why does one complain about the mixture of genres. In the handbooks one separates them as much as possible from each other. But when a genius for higher purposes combines them in one and the same work, one should forget the handbook and investigate whether he has fulfilled his high ambitions. Why should I bother whether a piece by Euripides is neither pure narration nor pure drama. Because a mule is neither horse nor donkey, is it therefore less useful an animal?': Lessing [1767] 1963, chapter 48.

[21] The first point of criticism, that of monotony, has only been contradicted in passing by e.g. Dalmeyda 1919, 125: *'Si les prologues d'Euripide donnent au premier regard, une impression de monotonie, il n'en faut pas conclure à leur uniformité'*.

[22] 'As a consequence, the judges of art should actually only take offence at one thing, that he has not tried to give us the necessary information about past and future in a more subtle way, that he uses for this purpose a higher creature who does not partake in the ensuing action, and makes this creature directly address the spectators: Lessing [1767] 1963, chapter 48. Cf. also, e.g., Nestle 1930, 5.

nothwendig…', writes August Schlegel.[23] Would this schoolmaster instinct, this 'passion for intellectual clearness and for throwing all his cards on the table'[24] really have been the motor behind Euripides' development of the prologue? The unlikeliness of this suggestion has been well exposed by Kitto:

> Euripides, we are told, innovated so freely in myth that it was necessary to warn the audience beforehand that the story was to be not quite what it might be expecting. Did then Aeschylus and Sophocles not innovate?… Even if the myth was being severely rehandled, was the audience now so lacking in wit that it could not follow a new story in the play itself, and was the dramatist so helpless that he could not make his story intelligible as he went along?[25]

A second view[26] of Euripides' intentions with his prologue is that the playwright provides his audience with a clear picture of the situation, sometimes even with an inkling of the future, in order to place it in a special position vis-à-vis the characters in the play, who lack such superior knowledge. Phaedra in *Hippolytus* does not know that she is a pawn in the scheme to punish Hippolytus, the victorious Greeks in *Trojan Women* do not know that soon they themselves are to suffer, and neither the chorus nor Pentheus in *Bacchae* knows that the Lydian stranger is Dionysus himself:

> *Lessing hat ein wesentliches Prinzip der euripideischen Prologe erkannt, das auch da waltet, wo keine Vorhersagen gegeben werden. Ich meine die stille Übereinkunft des Dichters mit dem Publikum gegenüber den unwissenden oder unbedachten Personen des Dramas. Der rechtzeitig aufgeklärte Zuschauer nimmt gewissermassen ein erhöhten Standpunkt ein, von dem er den Fortgang des Spieles mit innerer Überlegenheit verfolgen und beurteilen kann, ohne indessen sein Mitleiden mit der tragischen Verblendung des Handelnden zu verlieren.*[27]

[23] 'Since he often toppled over all that was known and normal up to then, he needed the prologues': Schlegel 1802-1803, 297. Cf. Murray [1918] 1965, 208; Stuart 1918, 295; Schadewaldt [1926] 1966, 8; Nestle 1930, 3; Pohlenz [1930] 1954, 432-436, 439; Schmidt 1971, 19-20; Lesky [1956] 1972, 53, 507; Erbse 1984, 289; Danek 1992, 20.

[24] Lucas 1963, 10-11.

[25] Kitto [1939] 1961, 279.

[26] It will be understood that the three different views here distinguished for the sake of clarity are often found together in the work of one critic.

[27] 'Lessing has recognized a crucial principle of the Euripidean prologue, which is also relevant when no prophecies are given. I refer to the silent contract between poet and public as against the unknowing or unsuspecting characters in the play. The timely informed spectator takes up a kind of elevated position from where he can view and evaluate the progress of the play with inner distance, without abstaining from pity for the tragic blindness of the acting character.': Erbse 1984, 8. Cf. Lessing [1767] 1963, chapter 48; Stuart 1918, 295; Nestle 1930, 125. A variant is the idea that Euripides wanted to start on a quiet tone, to prepare for the high-pitched emotion to follow: cf. Murray [1918] 1965, 210; Lesky [1956] 1972, 507 ('ihre nüchterne referierende, von starken Affekten freie Haltung ermöglichte in den nachfolgenden Liedern und Reden wirkungsvolle Steigerungen').

I think it is undeniable that through his prologue Euripides provides his spectators with a certain degree of superior knowledge compared to the characters, but he does not 'throw *all* his cards on the table', neither as regards his plot nor as regards the evaluation of what will follow. If this were the case we would be obliged, e.g., in the case of *Bacchae* to share completely Dionysus' view of his conflict with the Theban royal family, whereas in fact it is part of the haunting spell of this play that both parties are both equally right and wrong. In my view the prologues offer a first and important, but not an exclusive, let alone a decisive view of the play to follow.[28]

A third approach to the prologue consists in connecting it to the exodus-speech, another innovation of Euripides which has not met with great enthusiasm.[29] In these speeches at the end of a play someone, usually a god, looks back on what has happened, provides explanations, and sketches the future lives of the protagonists. Critics have argued that prologue and exodus-speech together form a kind of narrative frame which encloses the dramatic action in the middle, the part which really interested Euripides and to which he devoted all his dramatic ingenuity, centring as it does on human motivation and psychology:

> We first see a dim light travelling very rapidly over a long period of time and throwing only the high peaks for a moment in relief, then slowing down and growing brighter as it approaches the crisis which is the drama, stopping without a shock as the particular situation develops in a fierce light that illuminates the inmost recesses of the human heart. The crisis over, the light does not suddenly go out, but fades away after travelling swiftly over the future of the persons, the house or the city whose fortunes we have been following.[30]

This idea of Euripides wanting to frame his dramatic action by narratives seems to me to be a highly attractive one, and perhaps we may come closer to understanding him when we next ask ourselves from where he may have taken the inspiration for his narrative prologues and epilogues.

With reference to the prologue, scholars have suggested drama, rhetoric, or mythography as Euripides' model. According to Nestle and Lesky, Euripides in adopting the monologue form of exposition is harking back to the prologue monologues of Thespis or Phrynichus.[31] A relation with rhetoric has been advocated, for example, by Cropp:

[28] See note 5. It is clear that Erbse (1984, 290; my italics) indeed sees the prologue as an infallible, authorial instruction to the spectators on how to understand the play: 'Der Interpret, der bei Betrachtung des jeweiligen Dramas *den Standpunkt des Dichters* zurückgewinnen möchte, darf die Mitteilungen des Prologs nicht anzweifeln, nicht kritisieren oder gar durch Ironisierung verwässern'.

[29] See Dunn 1996, 42.

[30] Grube [1941] 1961, 63. Cf. Pohlenz [1930] 1954, 434-439, esp. 439 ('Bei Euripides wurde der Mythos zum Rahmen für die eigene Geschichte'); Kitto [1939] 1961, 278-287; Imhof 1957, 29-30, 42; Danek 1992, 35-37; Dunn 1996, 76-83.

[31] Phrynichus: Nestle 1930, 23; Thespis: Lesky [1956] 1972, 53.

> Euripides sacrificed dramatic illusion and employed techniques commonly used in political and law-court speeches for presenting the background to a case: simple narration of the facts in a chronological order, clear suggestions as to motives, deftly applied ethical colouring.[32]

Finally, there is the suggestion that Euripides acts like a mythographer:

> *Er [Euripides] liebt die kritische Distanz des 'So sagt man', gibt Hinweise auf Beginn und Einhalt der Erzählung, verfährt also wie ein ionischer Logograph mit seinen* muthoi *und* genē.[33]

Of these three suggestions I am most attracted to the third one, and would like to work it out a little further.

The prologue narratives are in narratological terms summaries, i.e. they cover a long time span within a short compass. In so doing they often display a combined chronological and, as I would like to call it, genealogical structure: the speaker moves, broadly speaking, from past, via present, to future, reporting on one character after another (who may or may not be family), i.e. pursuing the life of X wholly, or up to a certain point, before turning to Y. A clear example is the prologue of the *Electra* (I paraphrase):

> *Agamemnon* went to Troy and upon his return was killed by Aegisthus. After his death *Orestes* was saved by his tutor and fled to Phocis, *Electra* stayed in the palace, was nearly killed by Aegisthus but saved by her mother Clytemnestra. Aegisthus has now set a price on the head of *Orestes* and married *Electra* to the prologue-speaker.

We see how the prologue-speaker deals first with Agamemnon, then with his children Orestes and Electra in the past, and then with Orestes and Electra in the present. Later prologues even — notoriously — contain straight genealogies, e.g., *Helen* 4-22:

> Proteus, while he lived, was king of this land [Egypt]. He married Psamathe, one of the maids of the water, when she had left the bed of Aeacus. In this house she bore two children, a boy named Theoclymenus and a fine maiden called Eido… As for me, glorious Sparta is my homeland, Tyndareus my father…, and Helen is my name.

Interestingly enough, the same genealogical structure may be observed in exodus-speeches, e.g. *Helen* 1642-79, where the *deus ex machina* Castor successively deals with — the future lives of — Theoclymenus, Theonoe, Helen, and Menelaus (I paraphrase):

[32] Cropp 1988, 98. Euripides' style has, of course, in general been connected to the rhetoric of his time. For a lucid overview, see Allan 2000, 118-126.

[33] Schmidt 1971, 34-35. See also Méridier 1911, 54-59; Nestle 1930, 5.

> *Theoclymenus*, stop being angry. You were not fated to be married to Helen all the time. Your sister *Theonoe* was acting rightly, so do not kill her. Those are my words to you. To *my sister* [Helen] I say: go home with your husband. After your death you will become a goddess. As for *Menelaus*, he will live on the Island of the Blest.

We see how a metanarrative comment ('Those are my words to you. To my sister I say') makes explicit the genealogical structure, the presentation of different biographical storylines one after another.[34]

Where did Euripides take this type of summary narrative with genealogical structure from? My suggestion is that he may have been influenced by the genre of the mythographical handbook, which emerged in his time. In a recent paper Fowler, who compiled an edition of the early mythographers, set out the main characteristics of their narrative style, and came up, among other things, with exactly summary and genealogy.[35] He also suggests explicitly that such early mythographical texts may have been used by dramatists, especially by the bookish Euripides (cf. Aristophanes *Frogs* 943 and 1409).[36] If Fowler is right to claim that Euripides used mythographical handbooks, we may have found in them the model for his innovative, riddling, and poorly appreciated prologues.

To back up this idea I quote an excerpt from the 6th-century mythographer Pherecydes, which can be well compared with the — opening part of the — prologue of Euripides' *Helen*:

> Creon gives Oedipus royal power and the wife of Laius, his own mother Jocasta, out of whom are born Phrastor and Laolutos, who die through the Minyans and Erginos. After a year has passed, Oedipus marries Euryganeia, daughter of Perifas, out of whom are born for him Antigone and Ismene, whom Tudeus kills near a spring and for this reason the spring is called Ismene. The sons for him with her are Eteocles and Polyneices. After Euryganeia has died, Oedipus marries Asrymedousa, daughter of Sthenelos. (95, ed. Fowler)

Of course there are also important differences, the most important being that prologue speeches feature internal narrators, i.e. narrators who are themselves involved in the events, whereas mythographers use external narrators. As a result, prologue narratives have a much more personal and subjective tone. But the point I want to make is that Euripides in developing the very characteristic, systematic, chronological-genealogical structure of his prologue monologue may have been inspired by the emerging mythographical handbook.

So much by way of conclusion. I would like to end by making one final, tentative suggestion. Throughout Euripidean drama we come across characters speaking

[34] Cf. e.g. *El.* 14-19 'as for those he left in the house, Orestes and Electra, him…, her…'.
[35] Cf. Fowler 2006, 40 on summary, and 42-43 on genealogy.
[36] Fowler 2006, 40.

about myths: there are the stories told at the loom in *Ion* 196-7, the age-old legends in *Electra* 701, the hymn on Heracles in *Heracles Furens* 673-86, the tablets of the Muses in the *Iphigeneia in Aulis* 797-800, the writings of the ancients in *Hippolytus* 451, and also the mythical subjects on the temple of Delphi in *Ion* 190-218, the *peplos* of Athena in *Hecuba* 466-74 or the shield of Achilles in *Electra* 452-75. This highlighting of the existence of myth qua myth seems typical of Euripides. Thus when Sophocles lets his chorus present a myth they simply embark on telling it ('The fair Danae too endured separation from heaven's light in a bronze dwelling': *Antigone* 945-6), while Euripides — often — has them explicitly comment that they are telling a myth ('The tale in our age-old legends has it that Pan once brought down a golden lamb': *Electra* 699-705). In my view the mythographical frame formed by prologue and exodus-speech should be seen in the same light. By means of this frame Euripides flags the nature of his plays as myths, as *art* rather than reality.[37] Not every critic has appreciated this move (though playwrights like Menander and Shakespeare followed his example), but we owe Euripides at least an attempt to detect his model and understand his motives.

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[37] Cf. e.g. Goldhill 1986, 247; Segal 1992, 107.

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