

## Fathers and Sons on the Athenian Tragic Stage

This paper surveys theatrical deployment of fathers and sons *together* on stage, whether confronted with deadly consequence for either (or both) or otherwise in painful, pitiable demonstration of how far it is true—not far at all—that “Father Knows Best.”

Father-son relations among ancient Greeks and Romans generally (Bertman 1976) and at 5<sup>th</sup>-century Athens in particular (Strauss 1993) have been studied with dramatic texts primarily as sociological evidence, including Comedy Old (*Wasps*, *Clouds*) and New (passim, especially in Roman adaptation). Often generational conflict is front and center, as indeed it is in those plays of Aristophanes just named. That can be funny. Son beating father!

This, however, is never the case in tragedy. Conflict or other *pathos* has personal motivation, frequently owing to a third party. Ever at stake is the unsymmetrical dependencies upon each other of fathers and sons. The former need male progeny for propagation of their seed/blood/race beyond their own lifetimes, while the latter owe their very lives and, though childhood and adolescence, their security to their begetters. Tragedy for them is “a matter of life and death.”

In fact, the only father who knows better than his son is Xerxes’ ghostly sire Darius in *Persians*, where the “Great” king’s *eidolon* and his humiliated grown-up son do not appear together; indeed the same actor plays both.

Several times sons are *very* young and indicate no minds of their own. Only their physical presence matters. Adult fathers’ motives and deeds display fire ignorance or disastrous judgment.

Confrontations in Sophocles: Creon versus Haemon over the latter’s decree and death sentence of Antigone; Heracles versus Hyllus over the fates of Deianeira and Iole; Oedipus at

Colonus versus Polyneices. Within (telescoped) hours Haemon, after missing a lethal lunge at his father, will have killed himself, Polyneices will be slain by his brother in a day or two. In Euripides: Theseus versus Hippolytus over Phaedra's suicide and the young man's way of life; Creon versus Menoeceus over the latter's sacrifice for the survival of their city; and possibly, if we may count Apollo *addressed*, not merely apostrophized, as present, visibly perhaps in a statue, at least invisibly in his precinct, versus Ion over the god's violation of Creusa, over Ion's begetting, raising, and supposititious insertion as Xuthus "son"; even, though subtler and less explicit because the boy's singing role is brief, Admetus versus his *pais* (Eumelus) over impact and longer consequence of Alcestis' death.

Also to ponder: father who leaves vulnerable son in a precarious position (little Eurysaces, left, like his mother Tecmessa, among potentially murderous enemies); fathers whose grievous offenses against women lead to guiltless sons' slaying (cad Jason whose treachery provokes Medea's horrendous infanticide, avaricious Polymestor whose murder of Hecuba's son provokes her atrocities); and father who, divinely deluded, *thinks* he is killing innocent sons and wife of a *would-be deadly* enemy, but actually slays his *own*—whom, bitterer irony yet, Heracles has just rescued from mere liquidation by a dastardly tyrant.

Finally, we note the intense scene in posthumous *IA* with all four figures in tragedies of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra: supplicant oldest child Iphigenia, whose imminent sacrifice precipitates both parents' dooms, and quasi-suppliant youngest, baby Orestes, whose eventual matricide brings those tragedies to closure—assuring his own).

Spectacular effects, typically in *exodos* sequences: delivery of Haemon's corpse with his devastated father; carting off of agonized Heracles before his anguished son exits, who has the famous last words; a *pietà* of Theseus holding his bloodied dying, forgiving son; Oedipus seated

unmoved, statue still, on the edge of the Erinyes' precinct; absence of (Eumelus) and his little sister from the "happy ending" of *Alcestis* (Dyson 1988); suppliants-like tableau of infant Eurysaces, hugged by his silent mother by his father's corpse; Jason, who has not appeared with his *living* sons, below Medea in the chariot of Helios as she holds up whatever represented their dead little bodies (in the Mistress of Animals stance?); Polymestor, rolled out with bloodied mask beside his two little son's corpses, whence he crawls, animal-like, whither he hopes he can catch the soon-to-be-howling bitch who organized their killing, his blinding; and comatose Heracles, collapsed, by a dead woman and three little bodies (fletched arrows projecting from them?) and an architectural fragment of the house, physical and dynastic, that he has just ruined.

A notional tragic "day" is no Father's Day. Consider *OT*'s ending and aftermath.

#### Works Cited

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