

EURIPIDES

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Introduction *Terror and Instruction from the Woman Scorned.* In 431 B.C., the year of the first production of *Medea*, the meteoric cultural development of the Athenian democracy was at its fervent height. The first histories are being written, philosophers abound, the Parthenon has just been constructed; a new world, for mind and society, is in the making. While Aeschylus, in the *Oresteia*, creates a founding myth for a venerable social institution, the law system, Euripides (in his more than twenty preserved plays) regularly reaches out, often melodramatically, to more personal issues—the to the underprivileged or passion-driven in his society. (While remaining within the dramatic stagecraft conventions of his colleagues, he brings something like a ‘sociological’ insight to bear on his themes.) The story of Jason and Medea opens unfamiliar vistas to the Athenian playgoer of the time. Medea, hailing from distant Colchis, exposed the quite provincial Athenian to a representative of a foreign and (as it was thought) barbaric culture. Her passion and violence whipped up a frenzy of fascination, as she flew off in her fiery chariot. But more intensely riveting yet was the way Euripides respected the world and needs of woman, as embodied in Medea. While Aeschylus tended to think and create on a symbolic level, moving high themes in lofty directions, Euripides descended to issues of daily life with its burdens of injustice and insensitivity.

The new turn in tragic drama. You will note that the life and work of Euripides (485-406 B.C.) overlap the work of both Aeschylus and Sophocles. You will also notice the startling difference in Euripides. We will read three of his dramas—should we call them melodramas?—this week, and will rapidly grasp the new turn given to the tradition by this prolific dramatist, of whom fate has left us nineteen plays.

The historical setting again. All that we have said of the setting of Sophocles and Aeschylus—those second half of the century geniuses—belongs in spades to the ambient culture of Euripides. The Sophists are important. These teachers of wisdom—including public thinkers and discussers like Protagoras and Gorgias—were of great influence in the second half of the fifth century. Why were these figures needed and turned to, and what did they offer? We have seen that there is a tradition of question-asking in Milesian philosophy, and that that tradition burgeons richly into the work of Plato. The Sophists were perpetual raisers of questions, and often underminers of traditional belief. Euripides was very alert to these voices. We have noted that, in connection with the recitation of the Homeric epics there was a tradition of itinerant bards, public reciters who drew public crowds around them. By the fifth century Athens was itself ready for public discussion in every sense. There was a buzz on the streets. With the advent of a democratic polity, in the early fifth century, the energy of public outdoor life grew vibrant in Athens—especially around the central Agora or market place, the Theater of Dionysus, and the Law Courts, not to mention the sacred sites on the Acropolis. In all of these senses Athenian culture was being freed up into a passion for ideas and discussion. The Sophists, ultimately lethal foes of Socrates, were natural components of this social ferment. And into this fermenting cultural matrix Euripides emerged, writing dramas in great numbers, touching on ‘melodramatic passions,’ raising controversial issues, striking a ‘modern’ tone.

Themes

The Medea. (431 B.C.) You will see at once that Medea—a slice, of course, from the rich archive of mythical material available to every Greek writer—is par excellence two things typically minimized in fifth century Greek culture: first, a *foreigner*, second, a *woman* who is fully invested with women’s needs and attitudes. (Would you say the same of Antigone, or of Cassandra in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*?) Brought back to Greece from the exotic East, and by a conventional and deceitful mainstreamer, Jason, Medea finds that her marriage and her children have been supplanted by a new bride, and her own exile. She takes the terrible revenge you are to read

about! Et voilà! What has changed here, from Aeschylus and Sophocles? The outsider has been drawn into the Hellenic dialogue, with fierce consequences. We are growing away from the still nobility of the archaic classical posture—and Euripides is taking us there.

The Hippolytus (429 B.C.) The intricacies of jealousy, insinuation, betrayal of innocence, melodramatic finale—all these elements of pop psychology become the raw material of this 'modern' drama, which bathes in the questioning, discussion-rich atmosphere of a literary culture which is conspicuously public. As in the *Medea*, Euripides penetrates, here, into the feelings which undergird those *ritual/mythical* behaviors which were the stock of epic, and of the two tragedians we have studied before Euripides. The fixed world of myth has been opened out to reveal the boiling humanity myth was initially created to temper.

The Bacchae (405 B.C.) The Athens of the end of century was concerned not only with the new importance of women and foreigners, the foreign in general, but with psychologically 'modern' modes of feeling, emotional experimentation and quest, and passion breaking out from the mythical mold—where it is confined in the cases of Cassandra, Clytemnestra, or Antigone—square into the midst of Greek society. Pentheus, of course, is the perfect middle class bureaucrat foil against which to read the unlicensed and uncontrollable fury of the Bacchantes, exaggerated representatives of a strain of the demonic, which lurks throughout Greek culture, even when what we most expect is form and reason.

Characters

Euripides is credited with introducing new human realism into the drama. He takes an interest in marginalized types like Hippolytus, women driven to excess, like Medea, women meditating and undertaking the issues of self-sacrifice, like Alcestis, prurient bureaucrats like Pentheus, who get sucked into the vortex of violent life as it is, or god-figures, like Dionysus, who are quixotic, volatile, and extremely dangerous.

Euripides marks a new turn, for Western literature, into the sociological imagination; that is, he probes, in drama, into the settings and conditions that make people what they are. Hippolytus, for example, is a regular in a princely male hunting culture, and in that rarified environment we need to imagine him, as we try to understand the virulence with which he repels his stepmother's advances. Does he dislike women? The question is irrelevant. He lives and breathes in terms of the values of a sub-culture.

Medea is not just a woman scorned, but a woman scorned with a setting. She is from a Black Sea region famed among the Greeks for its magical practices and exotic culture. (Not only were the fifth century Greeks parochial, but they were ill informed). Euripides exploits the cultural buzz of his time, in dramatizing Medea.

Alcestis is a woman who is forced back onto her consciousness, by her husband's search for a surrogate, who will die in his place. She is eventually freed from the death she accepts, but not without having proven the heroic fruits of her difficult reflections.

Pentheus is a middle class bureaucrat-administrator, who takes it onto himself to investigate the orgies of Dionysus, which are causing calamity in his city. Because he has a dirty mind—he is a bureaucrat—he plunges into investigation, getting swallowed up and destroyed by the new force in town.

Dionysus, the divinity who comes to Thebes, to turn Pentheus' city upside down, is no figure of Olympian myth, stable and ritualized, but a creation of Euripides' fierce imagination, an externalization of the audience's (and our own) libidinal deep selves. In this creation, above all, Euripides reaches into the deep places of the self, in order to generate a major dramatic figure.

Reading

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 1. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*
--*Medea, Book 1, pp. 999-1043.*

Ten Plays by Euripides, translated by Paul Roche (New York, 1998). (Our assignment will be to read the three plays discussed in this week's syllabus.)

Discussion Topics

We are struck, from the start, by Euripides' attention to women and their psychology. We have seen powerful and fascinating women in Aeschylus and Sophocles—Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Antigone—but these characters are driven and one-dimensional, whereas Euripides' women (*Medea*, *Andromache*, *Phaedra*) are women in an historical situation, trying to cope, as we might say. This seems a clear case of Euripides wanting to bring everyday reality onto the stage? Am I right here? Or not?

Theme: Justice - Discuss the theme of justice in *Oresteia*. What does the *Oresteia* suggest about codes of punishment? How is the chorus used to establish some kind of moral/social code? What does the play do to stop the cycle of revenge?

Theme: Clytemnestra - Why does Clytemnestra seek revenge against her husband? Does her relationship with Aegisthus contaminate her motives? How does she attempt to justify action? What is the meaning of having masculine qualities ascribed to her?