

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

## EURIPIDES

(480 B.C.E.—406 B.C.E.)

### **Works. (extant dramas)**

*Alcestis.* 438. B.C.E  
*Medea.* 431. B.C.E  
*Heracleidae.* 430. B.C.E  
*Hippolytus.* 428. B.C.E  
*Andromache.* 425. B.C.E  
*Hecuba.* 424. B.C.E  
*The Suppliants.* 423. B.C.E  
*Electra.* 420. B.C.E  
*Heracles.* 416. B.C.E  
*The Trojan Women.* 415. B.C.E  
*Iphigeneia in Tauris.* 414. B.C.E  
*Ion* 414. B.C.E  
*Helen.* 412. B.C.E  
*Phoenician Women.* 410. B.C.E  
*Orestes.* 408. B.C.E  
*Bacchae.* 405. B.C.E  
*Iphigeneia at Aulis.* 405. B.C.E  
*Rhesus* ?  
*Cyclops.* ?

### **Biography**

Euripides was traditionally said to have been born on Salamis Island around 480 B.C.E. (The word 'traditionally' should be taken seriously. The sources of ancient literary biographies are various—folklore; parody in the works of other writers; autobiographical hints in the works of the author himself: the result being at best a fragmentary and weakly supported biography.) His parents were—and we follow the tradition here—Cleito (mother) and Mnesarchus (dad) who was a retailer living in a village near Athens. When Euripides' father learned, from an oracle, that his son was destined for 'crowns of victory,' he decided that the young man should be trained as an athlete. The fact was that Euripides was destined for a career as a dramatist, where he won five crowns of victory in the course of his career. He served for a short time as both dancer and torch-bearer at the rites of Apollo Zosterius; he also studied painting and philosophy under the tutelage of the masters Prodicus and Anaxagoras. (These fragments of biographical information enable us to reimagine, here, a man of wide humane curiosity, and talent to match his imagination.)

On the level of his personal life, Euripides is said to have had two bad marriages; both his wives—Melite and Choerine (the latter bearing him three sons)—were unfaithful. He withdrew from society, becoming a recluse, and went to live in a cave on Salamis—one recognizes here a folklore motif, common to literary or spiritual figures in many world cultures. "There he built an impressive library and pursued daily communion with the sea and sky." (Remember Sophocles' Philoktetes, in his cave on the island of Lemnos.) Eventually Euripides retired to the "rustic court" of King Archelaus in Macedonia, where he died in 406 B.C.E. (In other words, his life span coincided with the Persian Wars, the mid-century summit of Greek democracy, and the Peloponnesian Wars, though he did not live to see the final defeat of Athens, 404 B.C.E.)

## **Achievements**

**Technical innovation** Euripides was not in the position, as were Aeschylus and Sophocles, of making fundamental innovations in tragedy—modifications of the number of actors, or the place of the chorus in the action. For Euripides these large-scale logistics of drama had been settled, earlier in the century, by his two great predecessors, and there was now an opportunity to stabilize and fine tune the achievements of Aeschylus and Sophocles. On the technical level this enabled Euripides, who had the sharpest of ears for contemporary Greek, to plumb such enrichments as the use of everyday speech in dialogue, intimate and prolonged emotional rants, and dance and costume innovations; all of which united, by the time of the later *fourth* century B.C.E., to render Euripides the most popular of the Greek tragedians.

**Thematic and dramaturgic innovation** In 431 B.C., the year of the first production of *Medea*, the meteoric cultural development of the Athenian democracy was at its 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 slightly fewer than twenty preserved plays) regularly reaches out, often melodramatically, to more personal issues—to the underprivileged, *The Suppliants*, passion-driven, *Medea*, or self-destructive (*Hippolytus*) in his society.

**Sociological insight** Of special importance, in this new social optic of Euripides, is his attention to women as dramatic protagonists. In at least eleven of Euripides' remaining plays, women (or groups of them, like 'the Trojan women,' are protagonists, meaning that their sufferings, anxieties, or victimizations constitute the play's essential theme. The same point applies to the treatment of slaves on stage, in Euripides. Female slaves are characterized with dignity and in detail, while slaves in general are displayed in the bright light of day—given attitudes, humors, strategies as instrumental as those provided for the dramatic protagonists.

## **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

*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?