Greece and Environs

Introduction

Euripides

Euripides' life spanned most of the fifth century B.C. He was born in the latter part of the 480s (ancient sources record both 485/4 and 480 as dates for his birth) and died in 406. He was an Athenian. His father, named Mnesarchos or Mnesarchides, and his mother Cleito were from the Attic deme Phyla. It seems as if the family was reasonably well off and Euripides himself perhaps rich. Nothing reliable is known of his youth, but it is safe to assume that he received a traditional education, being schooled in letters, music and athletics. In 455 he produced his first plays, the title of one of which we know, the *Peliades* ("daughters of Pelias"). At this time Aeschylus, the most renowned playwright of the early years of the century had just died (in 456) and Sophocles (ca. 496-406/5), was already well established as a tragic poet. Euripides did not win first prize at the festival that year and had to wait until 441 before he took that honor. In fact, Euripides, although very often awarded the honor of putting on plays at the Athenian dramatic festivals, was victorious only four times in his career, and once posthumously. He composed about ninety plays, and on occasion he also wrote in other genres. Near the end of his life he left Athens and moved up north to the court of Archelaos, king of Macedonia, and there he died.

As in the case of all ancient Greek poets, we have little information about Euripides, and much of this is not very reliable. In addition to the information given in the brief sketch above, ancient sources preserve many anecdotes about the poet. Many of these stories, however, are of dubious historical validity; often the plays themselves and the traditions of contemporary comedy are the source for these tidbits about the personal traits and habits of the poet. But although there is much fiction in the biographical tradition, too skeptical an approach is unwarranted. From the ancient traditions and their half-truths a certain picture of the poet begins to emerge, even if the details are blurred. Euripides is said to have owned a library, and this in an age of few books. It is reported also that he had a cave on Salamis where he could avoid the crowd and that he was often lost in thought. The stories about Sophocles, themselves exaggerated and even apoc-

ryphal, suggest an ideal citizen, active in the social, religious, and military life of Athens. This picture of Sophocles and the contrasting one of Euripides were very possibly drawn in caricature in order to highlight the differences between the two men, but it seems unlikely that the differences were invented from whole cloth. The ancient sources seem to suggest that Euripides was something of a loner (although we need not assume a misanthrope), who was more caught up than his contemporaries in the intellectual movements of his age.

Athens was experiencing its most exciting and stimulating era. In fact, Euripides' life is virtually framed by the rise and fall of Athenian pre-eminence. The year 480 is given as one of the dates for his birth perhaps because of the ancient predilection for linking together important events, in this case the birth of the poet Euripides and the battle of Salamis. At this battle the Greek navy defeated the Persians, and, although hostilities between the two powers continued, this signaled an end to the threat of Persian attempt to dominate Greece. The victory not only freed Greece from the decades-old threat of Persian rule but helped to establish the dominant role of Athens in Greek affairs, for it was the Athenian naval initiative, led by Themistocles, which drove back the Persians. What this victory over the Persians guaranteed and what the Athenians valued so dearly was freedom. Athens had recently cast off its own tyrants and was ruled by a democracy, which became even more democratic as the century progressed. There continued to be supporters of oligarchy in Athens, but they did not hold sway. An important consequence of the prominent role of Athens in the Persian defeat was the great confidence it inspired, confidence which strengthened and characterized the city-state for most of the century. Freedom of speech was part of this confidence and of Athenian democracy. Thought of by Athenians as their privilege, this freedom helped create the environment hospitable to the great intellectual achievements of this age. In some ways Athens remained a conservative community, and trials for impiety (the most famous being that of Socrates in 399) are recorded. But Euripides, Sophocles, the comic poet Aristophanes (ca. 445- ca. 385) and others worked in a city which permitted and in no small part fostered their genius. It is difficult to imagine the *Heracles* being written and produced in the more constricting environment of Sparta or Corinth.

Over the next fifty years after the defeat of the Persians Athens would become the most powerful city-state in the Greek world and, perhaps inevitably, the most ambitious and feared. This so-called "golden age" of Athens came to an end when Sparta, the other leading city-state of the Greek world, and her allies went to war with Athens and her allies, in the Peloponnesian War. As the contemporary historian Thucydides wrote in his account of the war (1.23), "I consider that the truest cause [of the war], although most concealed officially, was that the Athenians, by becoming powerful and causing fear to the Spartans, compelled them to war." Hostilities had flared before between these two powers earlier in the century, but this war was on a much greater scale. With some interruptions the war went on from 431 until the defeat of Athens in 404, shortly after Euripides' death.

However shortlived Athens' dominance would prove to be, its accomplishments during this period can not be ignored. Like Paris and New York in later ages, Athens was the center of artistic and intellectual activity for the Greek world, producing and attracting the leading practitioners of the various arts. The confidence and political leadership following the Persian Wars contributed to this in no small measure. Under the leadership of Pericles, an extraordinary building program was undertaken on the acropolis, culminating in the erection of the magnificent temple to Athena, the Parthenon, which showed off Athenian excellence in architecture and sculpture. (This and other ambitious projects were aided by money collected from the so-called Delian league, which was formed originally as an alliance against the Persian threat but was eventually based in and exploited by Athens.) Vase painting, depicting domestic and mythological scenes alike, reached its acme in this period and had its finest workshops in Athens. Athens was also the "home" for tragedy and comedy, the two most important literary genres of the age.

Very important for Euripides' career was the contemporary intellectual movement, named after a group of men collectively referred to as the sophists. This group of men, Protagoras, Anaxagoras, and Prodicus among them, did not constitute a "school" but were individuals who toured Greece and in many instances resided in Athens for long periods. They were teachers, offering instruction in a wide variety of topics, from astronomy to rhetoric. Much of their teaching was aimed at practical knowledge which would help their students be successful at whatever they did. Rhetoric played a large a role in their instruction in part because in a democracy the ability to speak well and sway public opinion, whether in the law court or the assembly, was crucial for success. But some of their teaching was in more theoretical areas such as epistemology and theology. Some idea of the sophists' intellectual concerns may be gleaned from a few quotations. Protagoras wrote, "About the gods, I am not able to know whether they exist or not nor what form they have. For many things impede this knowledge, the obscurity [of the issue] and the shortness of a human's life" (frag. 4). And, again, "Of all things a man is the measure, of those that are, that they are, and of those that are not, that they are not" (frag. 1). These fragments give a brief glimpse of the

fundamental nature of some of the sophists' inquiries. And man is placed at the center of the inquiry. We can also see their keen interest in rhetoric in a statement made by another sophist, Gorgias: "Speech is a great ruler, which with the smallest and least manifest body accomplishes divine deeds" (*Helen* 8).

Euripides is linked to these thinkers in the biographical tradition: the three men mentioned above were said to have been his teachers (the biographers' was of saying "there is a connection between"), and Socrates is recorded as his friend. Also his plays reflect the influence of these and other contemporary thinkers. Euripides was not the only playwright to be influenced by these contemporary thinkers: Sophocles and the author of *Prometheus Bound*, for example, also can be seen responding to the ideas and questions of these men. But Euripides, the ancient biographies reported, and his plays seem to reveal, was more influenced by them. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he was more concerned with the issues with which they too were concerned. Rhetoric, at times self-conscious, is more prominent in his plays than in those of Aeschylus and Sophocles. And questions of the gods and divine justice are at the forefront of several of his plays, as we see, for example in *Heracles*, *Hippolytus*, and *Bacchae*. Stories of Euripides being charged with impiety may well be apocryphal, but they reflect the discomfort which some Athenians may have felt at his frequently disturbing plays.

Although only mildly successful in his own time, Euripides' works became very popular after his death, in part because his interests prefigured those of later ages. (In fact, Euripides is often thought of as the most modern of the three tragedians.) His plays were frequently performed and their texts often reproduced. Owing to his later popularity and a stroke of good fortune, many more plays of Euripides survive than of Sophocles or Aeschylus. Eighteen genuine plays (plus the probably spurious *Rhesus*) are found in the manuscripts, the oldest one of which containing all these plays dates from the early fourteenth century. We have, in other words, almost a full fifth of the poet's total dramatic output, compared with, for example, about six percent of Sophocles' plays. Ten of these plays (including the *Rhesus*) derive from the gradual process of selection, a process which took place also for Aeschylus and Sophocles, which culminated in these ten in about 200 A.D.; these are the often called the "select plays". The other plays survive by chance from what was once a complete edition of Euripides; the *Heracles* is one of these plays. Thus we have plays of Euripides which were not subject to the tastes and decision making of later antiquity. Since these all come from the same section of the alphabet, they are called the "alphabetic plays". In addition to these plays which are preserved in full, many fragments

from other plays survive (more than in the case of the other two tragedians).Often of considerable size, these fragments, in conjunction with *hypotheseis*, ancient plot summaries, and other information, allow for a reconstruction of the plays. In short, we have a fuller picture of Euripides' dramatic work than we have of that of either Aeschylus or Sophocles.

This fuller picture does not permit a monolithic view of the playwright. Several of his plays, for example, often called the "romances" (*Helen*, *Ion*, and the *Iphigenia among the Taurians*) have "happy endings" and do not conform to a strict notion of tragedy. Other plays have unusual structures and twists, while others offer very novel treatment of the mythological material. The many Euripidean plays that survive suggest a very diverse, clever and thoughtful playwright. If he is harder to pin down as a result, he is all the more stimulating and fascinating. And we should be careful not to isolate the "intellectual" side of his dramas, as if it could be divorced form the plays themselves: Euripides was a dramatist, writing plays that were meant to be performed and most fully understood in performance.

The *Heracles* in Performance

The *Heracles* was first performed in the latter part of the fifth century B.C. (probably within a year or two of 415), in Athens at an annual religious festival. The day it was performed, some 15,000 people, mainly Athenians, gathered together in the large, open-air theater of Dionysus, which was located in the god's precinct and adjacent to his temple on the southern slope of the acropolis, to view the plays to be performed that day. The *Heracles* was a play called a *tragoidia*, a tragedy, or more generally a *drama*. *Drama* etymologically means "the thing done, enacted". Yet our direct experience is with the written word, and even this is tenuous, as the earliest manuscript which preserves this play dates from the fourteenth century. Moreover the play in this (and other) manuscripts is removed from its context, and it offers no explicit stage directions or information about the music and dance that were part of the performance. The words themselves are vivid, moving and finely-textured poetry, but we must remember that they were part of a larger structure of words and action. Fortunately, the plays themselves, while containing no explicit information about production, provide much evidence from which to make inferences and to establish the patterns and conventions of the ancient Greek theater. There are also two other rich sources of information: writers in later antiquity provided anecdotes and material which can be mined and sifted for useful gems, and the archaeological record, including, of course, the remains of the theaters

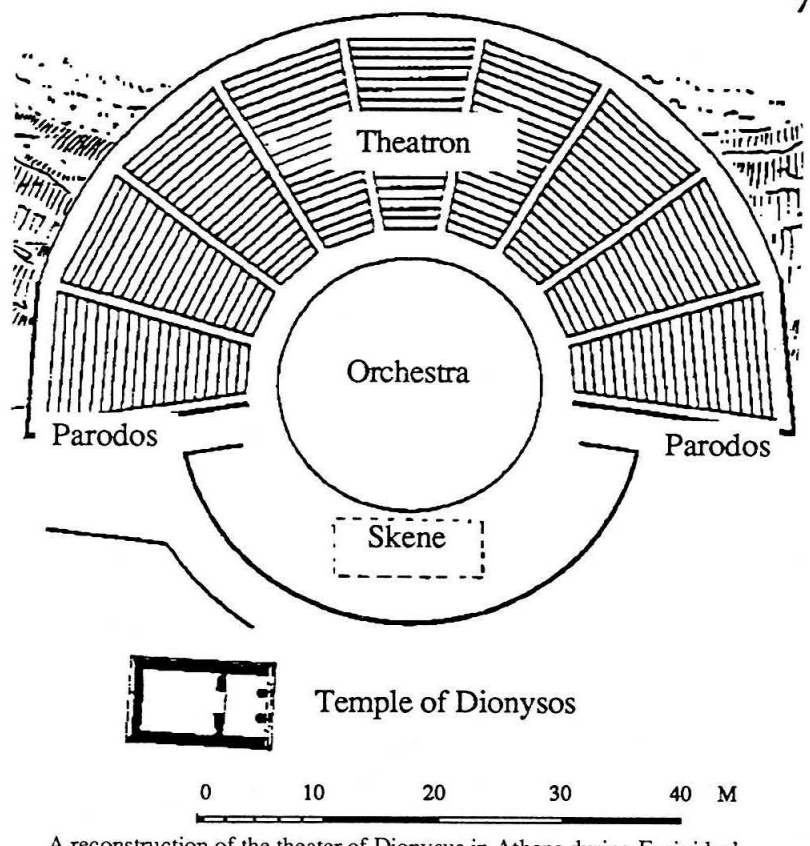
themselves, tells us a great deal about the physical circumstances of performance.

The theater of Dionysus was large. At the time of Lycurgus (latter part of the fourth century B.C.) it could seat by modern estimates approximately 15,000 spectators. Built on the southern slope of the acropolis, its rows of seats went up the hill. The viewing area was called the *theatron*, whence English "theater"; the performance itself took place below. The *orchestra*, a spacious circular dancing area, dominated the spectator's view. About sixty-five feet in diameter, it was the chief area of activity during the play. The other main focus of attention was the *skene*, an (originally) located wooden building, with a roof strong enough to support more than one actor, at the far side of the *orchestra*. It served as the backdrop for the play's action, being the palace at Thebes, as in *Heracles*, or whatever the world of the play claimed. Some scene painting was employed, but our knowledge of this aspect of the original productions is meager. In addition to providing the backdrop for the drama's action, the *skene* also was a stage building, a changing room. The building also helped in projecting the actors' voices in the large open-air theater. How many doors the *skene* had in this period remains a debated question. It obviously had at least one, and it very possibly had two or three. Certainly some scenes in some plays would have been much easier to stage if we assume more than one door was available for comings and goings.

The *skene* offered one place from which characters in the play could enter and to which they could exit. But characters could also enter into the *orchestra* and leave it along the two long entrance ramps, each one commonly called a *parodos*, which led at angles on either side into the acting area. Most of the entrances and exits in a Greek tragedy occurred along these long ramps. It is important to remember in this regard the great openness of the Greek theater: "The dramatic weight of comings and goings is proportional to the openness of space that the Greek theater presented to the playwright, who was also the producer, for exploitation."[1]

Characters in the dramas usually entered and exited on the ground, but could also appear on high. A crane-like device called the *mechane* was available, very likely by the time of the *Heracles*, for divine appearances aloft. The roof of the skene could also be used for divine appearances as well as for mortals' activities. The *ekkyklema* is another device whose existence, although certain for later periods in the theater, is doubted by some for the fifth-century. The *ekkyklema* was a platform which could be rolled out into the acting area and

[1] J. Gould, "Tragedy in Performance," in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. 1 *Greek Literature*, eds. P. Easterling and B. Knox (Cambridge 1985) 270.



A reconstruction of the theater of Dionysus in Athens during Euripides' career, the second half of the fifth century B.C. (Based on the sketch by J. Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens* [London 1971] 540).

permitted an interior scene to be shown to the audience. One of the conventions of the Greek stage was that all the action takes place outdoors, so anything that occurs inside must be revealed to the audience through voices from off stage, an eye-witness account of the event, or the scene presented on the *ekkyklema*. (Sometimes, as in the *Heracles*, all three methods are employed.) In all probability this device was used for the original production of the *Heracles* and was a potential resource for any contemporary tragedian.

Was there at this point in the history of the theater a stage, an elevated platform in the *orchestra* to be used by the actors, while the chorus, the other members of the production, operated in the *orchestra* proper? It *may* be that there was a slightly raised stage as in the *orchestra* and used by the actors during this period. Later in the history of the theater the stage became significantly elevated, furthering the distance and distinction between the world of the chorus and the

world of the actors. This was not the case in the fifth century. As the plays themselves make amply clear, even if the actors are on a slightly raised platform, they and the chorus communicate freely with one another and can impinge on each other's acting area; no barrier is felt between the two groups.

Tragedy was very much a part of the *polis*, the city-state, and had been since the performance of tragedies was first instituted by the *polis* in ca. 534. The plays were put on during a religious festival, the City Dionysia, sponsored by the state in honor of the god Dionysus, and were financially supported by wealthy citizens chosen by a state official. (The playwrights had other opportunities for producing their plays, but the original forum for their productions, the City Dionysia, remained the most prestigious and consistently drew, it seems, the best dramatists.) As the occasion was a religious holiday, work was suspended and a relatively large number of the citizens would attend. The holiday was an annual festival celebrated over several days in the month Elaphebolion (roughly our March). The festival included a torch-light procession, sacrifice, and various artistic competitions (choruses, tragedies and comedies). Although these plays were performed at a religious festival, they were not religious in the sense in which we usually understand the term: they were not necessarily or even frequently about religious dogma or ritual. Although, like so much of Greek literature, they often were in part concerned with questions of the gods' interaction with mortals, these plays honored the gods primarily by their excellence, their display of artistic achievement.

Greek society was agonistic. The plays were put on in competition: three playwrights competed for prizes. Even to be able to compete one had to be selected by the magistrate in charge of the festival, the eponymous archon (the magistrate who gave his name to the Athenian calendar year), who presumably made his selection on the basis of a sample of the playwright's work. In the expression of the Greeks, a playwright, wishing to put on plays at the festival, "asked for a chorus" and the archon "granted a chorus". Each of the three playwrights would produce three tragedies and a satyr play, a type of burlesque, playful tragedy. The same magistrate who selected the three poets to put on plays at the festival also chose three of the city's wealthy citizens to finance most of the expenses incurred in a production. The *choregos*, as each of these three men was called, although he could influence a production's outcome considerably by his generosity or parsimony, was not in charge of the nuts and bolts of production. This duty, or rather duties, fell to the playwright, who was director, usually choreographer, and, originally, though later only occasionally, actor for the plays.

Two groups comprised the performers of a Greek tragedy: actors and chorus. All the participants seem to have worn the same basic outfit: an ankle-length robe or tunic (*chiton*) with an outer garment (*himation*) over it. Footwear in this period was not elaborate, but consisted of a simple thin-soled shoe or boot; and occasionally actors or chorus would appear barefoot. Of course there would be variations in costume within a given production and differences fromone production to another. All parts were played by men (compare the *onnagata* roles in Japan's Kabuki theater). This might tax our response as spectators, but for the original audience the playing of female roles by male actors both was conventional and was aided greatly by an important feature of these performances—the wearing of masks. The actors, as well as the members of the chorus, all wore full-face masks. Made in this period probably of reinforced linen, they covered the front of the head and had wigs attached. Although no mask survives from this era, vase painting and the evidence of the plays themselves suggest that in general an attempt was made at realism. (Writing in the second century A.D., Pollux lists twenty-eight different types of mask, but the situation in Euripides' day is not certain.) The basic requirement of the mask was to identify a character in distinction from the other characters in the drama. The use of masks not only allowed this recognition of characters (the old man, the young woman, etc.), it also encouraged a close identification between the actor and the role. The mask, in the words of one critic, "presents, it does not re-present."[1] And, of course, the mask did not permit changes in facial expression, the type of nuance which we, accustomed to close-up shots in cinema, have come to expect. (Such fine touches in any case would have been lost to the great majority of spectators in the vast theater of Dionysus.) The mask with its unchanging expression drew attention, as another critic has put it, "not to the unexpressed thought inside, but to the distant, heroic figures, whose constant ethos it portrays."[2]

Of the two constituent parts of a Greek tragedy the chorus perhaps seems the more distant and difficult for a modern audience to appreciate. The members of the chorus, fifteen in number when the *Heracles* was produced, acted usually as a group, singing and dancing their part, a continuous presence in the *orchestra* once they entered. (Their number included a chorus leader, *coryphaeus*, who would at times act independently of the larger group.) This is not what we are used to in modern drama. Music and dance were integral features of the choral elements of the drama. (In fact the Greek word *choros* has "dance" as its primary meaning.) Music from a reed instrument, the

[1] J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (Oxford 1962) 59.
[2] O. Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1978) 14.

aulos, accompanied the performance of the dancing, but the precise nature of the music and of the dancing is impossible to determine from the ancient evidence, although we do know that in general Greek dancing was mimetic.

Even with little information about the music and dance, it is readily apparent that the choral lyrics are rich poetry and important to the drama. All parts of a Greek drama, both the dialogue and the songs, were composed in verse, but the poetry of the songs was different in kind: denser, more striking in its imagery and more suggestive in its language. The chorus has over the years been called the "ideal spectator" and the "voice of the poet". Neither is true. Although the chorus is generally less well defined and at times less integral to the action than the other characters in the play, it does have a specific personality (in our play the old Theban men well-disposed to Heracles and his family) and a definite role to play in the drama. The chorus responds to the action, reflecting on the events and often referring to past events as a context for the current ones. Owing to the nature of their poetry and their function, the choral songs are heard in, as it were, a different key. The typical choral song is strophic, that is to say it is written in paired stanzas, each member of the pair having the same metrical composition. The first member is called the strophe and the second the antistrophe. While the two members of the pair of stanzas are identical rhythmically, no two pairs are alike. After one, two, three or even more paired stanzas, the ode may conclude with a single stanza with no responding element; this is called an epode. The first song is called the *parodos*, the song delivered as the chorus entered into the *orchestra*; subsequent ones are each called a *stasimon*, a song delivered after the chorus had taken up their position in the *orchestra*.

The origins of tragedy remain obscure, but without sailing the murky and shoal-ridden waters of its origins, it is fair to say that tragedy originated as a song sung at a ritual. The name Thespis is attached to the first actor, and this man is often called the creator of tragedy. The stories about this shadowy figure give varied and at times conflicting reports, yet they point to the same essential fact of his profound influence on the history of Western theater: at a time of thoroughly choral presentations, Thespis was the first to break away from the chorus and give speeches and respond to the chorus. With Thespis tragedy ceased to be only a sung narrative and became enriched with a new dimension, that of actors and their *spoken* words. After Thespis introduced the first actor, others were later added: Aeschylus is said to have introduced the second actor and Sophocles the third. There the number of actors with speaking parts became fixed: each dramatist worked with only three actors. Of course a play could have more than three characters, but this would be handled by

the "doubling" of roles: one actor would play more than one part. There were so called "mute characters", "extras" who would have silent parts to play, such as attendants and children. The reason for this limit was perhaps aesthetic, perhaps it suggests an attempt at fairness so that all playwrights would be competing for the prizes under the same conditions. Whatever the reason, the effect is noteworthy: the Greek tragic stage, with the exception of the chorus, tended to be rather uncrowded. Dialogue among three characters, although possible, was in fact uncommon. The plays generally show conversations between two characters, or one character and the chorus, or one delivering a soliloquy. Even when the three actors with speaking parts are on stage together, they only infrequently carry on a three-way dialogue. The doubling of roles necessitated by the relatively small number of actors was also facilitated by the masks and the identification they created between the mask-wearing actor and the character he played. In a given drama an actor might play several roles, and with each mask that he donned he became that character and the audience could thereby readily make the adjustment.

As Aristotle long ago observed, the fundamental structure of tragedy is based on the alternation of speech and song, the dialogue of the actors and the songs of the chorus. Periodically in the play the chorus leader will have a few lines to speak, and the actors will occasionally sing their lines, but the basic dynamic of the genre is the alternation of speech and song. This alternation gives tragedy much of its rich and varied texture. Tragedy's structure also involves, as has been more recently demonstrated, not only the alternation of speech and song but this alternation tied up with exits before the song and entrances after them. One should be alert to this basic pattern and variations on it. In particular, since these junctures of song and exit and entrance represent the joints, as it were, of the dramas, one should pay attention to the ways in which the playwright exploits these junctures for significant juxtapositions as he moves in and out of scenes and between the two constituent parts of the drama, actors and chorus, action and song.

The Myth

With uncommon exceptions, the Greek tragedians took the subjects for their plays from the vast reservoir of traditional tales, the myths. By the time of Euripides this included not only orally transmitted tales but also the literary accounts found in epic poets, including of Homer and Hesiod, who composed near the end of the eight century B.C., in lyric poets, such as Stesichorus (late seventh to mid-sixth century) and Pindar (ca. 520- mid-fifth century) and in other

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The Heracles of Euripides

Translated with Introduction, Notes, and Interpretative Essay

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