Euripides: The Poet as Prophet

BERNARD KNOX

He was a many-sided poet; even in the fraction of his work that has come down to us—about one-fifth—we can hear many different voices: the rhetorician and iconoclast of Aristophanic travesty; the precursor of Menandrian comedy; the realist who brought the myths down to the level of everyday life; the inventor of the romantic adventure play; the lyric poet whose music, Plutarch tells us, was to save Athens from destruction when the surrender came in 404; the producer of patriotic war plays—and also of plays that expose war's ugliness in dramatic images of unbearable intensity; above all, the tragic poet who saw human life not as action but as suffering. The essays of this collection explore in detail many different aspects of this protean dramatist's work; this introductory note is concerned with one aspect of Euripides' tragic mood, its prophetic vision.

We have nineteen of his plays—almost three times as many as the seven of his contemporary and competitor Sophocles, the seven of his predecessor Aeschylus. We know him better than the other two and yet we find him more difficult to understand, to accept, to love. He seems unable or perhaps unwilling to resolve the discords his plays inflict on our ears; even his masterpieces leave us full of disturbing questions. If he were not so great a dramatist we would suspect him of lack of direction, of faulty construction, of exploitation of dramatic effect without regard to structure, of rhetoric without regard for character; in fact many critics have tried him and found him guilty on some or all of these charges. But a man who could conjure up out of iambic lines and a mask such awesomely living figures as Medea, Phaedra, and Pentheus, who could round off

the action of a play with final scenes like those of the *Trojan Women* or the *Hippolytus*, clearly knew his business as a dramatist. He must have intended to produce this unsettling effect, which disturbed his contemporaries as it disturbs us: to leave us with a sense of uncertainty, painfully conscious now, if not before, of the treacherous instability of the world in which we live, its utter unpredictability, its intractability. It might be said of him what the Corinthians in Thucydides say of the Athenians, that he was born never to live in peace himself and to prevent the rest of mankind from doing so.

Nearly all the plays we have were written in the last twenty-five years of his life, the years of the Peloponnesian War. One of the most famous, and shocking, of them, the *Medea*, was first produced at the very start of that disastrous war, in the early spring (end of March–beginning of April) in the year 431 B.C. This was the spring festival of the god Dionysus and the Athenians looked forward to it eagerly, for it marked the end of winter.

It had been a tense winter. Thucydides, who watched carefully the events of those months, intent, as he tells us, on writing the history of the war that was in the making, describes the atmosphere of that spring of 431 B.C. "Although war was imminent, the contending powers maintained diplomatic relations and exchanged representatives, but without confidence. For the preceding events were in fact a renunciation of the thirty years' peace treaty and anything now might provoke open hostilities" (1.146). We know this atmosphere very well; we live in it and have lived in it since 1945—the Cold War we call it. It has not yet, mercifully, turned into a hot one, a full-scale general conflict. In Greece it did and the spark that set off the explosion was, as usual, an insignificant episode in itself—the Theban attack on the small city of Plataea on a rainy night in March 431 B.C., the month and the year in which the *Medea* was produced.

This spring was the last spring of peace, of the Golden Age of Athens, the Periclean age, that period of enormous creative activity in every field of endeavor, political, scientific, intellectual, artistic. This was the last spring: two years later Pericles, speaking of those who died in the opening battles, was to say, "the spring has gone out of the year."

In the *Medea* the chorus sings the praises of that Athens of the great, the Golden Age. "The Athenians . . . rich and happy from of old, sons of blessed divinities, inhabitants of a land which is holy,

and undamaged by enemies; their diet is wisdom, which brings them honor; they walk luxuriously through air which is brilliantly clear, a land where once, the story goes, the nine Muses were born to golden-haired Harmony" (824–32). This description of an ideal Athens, set in a play in which a husband cynically betrays a wife and a mother murders her children, was sung in the theater of Dionysus at the very moment when what it described was about to disappear forever. "Rich and happy"—the wealth of Athens stored as golden plates on the Phidian statue of Athena in the Parthenon was to be poured down the sink of nearly thirty years of war; the happiness, the Periclean sense of mastery of the environment, of control and balance, of unlimited horizons—all this was to go up in smoke, the smoke of the burning farmhouses and orchards in the Attic countryside. The "land undamaged by enemies" was to feel the ax of the Spartan invader chopping down the olive trees. And wisdom was to go too—that sense of proportion, that bold initiative which yet recognized proper limits, the moderation of real understanding—all this was to die and fester in the plague that swept through the besieged, crowded city. The "brilliantly clear air" was to be clouded not only with the smoke from burning trees and houses but also with passionate hatred, anger, greed, partisan accusation, ambitious demagoguery—"golden-haired Harmony" was to be replaced by serpent-haired Discord.

And this is what the *Medea*, the *Hippolytus*, and Euripidean tragedy in general are about. It is a vision of the future. In it we can see at work the poet as prophet, as seer: *vates* the Romans called him, a word that means both poet and prophet.

The prophet is not a familiar figure in our modern civilization but ancient Greece had many prophets human and divine who foretold the future, Apollo at Delphi the greatest among them. In the museum at Olympia one can see, among the figures on the pediment showing Oenomaus and Pelops about to run their chariot race, the figure of the prophet—a bearded old man whose tense and tragic face shows that at this very moment he foresees all that is to come from that fatal charioteering: the children eaten by their father, the husband slaughtered by his wife, the mother cut down by her son. Though prophets play a prominent role in Greek art and literature, as they did in everyday life, all this seems foreign to us. Yet we have our prophetic writers too, not only those who deliberately try to

foretell the future, like Huxley in his *Brave New World* or Orwell in his *1984*, but also those greater writers who, without consciously trying to, create in their writing the shape of things to come—such as Dostoyevsky, who, in his nineteenth-century novel *The Possessed*, creates a character who describes with terrifying accuracy and with apparent approval the theory and practice of Stalin's rule by terror and purge.

The writer as prophet is not someone with a lucky gift of foresight but someone who foresees only because he sees, sees clearly, unmoved by prejudice, by hopes, by fears, sees to the heart of the present, the actual situation. He knows where he is. And if you really know where you are, you can see where you have been and also where you are going. The poet as prophet is no vague, dreamy seer but on the contrary a man of hard analytic vision who sees the here and now truly and exactly for what it is. His face is not that of the young Shelley in the idealized portraits but the face of the prophet on the Olympia pediment, worn, sad, and loaded with the burden of terrible knowledge. The poet as prophet lives not in the past, as most of us live—our attack on reality made with weapons that are already out of date—nor, as others live, in dreams of the future which turn away from the world as it is, but in the present, really in the present, seeing the present.

And this is what another poet-prophet, Arthur Rimbaud, meant when he said, "il faut être absolument moderne"—one must be absolutely modern. This is what Euripides was, as he still is: absolutely modern.

But it is a dangerous thing to be. Rimbaud gave up poetry, left France to become an unsuccessful gun-runner in Abyssinia, and died of gangrene in a hospital in Marseilles, unknown, unrecognized. Euripides left his beloved Athens and went to spend his last years in the half-savage kingdom of Macedonia, where he died. The trouble with being absolutely modern is that you are ahead of all your contemporaries. You are, in fact, like all prophets, rejected and scorned by the present, to be acclaimed and understood by the future. It is the story of the Trojan princess Cassandra again: the divine gift of true prophecy and the condition that the prophet will not be believed. The prophet is rejected. With Euripides, in fact, begins the tradition of the poet not only as prophet but also as outcast and rejected. His career is a modern career. Unsuccessful throughout his life (he rarely won first prize and was the constant target of the comic poets), he became after his death the most widely read and most frequently performed Greek dramatist, eclipsing, and on the stage at any rate almost entirely extinguishing the fame of his competitors. Euripides was understood not by his own generation but by the next and the generations that came after. Stendhal, when he published *La Chartreuse de Parme* in 1839, said, "je serai lu vers mille huit cent quatre-vingts." He was right. It was just around 1880 that the modern adoration of Stendhal began.

This was the fate of Euripides too. The tragic world he created in the *Medea*, the *Hippolytus*, the *Trojan Women*, and many other plays is an image of the world in which he lived, but few recognized the accuracy of that image. It shocked his contemporaries because they had not come to realize the nature of the world they lived in; still less could they imagine what sort of a world their sons and their sons' sons were to live in. One can forgive their dismay. The world Euripides created in the theater of Dionysus is one of disruption, violence, subversion, uncertainty, discord. The keenness of his vision of reality cut him off from his fellow citizens. He "saw beyond," as Aeschylus says of the prophet Calchas. "You cannot see them, but I can" says Orestes to the chorus—he is talking about the Erinyes. And the chorus replies to Cassandra's visions of the future: "we seek no prophets in this place at all."

The democratic regime established in Athens at the close of the sixth century had emerged triumphant from its trial by fire and sword, the Persian invasions of 490 and 480–479; the next half-century saw the system consolidated at home on an increasingly egalitarian base and supported by the tribute from an Aegean empire which made Athens the dominant power in Greece. These were the years of confidence, of an outburst of energy, political, military, intellectual, and artistic, which astonished the world. There seemed to be no limits to what Athens—and Athenians—could achieve. It was in these years that Aeschylus produced his final masterpiece, the *Oresteia*, and Sophocles moved into his place to succeed him as the foremost poet in the theater of Dionysus. They spoke, through their actors and chorus, to a citizen body which, for all its diversity of income, status, and opinion, was fundamentally united on essentials; it was not until a long war had taken its toll and a disastrous defeat in Sicily had inflicted enormous losses that the democratic regime was over-

thrown in 411 B.C. It was soon restored, but Athens was never the same again; the ideal city of the Periclean funeral speech, a vision of creative order, tolerance, and freedom, was now a fading memory.

And Euripides is the poet of the crack-up: the *Medea*, the *Hippolytus*, the *Orestes* are visions of a divided city, a disordered universe, the nightmare in which the dream of the Athenian century was to end. Small wonder that Euripides was rejected by the majority, passionately admired by a few, but liked by no one. No nation, no society, welcomes the prophet of its own disintegration, any more than Belshazzar, at the feast, welcomed the writing on the wall.

> They drank wine and praised the gods of gold and silver, of brass, of iron, of wood and of stone. In the same hour came forth fingers of a man's hand and wrote over against the candlestick upon the plaster of the wall of the king's palace; and the king saw the part of the hand that wrote. Then the king's countenance was changed and his thoughts troubled him . . ." (Daniel 5.4–6)

The words on the wall were words of a language the king did not understand: MENE MENE TEKEL UPHARSIN. The prophet Daniel interpreted them: "Thou art weighed in the balances and found wanting." Euripidean tragedy is the writing on the Athenian wall. It numbers and weighs; it understands and pities. It does not condemn, for the situation is beyond judgment; it does not propose reform, for it is beyond action. Euripides attempts to understand and to sympathize; but he offers no comfort, no solution, no explanation, only sympathy. And this quality is perhaps what made Aristotle say that in spite of his defects he was the most tragic of the poets.

In his time and place he was a man apart. Sophocles served as general, as ambassador, as one of the treasurers of the Delian League, and even on the emergency committee set up to guide the democracy after the Sicilian disaster. For Euripides we have not the slightest hint that he ever held political office or took part in political activity. Aeschylus fought at Marathon and probably at Salamis too; for Euripides we have no record of military service. Like the incomprehension of his audiences, this apparent withdrawal hints at a modern situation: the alienation of the intellectual writer. And many passages in his plays suggest that he was familiar with that situation. Medea, for example, defends herself against the charge that she is *sophē*, an intelligent woman. Such a reputation, she says,

is a dangerous thing to have and she goes on to claim that no one should have his children too highly educated; it will only earn them the hatred of their fellow citizens. Young Hippolytus, an ascetic and religious intellectual, explains himself to his father along similar lines. "I don't have a talent for explaining myself to the crowd; my intelligence is best displayed in converse with a small group, men of my own generation. That's quite natural. The people who charm a crowd usually make a poor showing among intelligent people" (*Hipp.* 986–89). The tone is familiar; and so is the reaction to it. "Go on," says his father Theseus, the public man. "Go on, sing your own praises, pick and choose your vegetarian food, claim Orpheus as your mystic priest and study the cloudy doctrines of those many books of yours. But I have seen through you" (*Hipp.* 952–55). We can recognize in these characteristic passages a modern phenomenon, that alienation which seems to be the inevitable mark of the artist and intellectual in modern society. In fact Euripides is the first European to whom the modern term "intellectual" could with some exactness be applied. We know for example that he had a private library (perhaps the first in European history); he read many books and this was rare in fifth-century Athens, where literature and even philosophy were an oral, rather than a written, affair; where Homer was recited by professional rhapsodes, not read, dramatic and lyric poets performed, not read; where Socrates talked incessantly but wrote nothing. The library of Euripides could almost have been deduced from the titles of his plays—many of the plots come from out-of-the-way stories, legends from the periphery of the Greek world, local myths that deal with minor figures rather than the great heroes of the central Greek tradition. The Thessalian story of Alcestis is one example and the tale of Iphigenia as a sacrificial priestess among the barbarous Taurians another, but there are even more striking examples in the tragedies that have been lost. The *Aeolus* for example dealt with the love of brother for sister in the strange family of the king of the winds on his floating island; its high point was a lyric aria by the heroine which was interrupted by cries of pain as her birth pangs came on. The *Pasiphae* dealt with the passion of a Cretan queen for a bull and the *Auge* with one of the many loves of Heracles, but one who happened to be a priestess and who gave birth to his child in the temple precincts (a place where birth and death were tabu). The choice of subjects we can recognize as modern too. They seem to

have been chosen, like those of Faulkner or Sartre, for their shock value.

One feature we know did shock his contemporaries was the predominant role in his drama of what the Greeks called Eros, the irresistible force of sexual passion. The chorus of the *Hippolytus* finds it strange that this powerful deity ("tyrant over mankind") has no cult at Olympia and Delphi; in the play Eros brings about the deaths of Phaedra and Hippolytus and in many another Euripidean tragedy it "comes down on mortals with destruction and every shape of disaster." In the debate between Aeschylus and Euripides in Aristophanes' *Frogs* the elder dramatist is made to claim that he never put on stage a woman in love; he accuses Euripides of producing women "who act as go-betweens, who give birth in temples, sleep with their brothers—and say life is not life." Aeschylus had, of course, created the powerful figure of Clytemnestra, who conspired with her lover to murder her own husband, but, though her speeches are shot through with sexual imagery, no emphasis is placed on her feelings for Aegisthus. And in the scheme of the trilogy, though she is victorious in the first play, she is in the end defeated, rejected by gods and men. In the *Hippolytus* there is no such rejection of Phaedra; in the *Medea* it is Jason who appeals in vain to men and gods. Conservative expectations are disappointed, traditional relationships reversed, and this reversal is not confined to the domestic sphere. In the *Trojan Women*, for example, there is no question about where our sympathy is directed—it is to the defeated, the enslaved. In Euripidean tragedy old certainties are shattered; what seems solid cracks and melts, foundations are torn up, direction lost. "The waters of the holy rivers flow uphill," sings the chorus of the *Medea*. "Justice and everything in the world is turned upside down."

The subversive force turning the world upside down was something the intelligent moderation of the Periclean funeral speech had failed to reckon with, which the belief in human progress under divine tutelage built into the fabric of the *Oresteia* had relegated to the past, which Socrates, as we see him in the early Platonic dialogues, underestimated: the blind passions and ambitions native to the human soul which reason may for a time control but never entirely subdue. For Socrates, man's ethical and political problem is an intellectual one: if a man knows what is really good he will do it—goodness is in essence knowledge, evil merely ignorance. Euripides

seems to have no such belief in the human capacity to make the right choice. Phaedra in the *Hippolytus* states the human dilemma in words that have been considered a specific Euripidean critique of the Socratic program:

> *τὰ χρήστ' ἐπιστάμεσθα καὶ γιγνώσκομεν / οὐκ ἐκπονοῦμεν δ'*
>
> We know what is right, we distinguish it clearly, but we don't achieve it. (380–81)

The irrational elements in our human nature can overwhelm our reason.

Among those forces Eros has pride of place. But Euripides studies them at work not only in individuals but also in groups—war fever in armed mobs, as in *Iphigenia in Aulis*, Dionysiac frenzy in the Maenads of the *Bacchae*. Eros, in any case, is not a deity confined to the loves of men and women. When Achilles in *Iphigenia in Aulis* describes the mood of the army which demands immediate departure for war, he says:

> *οὕτω δεινὸς ἐμπέπτωκ' ἔρως / τῆσδε στρατείας Ἑλλάδ' . . .*
>
> So fierce a desire (*erōs*) for this expedition has fallen on the Greeks. (808–9)

Writing, probably, at just about the same time, Thucydides (6.24) proposed an identical explanation of the Athenian expedition to Sicily: "a passionate desire fell upon them all (*erōs enepese tois pasin*)." The historian who had so meticulously explained the causes, real and professed, of the outbreak of the war could find no other word to describe this irrational and, as it turned out, fatal decision.

Thucydides cites *erōs* as a psychological factor, a human impulse, but Achilles, in his speech at Aulis, is careful to qualify his explanation. To the statement that *erōs* for the expedition has fallen on the Greeks he adds the words (809) "not without the gods." The gods are in fact regularly adduced, in Euripidean tragedy, as wholly or partly responsible for irrational behavior in human beings. This is of course a commonplace of Greek epic and tragic motivation but in Euripidean tragedy it is given such impressive dramatic form that it must be taken as more than metaphor. Aphrodite begins the *Hippolytus* (28) by explaining how she has driven Phaedra mad with love for her stepson—"her heart was seized with a terrible passion for Hippolytus—it was my decision (*tois emois bouleumasin*)"—and,

when Phaedra comes on stage, we see the goddess at work in her victim, Racine's "Venus toute entière à sa proie attachée." In the *Heracles* we see Hera's deadly ministers, Iris and Madness, appear on stage on their way to take possession of the hero's mind and direct his murderous hands against his wife and children. And in the *Bacchae* we watch Dionysus himself transform Pentheus into a simpering transvestite victim, crazed with megalomaniac visions as he dances off to his hideous death.

Pentheus' fate might be considered no more than the appropriate punishment for his opposition to the god's cult and the insults offered to his person. But no such defense can be offered for the unspeakable calamity that falls on Heracles; Hera has hated him from the moment of his birth and now chooses the point at which he has completed the great labors for mankind to bring him to ruin. Hippolytus has offended one great goddess by the purity of his devotion to another, but even if his attitude exhibits a reprehensible pride, there is no moral justification possible for the destruction of Phaedra and in fact Aphrodite announces: "she is noble—but she shall die just the same." Agave, too, is cruelly used by Dionysus as an instrument of divine revenge and Cadmus, whose offense was venial and who begs for mercy, is driven into exile together with his wife and daughter. There seems to be no correlation between divine intervention and human ideas of justice.

Divine intervention in fact is always, in Euripidean tragedy, motivated by considerations of personal prestige. The gods act like jealous sovereign states, which will go to any lengths to maintain that prestige, no matter what the cost in human life. In the *Trojan Women* we see Athena and Poseidon, bitter opponents in the Trojan War, negotiate an alliance against the Greeks; Athena's change of sides is in retaliation against the whole Greek fleet, for an insult offered her by one Greek chieftain. And in the *Hippolytus* we learn from Artemis that she cannot intervene to save her favorite because of the rules of the game: "This is law and custom (*nomos*) for the gods; no one is willing to oppose the will of another who has a wish; we stand back always" (1328–30). All she can do is destroy some human favorite of Aphrodite, which she promises to do at the first opportunity. Mortal lives count for little or nothing in the alternating friendships and enmities of the powers that rule the universe. These

powers are in their relationships no more rational than the human beings in whose destinies they intervene so cruelly; the creatures whose passions are too much for their reason are in any case unwitting victims of tyrannical, amoral forces intent only on manifesting their power. In such a world there is little place for heroic action: what is called for is heroic endurance—Heracles' resolve to go on living (*egkarterēsō bioton*, *HF* 1351), Talthybios' advice to Andromache to bear pain and sorrow with nobility (*eugenōs*, *Tro.* 727) and be silent.

Even in his own time some of his audience must have felt that his plays were images of a new Greek world in the making. But to the audiences and readers of the next century Euripides spoke directly, as if he were their contemporary; the world had finally caught up with his vision. The Greek city-states exhausted their material resources and their spiritual potential in endless, indecisive struggles for hegemony—all Greece became the theater for the mindless violence of the *Orestes*, the irreconcilable hatred of the brothers in the *Phoenician Women*. Too weak and too divided to resist successfully the pressure of Macedon, the city-states lost that jealous independence which had been the source of their creative energy and also led to their downfall. As Alexander's conquest opened up the East for Greek settlement, the cities, no longer sovereign states, became the cultural and administrative centers of the huge Hellenistic kingdoms. And as the Hellenistic kings, like Euripidean gods, fought out their everlasting dynastic disputes with sublime indifference to the fate of the victims sacrificed in a quarrel not their own, men faced the unpredictable with Euripidean attitudes: the Epicurean withdrawal from the world of action, foreshadowed in Hippolytus and Amphion; the Stoic acceptance of suffering and the will to endure whatever comes that Heracles proclaims as he renounces suicide. All through the Hellenistic and Roman centuries, in the theaters of Asia Minor, Palestine, Egypt, and farther east, it was Euripides who held the stage—even in the non-Greek court of Parthia there was a performance of the *Bacchae* going on when a general arrived from the battlefield of Carrhae carrying the head of Marcus Licinius Crassus. Even the triumph of Christianity did not put an end to Euripides' presence in the minds of men. The writings of the Greek Fathers of the Church, Clement of Alexandria especially, are studded with

quotations from Euripides. And the reason is not hard to understand. They found exposed in his tragic plays the desperation of the human spirit, the misery of the human condition, in a civilization which had reached the end of its spiritual reserves and, as it looked foward, saw, like the prophet on the Olympia pediment, nothing but disaster to come.

Rhesus: Are Smiles Allowed?

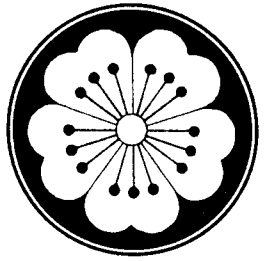
ANNE PIPPIN BURNETT

In recent years scholars have proved that the play called *Rhesus* comes from the fifth century B.C. (unless it stems from the fourth) and that it was not written by Euripides (unless perhaps it was). The disputes that were necessary to the nice establishment of these points have, however, left neither space nor time for appreciation of the piece in hand.[1] The authorship game has been played on the settled ground of the play's inferiority, and the gamut of response has stretched only from scorn to embarrassment as disbelievers asserted that Euripides could never have written such trash,[2] while believers apologized, pleading the poet's youth or his special political intention to explain the "unevenness" of this tragedy.[3] Everyone sees that the *Rhesus* is not like other classical plays, but hardly anyone has been willing to suppose that its differences might be due to something other than mediocrity or muddle on the part of the author. Not since Gilbert Murray has anyone asked himself what kind of drama this was meant to be, what sort of experience it tried to offer to its spectators, and what set of principles allowed its playwright (whoever he was) to feel that it was a finished and poetic whole when he had brought it to a close.

The almost unanimous refusal to take the *Rhesus* seriously as a work of art is surprising because the play has an extraordinary surface glamour about it. It concerns itself with doomed Trojans, a spy in wolf-skins, a golden barbarian prince, two Greek bravos, and the most beautiful horses in the world. In addition, the drama offers a stage spectacle unique in surviving tragedy, as an unparalleled action of darkness is played out in front of a rare army-camp decor—an ac-

Directions in Euripidean Criticism

A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS



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