

EURIPIDES

Some notes on his life and work.

c.480 - 406 b.c.

He was born in Salamis on the day, it was said, of the great battle off that island.

He held no magistracies, lived in retirement, and seems to have been somewhat morose of temperament. He was sneered at because of his lowly origins (his mother was supposedly a greengrocer) and the rumour that his plays were written by his slave Cephisophon).

His first play "The daughters of Pelias", said to have been produced in 455 b.c.

He wrote 80-90 plays, winning first prize 5 times (first victory in 441).

After 408 he went to the court of Archelaus, king of Macedonia, where he was honourably received, and where he died (he was said to have been accidentally torn to pieces by the hunting dogs of Archelaus).

18 of his tragedies (including the doubtful 'Rhesus') and one satyric play survive:

438 Alcestis

431 Medea

428 Hippolytus

415 Trojan Women

412 Helen

408 Orestes

405 Iphigenia at Aulis

Bacchae

and of uncertain date: *Andromache*, *Children of Heracles*, *Hecuba*, *Suppliants*, *Electra*, *Madness of Heracles*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Ion*, *Phoenissae*, *Cyclops* (Satyric drama), and *Rhesus*.

* Euripides chose for his tragedies, as a rule, situations of violent stress, showing men and women in the grip of passion or torn by conflicting impulses; showing also the play of natural affection.

He approached nearer to life than did Aeschylus and Sophocles. He did not accept unquestioningly the traditional religion and morality, but displayed vigorous independent thought, frequently scandalising public opinion.

Allusions here and there show him a keen critic of contemporary society. He was the 'angry young man' of his times, the declared enemy of complacency, woolly thinking and narrow mindedness.

He took institutions regarded by the Greeks as sacrosanct, examined them with a merciless eye and presented them on the stage in strange and unpleasant aspects. Aeschylus and Sophocles had treated moral problems but within the framework of traditional belief. Euripides set himself outside it and criticised the established institutions.

He took the stories of the gods, stripped them of their romance and presented them simply and logically thus attacking popular mythology with deadly logic. Euripides wanted to teach people to think for themselves. His god was REASON.

He has a contemptuous attitude towards popular fairy-tale; e.g. *Medea* and *Bacchae* are gripping and gruesome inspiring revulsion at the demonic triumph of the gods. In

Hippolytus, the story is stripped of its glamour and he concentrates on the sordid aftermath.

He takes the great theme of the misery of war in Trojan Women, Phoenissae, and Hecuba. It was courageous to write about this just when Athens was fighting for her very life.

He was in the forefront of a 'new movement' towards a more questioning society, one which came to be dominated by the nouveaux riches, the orators, the Sophists, a new materialism which attacked the values of traditional religion, leading to scepticism and agnosticism - all replacing the statesmanship of Pericles who had died of the plague.

His plays are marked by much variety of mood. The occasional bitterness of his reflections on the human lot is mingled with admiration for heroism and love of the beautiful things of nature.

He gave great prominence to female characters, heroines of virtue or vice.

Aeschylus in 'Frogs' accuses Euripides of portraying 'bad' women in his plays - Euripides seems fascinated by them but he tended to be less than sympathetic, hence he got the reputation of being a woman-hater.

He sought dramatic effect in ingenious devices (e.g. 'recognitions'), modifying legend to suit his purpose. He was original in his use of the scene-building in that it was far more realistic: e.g. the upper part of the skene for Euripides was not the heavens but simply the roof of a house.

He delighted in theatrical effects such as the mechane (to show characters flying), he frequently uses processions and elaborate entrances, he likes the bizarre (e.g. Bacchae), foreign settings and characters for their exotic effect. He liked to use

shock tactics (eg Messenger's speech in Medea where we are spared none of the gory details).

He was uneasy with the convention of the ever-present chorus and seemed to fight against it as being artificial (esp. Medea)

He also made much use of the prologue, a short introduction in monologue or duologue setting forth the situation, and of the intervention of a god to clear up an embarrassing situation.

His lyrics are graceful and charming, and contain much beautiful description of nature, but without grandeur and often without close connection with the subject of the play.

His expression is natural, clear and familiar, and admirably reproduces the language of passion.

His literary methods (but not his personal character) are subjected to lively criticism by Aristophanes in "Acharnians" and "Frogs" and he appears as a leading character in "Thesmophoriazousae" where a number of farcical scenes are constructed with tags from his tragedies.

The popularity of Euripides in the ancient world is illustrated by three anecdotes of Plutarch, who states that some of the Athenian prisoners at Syracuse won their liberty by their ability to recite passages of the poet;

also that on one occasion a vessel pursued by pirates was not allowed to enter a Sicilian harbour until it was found that some on board could do this;

again that when Athens was conquered in 404 and it was proposed that the city should be destroyed, the Spartan generals were moved to mercy by a Phocian singing the first chorus of "Electra".