

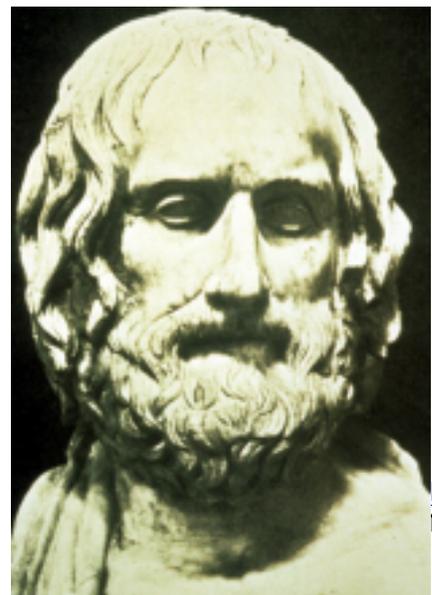
Chapter 7: Classical Greek Tragedy, Part 3
Mark Damen (2012)

V. Euripides (ca. 485-406 BCE)

A. Euripides' Legacy: The Select and the Alphabetic

Euripides produced something on the order of ninety dramas, a somewhat smaller output than that of his rival Sophocles but nevertheless one that encompasses at least twenty entries at the Dionysia. Since both tragedians wrote prodigiously and were roughly the same age—Sophocles was slightly older and outlived Euripides by a few months—they must have competed against one another at the Dionysia, no doubt, several times. Outside of that, however, they seem to have shared little else, especially the number of first-places each won and the public esteem they earned.

For instance, early in his life Sophocles became a winning playwright at the Dionysia (468 BCE), whereas Euripides had to wait quite a bit longer both to see his first works produced (455 BCE) and to be given the top award (441 BCE). And while Sophocles succeeded there many times, over his entire career Euripides garnered only five victories total—one of them posthumously—but even so, he kept writing and producing innovative dramas right up to the end of his life, literally. To put it another way, one was solid gold, the other tempered steel.



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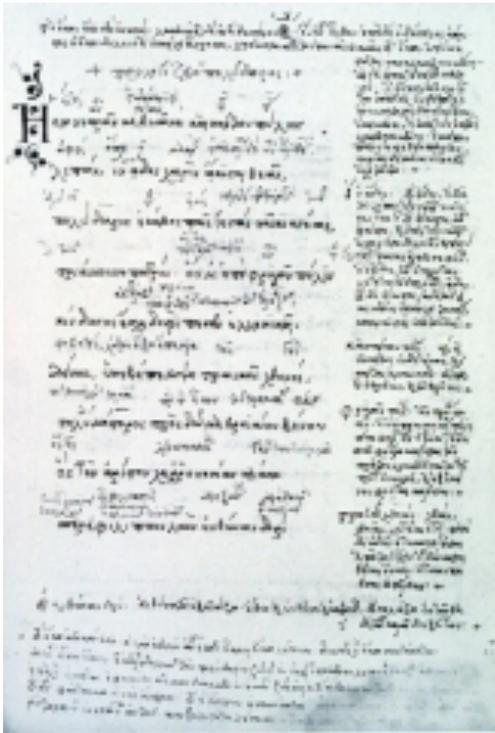
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Though never as popular as his highly lauded counterparts—not only Sophocles but the long-dead Aeschylus was esteemed above Euripides during the Classical Age, as Aristophanes amply demonstrates in his comedy, *The Frogs*—Euripides' surviving corpus includes nineteen plays, more than what remains of the others' work combined. It is a clear tribute to his foresight as an artist and his perseverance in the face of an unappreciative crowd. And the reason for this is readily evident to anyone who has ever had the good fortune to see a play of his on stage.

Euripides envisioned some of the most eye-catching, provocative theatre ever in Western Civilization and, if his classical contemporaries refused to recognize this—chagrined, no doubt, at how much they actually liked it!—their children and grandchildren were not so demure. The audiences of fourth-century Greece embraced Euripides' drama with wholehearted enthusiasm, calling for revival after revival of his plays and demanding their own artists compose plays in a Euripidean style. Every artist who has struggled with a callous public should look to Euripides as a model of how and why to keep creating in the face of contempt, injustice and ignorance.

Besides being greater in number, the surviving plays of Euripides provide some of the most important information known about Greek tragedy in general. The nineteen dramas extant come down to us via two very different paths. One group, called the **select plays** (*Alcestis*, *Andromache*, *Bacchae*, *Hecuba*, *Hippolytus*, *Medea*, *Orestes*, *Phoenician Women*, *Rhesus* and *Trojan Women*), were the ten prescribed as required reading in the late Greek and Byzantine school system—all fourteen of the tragedies we have by Sophocles and Aeschylus belong to the same category—which is to say, all of these plays are acknowledged classics. ([note](#))



The other group are called the **alphabetic plays** (*Electra*, *Helen*, *Heracles*, *Heracles' Children*, *Hiketes* [*The Suppliants*], *Ion*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, and *Kyklops* [*Cyclops*]), because they come most likely from one part (volume two?) of a complete set of Euripides' work, originally organized in roughly alphabetical order. These are all dramas having titles that begin with the letters E to K—in Greek, eta to kappa—or roughly the second fourth or fifth of the alphabet. From this alone it seems safe to assume that they were preserved not because

literature teachers saw them as the most effective drama to read in the classroom but by chance when, no doubt, a lone volume from a complete edition of Euripides turned up at some point in history and was integrated into the ten "select plays." ([note](#)) Indeed, what was probably the last of these alphabetic plays (*Cyclops*) is not even a tragedy but a satyr play, the only one, in fact, preserved through a manuscript tradition. ([note](#))

These alphabetic plays by Euripides, thus, represent much more than merely a few additional tragedies from the classical corpus but a group not selected for preservation by readers and purveyors of literature. As such, they show how wide the range of classical tragedy actually was and how many different types of plays it encompassed. All in all, it would no overstatement to say that the existence of Euripides' alphabetic plays is the single most important fact about classical drama.

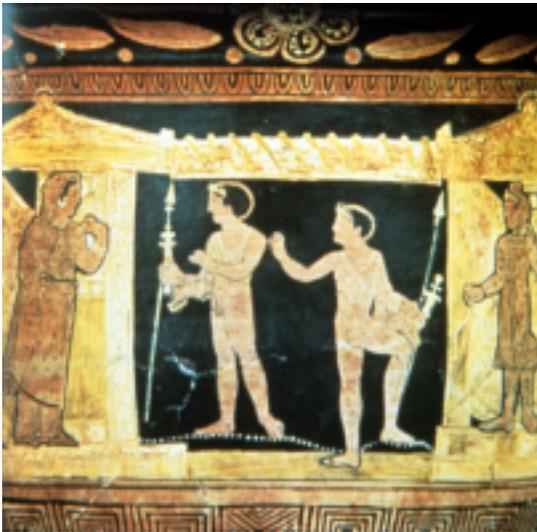
To wit, if it were not for this assortment of plays, not only would we

today be ignorant of several types of tragedy — particularly, **melodramas** and **rescue plays**, like his *Helen* as we'll see below (V.A.1)—but our definition of classical tragedy would also be markedly narrower, much more in line with the conventional view of tragedy as "tragic," that is, dominated by unhappy endings, serious reflection, morose characters, and so on. The rescue plays and melodramas show that classical tragedy could and did entail very different elements: happy endings, light-hearted characters, and even farcical situations.

1. *Helen*: The Melodrama

For instance, in *Helen*, Euripides pursues an apparently unconventional way of looking at the infamous beauty, the "face that launched a thousand ships." As depicted in this "alphabetic play," the title character is neither the unwilling victim of Paris' abduction nor his wanton accomplice, the [typical dilemma](#) confronting those ancient authors who wrote about Helen. In fact, according to Euripides in this drama, she never went to Troy at all! Instead, for all the long years during which the Greeks were fighting at Troy, and subsequently returning home, **Helen** has lived by the shores of the Nile in Egypt where the gods magically transported her before the war broke out. A captive there of the reigning pharaoh who like most men lusts after her, she has managed deftly to keep him at bay and her virtue intact, though not without some struggle.

Far off across the sea in Troy, what appears to be Helen, the woman all the Greeks and Trojans saw as the most beautiful in all the world, is in actuality nothing more than an "airy phantom," an apocalyptic hologram



sent by angry gods to beguile and destroy mortals in the war. Euripides' play begins with Helen herself explaining this complex and unusual situation at the opening of the play. She then retires with the chorus, a collection of women faithful to her, into the temple (the *skene*) that serves as a backdrop throughout the drama.

On to an empty stage mid-play—something quite unusual in a Greek tragedy—enters her husband **Menelaus**, who has been shipwrecked by divine design in Egypt. He and the apparition he supposes to be "Helen" have just survived a storm which swept his ship all the way from Troy to Egypt and sunk it off the coast. After washing up on land, he has hidden this "Helen" in a cave by the seashore and come into town looking for help.

Following a comical scene in which an old serving woman threatens to beat the noble Menelaus if he tries to enter the temple, out comes Helen—the *real* Helen—who sees not her husband coming to save her but a wet, bedraggled, very unhuman-looking creature disgorged by an unhappy sea. She screams and runs from him. He sees, instead, his wife Helen and pursues her around the stage, begging that she not flee him.

But then he realizes that this woman he is chasing *cannot* be Helen because "Helen" is in a cave where he hid her. Instead, she must be some sort of demonic Egyptian vision, so he turns and runs from her. At the same moment, she hears him speak and recognizes him. Realizing that

this is her husband who presumably has come to rescue her at long last, she also turns and begins pursuing him.

The chase reverses—a literal *peripeteia* (a sudden change of fortune, in Greek "a turning around")!—until Helen finally catches Menelaus and the couple is reunited. Ultimately, the play ends happily as our savvy heroine cons her captor, the lecherous pharaoh, out of a ship whereupon heroic husband and faithful, crafty, beautiful, sun-tanned wife escape and hurry home.

A happy ending, some comic violence, a lovely damsel in need of rescue, a day at the beach—these are the hallmarks of melodrama, comedy and popular entertainment, not tragedy in any sense of the word, at least any *modern* sense of the word. But, if it were not for the chance survival of the "alphabetic plays," we would have little idea such dramas were even capable of being presented under that name on the classical Greek stage. For that alone, we owe great thanks to the persistently rebellious Euripides and the luck of a random accident which preserved such "tragedies" for us. In light of this, it seems safe to say that not all goat-songs aimed at being Sophocles' *Oedipus*, as Aristotle would have us believe.

B. Euripides' Life

Still, for all his unconventionality and irreverence, Euripides was born into a respectable Athenian family which, while not as well-off as Sophocles', was certainly well-to-do. Several times in his comedies, however, Aristophanes parrots a popular joke in his day that Euripides' mother was a "green-grocer"—we have no idea to what the joke is referring—can it mean she sold vegetables in the Athenian market? That seems highly unlikely for a woman of the social position her family enjoyed.

Even if based on unfounded whimsy, the comic poet's ridicule points to

one important aspect of the tragedian's life at least: how few reliable data there are. As opposed to Sophocles whose life history it is possible at least to sketch out in rough detail, virtually all that comes down to us about Euripides-the-person smacks of gossip and sensationalism. Thus, it is safe to throw out the biographies which claim his own dysfunctional home and marriage stimulated the manifold difficulties which the mythological families in his plays so often face. Such tripe is obviously historical filler, a clear indication that the ancients themselves had little credible information about the man behind the masks.

While lacking even a hint of truth, these shadows frame a greater and more significant truth. The mystery surrounding Euripides' life stems, no doubt, from his intensely private nature. Again in strong contrast to Sophocles who played prominent public roles throughout the Classical Age, Euripides was "**surly and unconvivial**," according to one ancient source (Alexander Aetolus), preferring to be alone rather than share the company of others. This is something quite unusual among the ancients who tended to spend the vast majority of their lives, if not outside in public, at least surrounded by others.

Besides that, he is also said to have liked reading books by himself, again abnormal behavior for his times, since in antiquity texts—that is, scrolls which scribes had to copy out one at a time by hand on papyrus imported from Egypt—were expensive and rare and thus most often recited aloud in the company of friends for the shared enjoyment of all. Like someone who downloads a movie but refuses to let anyone watch it with him, Euripides, we are told, preferred to sit by himself in a cave on his family's property and do his reading in quiet solitude.

Whether or not any of this is true, the controversial and innovative playwright clearly severed himself from most aspects of public life—and from politics completely—choosing instead to study the works of cutting-edge philosophers in the day, among them those dangerously

amoral "[sophists](#)," and, in general, spelunking around in non-traditional modes of thought, an assertion his plays support in grand theatrical fashion. They show a highly intelligent mind, fascinated by philosophical issues, with a strong distaste for uncritical acceptance of convention: a thinker with a taste for the sensational who knows that nothing in life is easy or simple or comes tied up in pretty bows.

Euripides' tragedies also reveal the playwright's uncanny ability to see all sides in an argument, paying little attention to what was considered right in the day and, instead, serving up what the dramatic situation *showed* to be right—that a mother like Medea, for instance, *can* have some share of right on her side even when it leads her to kill her own children—or if not right, then some degree of righteousness at least. Ancient critics pointed out, as if we could not see it for ourselves, Euripides had an extraordinary talent for envisioning conventional mythological situations in such vivid detail that he seems always prepared to find new and original ways of presenting the mustiest commonplaces of traditional Greek lore.

C. The Agony in the Ecstasy

If Euripides did, in fact, have a natural antagonism to human company, it will come as no surprise, then, that his characters seem to reflect their author's disposition and frequently engage in a complicated and provocative form of debate called an *agon*, [a sort of legalistic confrontation](#) in which one character plays prosecutor and the other defendant and the lives or well-being of either or both hangs in the balance. ([note](#)) In fact, no play of his which survives in full lacks an *agon*. ([note](#)) Even *Trojan Women*, a tragedy in so many ways dark and conventionally tragic, stops the dramatic action midway through the play so that Helen and Hecuba can debate in front of Menelaus the pro's and con's of Helen's conduct during the war.

And there is a good reason Euripides so often includes these *agons*. They were—and are!—fascinating to watch unfold on stage, even when they are irritating. And irksome indeed they were to many in the ancient Greek audience, because Euripides rarely gives any clear indication that one side is clearly right or wrong in the *agon*. Instead, he leaves it up to the audience to resolve for themselves the moral issues raised on stage.

Worse, in fact, he had a diabolical instinct for how to stack a debate such that the "right" answer—that is, what was conventional and accepted, what every decent, moral, not-very-deep-thinking person agreed was right—looked ridiculous, possibly even wrong, when caught in the glare of Euripides' dramatic searchlight. The ancients called this sort of [sophistry](#) "making the weaker argument the stronger," a clear sign of their frustration, when they could see no way around some devilishly clever argument but refused nevertheless to acknowledge its validity.

1. Euripides' *Cretans*

Besides our having at least one *agon* in every play we know Euripides to have written, a good example of this device has recently been found on a papyrus unearthed in Egypt. ([note](#)) Many such papyri preserve pieces of Euripides' lost plays—a strong testament to his popularity in later antiquity—and their content shows why. Euripides tackles difficult and sticky situations with head-on glee, and he does so apparently because of (not despite) the unease his peers sitting next to him in the *theatron* must have felt as they listened to the argument unfold. In this case, the papyrus preserves one half of an *agon* from Euripides' *The Cretans*, a play built around the tale of the monstrous **Minotaur**'s birth (for the full story, see [Reading 8](#)).

The myth runs as follows. The sea-god Poseidon gave **Minos**, the all-powerful ruler of Crete and a favorite of the gods, a beautiful white bull, on the understanding that Minos was to sacrifice it back to him in thanks. But Minos liked the bull and decided to keep it. Incensed at this

outrage, Poseidon cursed the king by making his wife **Pasiphae** fall in love with the bull.

Trapped in what seemed to be a hopeless affection, she at last consummated her lust by donning a cow hide, inducing the bull to make love to her and, horror of horrors, becoming pregnant by it. The creature she bore was the half-man half-bull Minotaur, a human baby with bovine horns that she tried to hide from her husband after its birth. But Minos discovered the halfling—and along with it the whole truth!—and confronted his wife, accusing her of unnatural passion.

In his half of their debate from *The Cretans*, what was essentially the prosecution's case, Minos must have charged his wife with bestiality. Unfortunately, that speech is still lost, but much of what Minos said can be gathered from Pasiphae's subsequent response which the papyrus preserves. To judge from her defense, he condemned her outlandish behavior, blaming it on self-indulgent eroticism—the typical behavior of a slutish, pampered princess—and vowed to have her executed for such a crime by drowning her in the sea. She replies as follows:

I can see that denying what happened will get me nowhere.
The facts are readily apparent. You simply don't believe me.
Suppose then I had thrown my flesh at a man,
Not a bull, selling myself like some back-street Aphrodite,
Then I guess you *could* call me "slut" with some justification.
But come on, it was the gods who sent this madness on me—
Would I bring this sort of pain on myself, willingly? No,
Not likely! It makes no sense. What part of a bull
Would I look at and sting my heart with such affliction?
How well-dressed he was? How good he looked in his *peplos*?
His auburn locks? And the gleam of wine that shone
In his eyes and stained his ruddy cheeks?
His flesh was not so creamy, not my lover's.
To get in bed with *him*, I put on a quadruped's
Skin and covered my body! This is what fired me up?
Making children didn't seem very likely, not from
Such a husband. So, you can't say I did it for that.

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It's simple: I went mad. This man's god gorged me with evils,
And *he* deserves the greater part of the blame.
He didn't sacrifice the bull, as he promised
He'd do, that phantasm sent from his sea-god.
That's why he's hunting you down, avenging the injustice
You did *him*, Poseidon, and *he's* taking it out on *me*.
So then *you* call on the gods to witness this,
You the one who did these things, brought this shame on me.
I'm the one who had to bear it, and not for anything *I* did,
No, I tried to hide the gods' affliction heaven-sent,
But *you*, you think it's best to spread the "good news"
About your wife—you have got to be the stupidest man on earth!—
And you trumpet it around as if you had no part in this.
You are my destroyer, *yours* is the mistake,
It's *you* we suffer with. But don't stop there! Throw me
In the sea, if that's what you want. Do it! It wouldn't be
The first time you sinned and murdered someone, would it?
Or eat my living flesh if that's your preference,
Right off my body! Here it is, enough for a hearty meal.
We are free people, and free of sin as well,
But to pay the penalty for *your* appetites, *we* die.

There are several things to note about this speech. First, Pasiphae conveys a sense that the public is watching and weighing her ("This man's god gorged me with evils . . ."), with little or no feeling that an invisible "fourth-wall" stands between her and the viewers. Second, by having her address those listening directly—is it the chorus or the Athenian audience in the Theatre of Dionysus? or perhaps both at once?—Euripides plays down [the interiority of her character](#) and enhances the notion that the character sees herself as on trial, standing before a jury, defending her actions and justifying her choices.

Finally, the disposition of the scene, at least as much as we have of it, inclines one to side with Pasiphae who makes several very good points. This is an uncomfortable prospect for most people, especially an ancient Greek man, inasmuch as she is a lustful foreign princess who has practiced bestiality and conceived by interspecial miscegenation a

murderous bull-child, all in all, not the sort of woman rational Athenians in the Classical Age usually married and took home to their mothers. But in this drama Euripides makes it more difficult than it ought to be to see things the way the viewers naturally wanted, to argue with qualification that the adulterous Pasiphae is wrong instead of her cuckolded husband. So, one of the things, it appears, that made this tragedy so compelling—and such a tragedy that it's now lost—was how sensationally tasty it was, if at the same time rather difficult to swallow.

2. Euripides and the Radical Right

Because Euripides' *agons* were simultaneously maddening and fascinating, they were also dangerous. In the ancient theatre brimming, as it was, with an intellectually restless crowd, some saw Euripides' penchant for raising divisive and volatile issues as fostering dissent and fomenting disobedience to the state. Worse yet, his diabolical talent for seeing all sides of an argument could be taken as an attempt to disrupt the proper education of young people—there are some in every society who believe young people need and are able to be told how to think—so even in the world's first democracy, an exponent of liberal and challenging thought like Euripides found critics and faced scorn and ridicule. They did not slow him down in the least.

Much to the contrary, for most of his career Euripides produced brilliant drama steeped in irritating *agons*. As a result, his compelling but polemical drama mesmerized the theatre-going public, Athenian and visitor alike, and helped to make the Dionysia a must-see event across the Aegean world every year. All in all, Euripides' interaction with his viewers was a very successful, if not entirely healthy relationship, one that in the long run was doomed.

When things became desperate for the Athenians toward the end of the Peloponnesian War (412-404 BCE), they lashed out, as injured creatures will, at anything that irritated them. Sophists, scientists and all sorts of

non-traditional elements in their society were forced to flee amidst the convulsions of internal strife. Among those banished was Euripides. An old man by the time he finally packed up and departed (408 BCE), as far as we know, he had never lived outside of Athens, but he spent his last years of life abroad in Macedonia where, however well the king there may have treated him, he cannot have felt much at home in such a place. It is doubtful, for instance, there was a theatre within a hundred miles.

No doubt, for some time before he was compelled to leave Athens, Euripides knew his exile was imminent which must have stung terribly—to know the shot is coming makes it hurt much worse—and there is evidence of this in the last trilogy he staged in the Theatre of Dionysus. In it he captured so startlingly vivid a picture of the madness which had engulfed his native *polis*, as the Peloponnesian War ground without remorse to its pathetic and pointless end, it is hard to imagine this dramatic assault as anything other than a snide good-bye and final word of warning to his beloved but broken homeland. Among that trilogy is one of Euripides' nineteen surviving plays, *Orestes*, which we have already discussed [above](#), but seen in the context of history and Euripides' life, deserves a closer look.

D. *Orestes*

According to the preface appended to the front of the *Orestes* manuscripts, this play was Euripides' most popular tragedy in the post-Classical, often revived on stage in the fourth century and thereafter, and it is not hard to see why. A brilliant theatrical tour-de-force, *Orestes* walks a fine line which many playwrights have attempted to straddle but few have ever managed: both traditional and revolutionary, deadly serious and blithely farcical, faithful to the plot of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* but hardly its spirit, a brutally vivid picture of human life at its worst encased paradoxically in a message of hope and salvation. Because it constitutes so many different things at once, what people see when they

watch *Orestes* frequently says at least as much about them as the play.

Thus, the play is a masterpiece, both translating and transcending its time. In its day, it was a fond and fiendish farewell to Athens, but in the long run looks more like a godfather's kiss on the cheek to all of mankind. When Euripides wrote it, he must have doubted he would ever again have the chance to write for the stage, but at the same time the harsh misfortune of impending exile neither chastened him nor bowed his spirit. *Orestes* is as uncompromisingly acidic as Euripides ever was, a stinging, unstintingly stark picture of human society as he saw it. In other words, staring down the barrel of *Orestes*, most people blink before Euripides does.

The play opens amidst despair and gloom, at a pivotal moment in the story after the title character has murdered his mother Clytemnestra but before his subsequent trial and acquittal in Athens. Euripides chose to dramatize this part of the myth intentionally, for at least two reasons: one, because [Aeschylus](#) had not—the *Oresteia* skips over this moment which falls in the gap between the second and third plays of the trilogy (*The Libation-Bearers* and *The Eumenides*)—and also because it is a sequence full of dramatic tension and potential. At this point in the myth, for instance, the **Furies** have appeared and begun to plague **Orestes**, and Furies are always a good thing for playwrights to have in the wings

Even though he had killed his mother at the god **Apollo's** instigation and with the assistance of his sister **Electra** and friend Pylades, Orestes stands at this instant bearing his guilt alone, since Apollo has yet to reappear and rescue him. In situating the title character at this juncture where Aeschylus had fast-forwarded from revenge to redemption, Euripides can freeze-frame his hero and play up the horrors of his uncertain future. Even if we have seen Aeschylus' drama and know Orestes will be vindicated in the end, he and his comrades in this play do

not.

In the first scene, Orestes lies in bed unconscious, exhausted by hallucinations of the Furies. His sister Electra stands alone by his side. All others but his friend Pylades have abandoned him, interpreting his delusions as a sign of guilt and the gods' damnation. The city of Argos itself has decided to try both sister and brother on the charge of matricide that very day, and the siblings have only one hope left. Their uncle Menelaus has just returned from Troy, bringing home his beautiful wife Helen after ten years of war.

If Menelaus, a victorious general, will support them in court, a slim chance exists they may escape conviction and execution. Otherwise, there is nothing they can do but wait for the death penalty, unjust though it may be. Electra's first words are "There is nothing . . .," spoken at the very opening of the play itself, though she goes on to say, ". . . nothing that humans cannot endure," a desperate cry that life can and should somehow continue. "Nothing" sums up this play better than her fond conviction that there is nothing past human endurance.

Enter Helen, not the savvy, resourceful heroine of Euripides' earlier play named for her ([see above](#)), but a more traditional and typical Helen, the vacuous, vain, manipulative beauty queen. Her first line in the play, spoken to her grief-stricken niece Electra—"Still not married, darling, after all this time?"—shows the sort of sensitivity one expects of fading starlets. The line could be grafted very easily into *All About Eve*.

Helen has come outside the palace to ask Electra if she will take funeral offerings to the grave of her "dear departed sister Clytemnestra." Stunned that anyone should request that an accessory to murder take offerings to the grave of the victim, Electra refuses and tells Helen to go there herself. Helen, however, is afraid of the Argives, many of whom have families decimated in the war. She worries that they blame her for the deaths of friends and family and will try to kill her if she shows her

pulchritude in public. She may be vacuous but she's right about that. Clearly, she's learned one thing from her travails at Troy, how to avoid being killed.

Electra then suggests she send her daughter Hermione instead. Glad for any way to avoid the madding crowd, Helen calls Hermione out and dispatches the young girl off with the offerings she has for her late sister. Although Greek women were supposed to shear off their hair and put it on the tomb of a dead relative, Electra notes, as Helen retreats back inside the palace, that she's clipped off only the ends of her hair—she must remain beautiful or Menelaus might lose interest—and has given Hermione only the meager tips of what is clearly a meager grief.

The chorus enters and, although Electra tries to keep them silent—how can a chorus like those in Greek tragedy be quiet?—they wake Orestes up, who seems at first quite sane but soon suffers a bout of hysterical delusion when he hears mention of his murdered mother Clytemnestra. He leaps up and starts shooting things that are not there with a bow that does not exist. Electra sits and weeps pitifully, for she loves her brother—loves him so very much!—and hates to see his insanity. ([note](#))

One by one, other characters emerge, each with his own particular knapsack of nasty habits. Menelaus first shows himself a typical politician, brutally ambitious, lacking interest in anyone who cannot advance his career. Nephew or not, a matricide like Orestes does not fit into his current political agenda, so he refuses to lend his aid, claiming he is helpless, a blatant lie.

To make matters all the worse, while Orestes is pleading for help from Menelaus, the Spartan Tyndareus—Tyndareus is the father of Clytemnestra, thus Orestes' grandfather—appears suddenly without warning. He has come to Argos to demand the death penalty for both his grandchildren and everyone involved in any way with the murder of his daughter Clytemnestra. When he is forced to acknowledge she was

herself a murderess, Tyndareus retorts, if she were not already dead, he would kill her himself. In the end, "death and vengeance" seems to be all that those self-righteous, violent Spartans know, now or then.

Orestes is left to go to the assembly on his own, until his good friend **Pylades** appears. In antiquity, Pylades was the paradigm of an ideal friend, but here he is more than fiend than friend. Not just a devoted and loyal ally, he would say anything, do anything to help his companion Orestes. To him, everything comes second to friendship: family, mortality, morality. Though Pylades' role in Clytemnestra's murder is not elaborated in the play, he claims to have played a major role. All in all, he is less Orestes' friend than his fellow gang-member, and together they go off to face the wrath of the mob as Orestes stands trial for murder.

Things go badly, or so Electra hears from a messenger who "just happened to be passing by" — surely Euripides' swipe at the convenience and frequency of "messengers" in Greek tragedy — and has come back to report the outcome of the trial. A clutch of vicious demagogues whipped the crowd into a frenzy of wrath directed against Agamemnon's progeny. In the end, the assembly condemned both brother and sister to death, with the single mercy that the pair be allowed to kill themselves rather than suffer the humiliation of a public execution.

As Orestes and Pylades trudge tragically back on stage, they find Electra weeping in terror at the news. The siblings take a moment to wail, and then another moment, and then several more. With Pylades providing accompaniment, it turns into an oratorio of grief. It's all so unfair, when you think about it. After all, it wasn't *their* fault they plotted and killed Clytemnestra. She'd killed Agamemnon, their father. On top of that, the god Apollo ordered them to do it. Where's the injustice in punishing murderers? Be fair, aren't assassins victims, too?

Swept up in their gloom, Pylades insists on joining them in death but, as

Orestes at last walks off to kill himself, Pylades says suddenly — completely out of the blue! — "Well, since we have to die, let's see if we can't make Menelaus suffer, too!" Orestes says, "Dearest friend, if only I could see that before I die!" "So," says Pylades, "let's hit him where it hurts. Let's kill Helen!"

"Kill Helen?," asks a startled Orestes, and surely not the only one in the Theatre of Dionysus that day in 408 BCE to be shocked by the suggestion. Indeed, some part of the Athenian audience, no doubt, stood up in unison and waved their collective *Odysseys* at Euripides who was surely sitting in the *theatron* with them, and pointed to Book 4 where Helen is still alive many years after returning to Greece with Menelaus. And Euripides, it seems safe to conclude, smirked and pretended not to notice them.

Spiraling ever deeper into insanity, Pylades and Orestes plot how they will kill Helen. They decide to go inside the palace, where Helen is at that moment guarded only by her Trojan slaves, mere Eastern weaklings. They will carry in their swords on the pretext of killing themselves, but kill *her* instead.

Silent for a long time — probably out of jealousy that Pylades thought up this plan before she did — Electra suddenly chimes in, "Hermione has gone to Clytemnestra's tomb. When she returns, you can seize her as your hostage. That way we can keep Menelaus from trying to harm any of us." The boys approve and compliment her on thinking like a man.

In one of the few true dialogues in classical tragedy, all three join in a prayer of vengeance, directed not to Apollo, not to any god, in fact, but to the ghost of the dead Agamemnon. Voodoo is all these benighted children have left to believe in:

PYLADES: Agamemnon, hear our prayer! Spare your children!
ORESTES: I murdered my mother!

ELECTRA: I touched the blade.
PYLADES: And I plotted, never hesitating.
ORESTES: To help you, father!
ELECTRA: And I did not betray you.
PYLADES: Hearing of our shame, will you not save us?
ORESTES: I weep for you.
ELECTRA: I mourn you pitifully.
PYLADES: Enough of this. We have a job to do!

Orestes and Pylades exit into the palace bent on killing Helen, as Electra waits outside with the chorus behind her and cheers them on.

After a moment, the death-cries of Helen are heard from offstage. By now Euripides' audience must have been thinking: "Wait! Helen can't die! Not only is she alive in Homer later, but she's immortal! This must be another false plot lead, another one of those **red herrings** we've seen so often in Euripides. Thank goodness he's leaving town. I wonder what's going to happen next."

Enter Hermione, back from Clytemnestra's tomb. Like a spider spinning a web, Electra gleefully lures the innocent girl inside to Orestes' and Pylades' waiting blades and follows her inside the palace. The stage is briefly void of actors, as the chorus, bidden by Electra to sing loudly, dances frantically and tries to drown out Hermione's panicked screams.

As if that were not insane enough, the improbable now begins to waltz with the impossible. The requisite messenger-speech which traditionally follows important offstage action in Greek tragedy—that is only way the Greek audience can learn what has happened since it's beyond the capability of Greek theatre to present something like a realistic chariot wreck on stage—is assigned to a person *who can barely speak Greek*. One might imagine that the one mandatory requirement of being a messenger in Greek tragedy is to know how to speak the language of Greek tragedy, but apparently not in Euripides' universe.

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A **Trojan slave**, one of Helen's fawning Phrygian eunuchs, crawls out of the palace through a hole in the roof and runs out to report how Orestes' and Pylades' plot to murder Helen has unfolded. ([note](#)) In his limited Greek, the description of the murder leaks out intermittently through a cascade of broken phrases, protracted laments and extravagant barbarian arm-waving ([note](#)): "O Troy, Troy! Oh woe, woe! Phrygy city and so nice Ida Mountain, holy place, you dead, I moan, in foreign mourning, bird-born face of swan-winged prettitude, Leda pup, sadhelen, sadhelen!" (trans. Wm. Arrowsmith)

From the Trojan slave's long and highly entertaining but mangled message, the audience gathers actually very little. Clearly, Orestes and Pylades attacked Helen, but in the midst of their assault she disappeared, according to the Phrygian, and apparently no one knows exactly how or where to. And just as the Trojan slave is finishing his messenger speech, Orestes comes out, armed and angry and looking for "that slave that fled my sword."

The quivering minion drops to his knees, begging for his life, and in Orestes' bullying of this defenseless domestic, he shows the sort of man he really is, a frightened child at heart whose abuses have taught him little more than how to abuse:

ORESTES: And Helen? She died justly, didn't she?
TROJAN SLAVE: Oh, justestly! Slit throat three times, me no care.
ORESTES: You're just saying that to please me. That's not what you really think.
TROJAN SLAVE: No! She wiped down Greeks to Trojans, too.
ORESTES: Were all you Trojans so scared of the sword?
TROJAN SLAVE: Not so close with sword, okay? Death shine back in it.
ORESTES: A slave, and he fears death. I'd have thought you'd want to die.
TROJAN SLAVE: Everybody like to live, even slave.
ORESTES: (*laughing*) Good point! Your sharp wit saves you. Get inside!
TROJAN SLAVE: No kill I?
ORESTES: . . . You're off.
TROJAN SLAVE: . . . Words of good you say.
ORESTES: But I could change my mind. . . .

TROJAN SLAVE:

(*running inside*) Words of no good those!

Orestes smugly returns inside the palace and locks the gate.

Having heard rumors of unrest at the palace and fearing for Helen's life, Menelaus arrives on stage with an armed escort. When he shouts for someone to open the gates of the palace, Orestes, Pylades and Electra appear on the roof above him. Electra and Pylades hold torches, ready to light the palace on fire, if Menelaus attacks. Orestes holds a knife at Hermione's throat.

Threats and insults fly back and forth. With no hope of resolution, Menelaus calls for reinforcements and prepares to siege the palace. Orestes' knife pushes against Hermione's throat. Flames lick the rafters. Swords are bared. The end is upon them all.

Then, above the smoke and heated passions flies the god Apollo in, bringing with him a newly deified Helen. Soaring on the *mechane* over everyone on stage—and much of the theatre—the god of reason and light, that rational deity who makes sons so admirably logical they kill their mothers, calls for a halt to all the mortal insanity boiling beneath him. "It is not the plan of the gods that this is the way things should end. Helen will be a goddess in heaven with me. Menelaus will marry again—in other words, that's a different "Helen" in Book 4 of *The Odyssey* so, everyone, roll your Homers up and put them away!—the Trojan War was meant only to lighten Mother Earth of her heavy load of humanity. Orestes must go into exile first but he will marry Hermione one day—meaning 'Drop that sword you have at her throat, young man, and say hello to your future wife!'—and Electra will marry Pylades. It was all my plan. Everything is going to be all right now! The gods have a plan. Trust me. They do."

What happens next is the only thing that can happen—Apollo, after all, has spoken—the smoke begins to clear, the characters move off stage in mechanical obedience to Loxias' will, and the play ends with a divine promise of peace and joy to come. More significant yet, this was also Euripides' final exit from Athens and, as far as anyone could say, from theatre, too. Yet again he took no first prize in hand, not that *that* mattered much at the moment. Just producing *Orestes* was his prize. A first place would have been nice but anticlimactic.

E. *The Bacchae*

Like nothing else, *Orestes* epitomizes the frenzied convulsions of Athens toward the end of the Peloponnesian War. Full of sycophants and double-dealers, twisted minds and helpless fools, the play reflects the insanity around it. "But who is the maddest?," begs the play, "The ruthless criminals who seem to be the only people capable of action? The simple, good folk who become these criminals' victims? The gods who let all this happen?" *Orestes* is that rare, nearly impossible drama, a heart-felt farce, Euripides' inimitable way of saying "Only a god can save you Athenians from the mess you've made of things this time, and the gods, if there *are* gods, must be even crazier than you!" With that, Euripides jumped in a wagon and headed off to Macedonia, where he proceeded to produce the most surprising and dramatic twist of his whole long and unpredictable career, the greatest play he ever wrote—to many, the greatest play ever written!—*The Bacchae*.

Euripides' death early in 406 BCE signaled the end of an era. When Sophocles also died only a few months later, it was clear that Athenian tragedy had reached a crisis. There was no obvious heir apparent to the throne of tragic drama, and the Athenians' dismay is palpable in Aristophanes' comedy produced the following spring, *The Frogs* (see below, [Reading Four](#)). But, when it was reported in Athens that three tragedies nearly complete—*The Bacchae*, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and

Alcmaeon in Corinth (now lost)—were part of the late Euripides' estate, there must have been a sense of simultaneous elation and dismay among his fellow Athenians: "One more trilogy from Euripides! How wonderful! But, wait, what will he say about us this time? The last drama he produced at the Dionysia it was . . ., well, we didn't look so good there, did we? Oimoi, what now?"

Producing the unexpected, however, was Euripides' signature, and so the next "logical" move for him after demolishing and satirizing all sorts of sacred traditions, everything from Aeschylean tragedy to the current political regime, was to return to the accepted norms of playwriting in his day. *The Bacchae*, as it turned out, was fairly conventional, on the surface at least.



It featured a full-blown chorus with long, Aeschylus-like odes and dealt directly with Dionysus, the nominal deity of drama—what could be more traditional in Greek theatre than that—and it made few, if any, obvious references to current politics. The Athenians must have been flabbergasted at Euripides' restraint: "A play about the god of ecstatic frenzy, written by Euripides, with no red herrings, no Helen-in-Egypt, no Helen-on-the-mechane? There must be some catch!" And there was, of course—and it was, of course, what no one expected.

Still, once it was staged, it must have been immediately evident that *The Bacchae*—not *Orestes*!—was Euripides' consummate triumph for the stage, the masterpiece of a man who was much easier to acknowledge a master when he was not there to hear you say it. So, no doubt, it was to a chorus of Panathenaic enthusiasm that this last Euripidean trilogy

processed across the stage in Athens and garnered Euripides a fifth and final first prize at the Dionysia. That the playwright happened to be unavailable for comment at the time—due to being dead—and could not accept the award in person doubtlessly played some role in the widespread popularity of that decision.

Thus, with applause he could not hear and had never cared to anyway, the intriguing Euripides' long and controversial chapter in theatre history finally came to a close, or so it seemed. He would, in fact, appear on stage again the next year. But only one man in Athens foresaw that, a different sort of visionary who was almost certainly sitting in the theatre watching *The Bacchae* at its premiere in March 406, the comic poet Aristophanes.

VI. Conclusion: The Legacy of Classical Tragedy

The true estate Euripides left to Greek theatre was nothing short of a revolution in drama, a very different type of play from that which had dominated the stage for most of the century in which he lived. By playing up plot and sudden reversals of fortune, by adding action and increasing the speed with which plots unfolded—in other words, by turning drama towards melodrama—he showed the way to make the Greek theatre more "theatrical." If his peers were divided in their appreciation of this change, their children were not. Nor were actors who gained much from Euripides' extremist tactics. The emotional gymnastics of a Medea about to kill her own children gave performers a chance to shine their particular brilliance on stage, surely a factor in the number of times his play about her and his many other showpieces for bravura performance were revived in subsequent ages.

No surprise either, then, that the play's players soon began to eclipse playwrights after the Classical Age. Indeed, the tendency of fourth-

century theatre was not to stage new tragedies, though dramatists didn't give up trying to write them, but to reintroduce and reinvent the great dramas of the classical tragedians, Euripides more often than not. Sadly for the later Greeks, another "Euripides," as Aristophanes' Dionysus hungers for in [The Frogs](#), never emerged. Thus, Hellenistic audiences mainly went to see stars in the old "classics," much as in opera today where "warhorses" composed generations ago are the principal vehicles of the art.

This is not to say that drama did not pervade post-classical Greek culture—it did!—just not *original* drama. Ultimately, Athens, the very nursery of drama, changed with changing times, and another competition *cum* award was instituted among actors playing in revivals of fifth-century plays at the Dionysia. It's worth noting that this happened only a few decades into the fourth century BCE—stagnation can be very swift sometimes—so if there's any simple way to put it, in the end post-classical tragic drama simply fossilized. While it left behind an awe-inspiring, toothsome skeleton, ferocious-looking but frozen, the art form after Sophocles was, in the end, more Tyrannosaurus than *Oedipus Rex*.



Of the lot, Euripides fared best. Like Dracula, he could still be very scary even from the grave, at times even more so than he'd ever been in life. To wit, when Greece briefly succumbed to a military takeover in recent times, the new regime forbade any performance of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, a play which celebrates young people who sacrifice their lives for the good of the state. What higher accolade for a playwright is there—including a victory at the Dionysia!—than to have his work branded too dangerous to be staged

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twenty-four hundred years after his life? Shaw and Shakespeare and Shepard can only dream of such censure someday. But if Euripides didn't die entirely with his death, Greek tragedy for the most part did, shifting the burden of theatrical innovation to its younger sibling comedy which rose to the challenge with surprising grace and energy and, in doing so, paved the path for a new and very modern-looking form of theatre, the comedies of Menander.

Terms, Places, People and Things to Know

Euripides

Select Plays

Alphabetic Plays

Melodramas

Rescue Plays

Helen (*Helen*)

Menelaus

"Surly and Unconvivial"

The Cretans

Minotaur

Minos

Pasiphae

Orestes (Orestes)

Furies

Apollo

Electra

Pylades

Red Herrings

Trojan Slave

The Bacchae

Cadmus (see [Reading 2](#))

Semele (see [Reading 2](#))

Dionysus (see [Reading 2](#))

Pentheus (see [Reading 2](#))

Agave (see [Reading 2](#))