



Euripides



Born about 480 B.C., somewhere in the vicinity of Athens, Euripides, the son of Mnesarchides, was destined from the beginning to be a misunderstood poet. He presented his first set of tragedies at the Great Dionysia in 455 B.C., but did not win his first victory until 441. In fact, he won only five awards--and the fifth of these was not awarded until after his death. This lack of recognition might seem a bit odd when one considers that Euripides wrote about 92 plays and was compared, even during his lifetime, to the likes of Aeschylus and Sophocles. But Euripides was ignored by the judges of

the Greek festival because he did not cater to the the fancies of the Athenian crowd. He did not approve of their superstitions and refused to condone their moral hypocrisy. He was a pacifist, a free thinker, and a humanitarian in an age when such qualities were increasingly overshadowed by intolerance and violence. Perhaps that is why he chose to live much of his life alone with his books in a cave on the island of Salamis.

Euripides was exposed early to the religion he would so stubbornly question as an adult. As a child, he served as cup-bearer to the guild of dancers who performed at the altar of Apollo. The son of an influential family, he was also exposed to the great thinkers of the day--including Anaxagoras, the Ionian philosopher who maintained that the sun was not a golden chariot steered across the sky by some elusive god, but rather a fiery mass of earth or stone. The radical philosopher had a profound effect on the young poet, and left with him a passionate love of truth and a curious, questioning spirit.

Always a lover of truth, Euripides forced his characters to confront personal issues, not just questions of State. In many ways, he is the forerunner of the modern psychological dramatist. In [Hippolytus](#) and [The Bacchae](#), he explores the psyche of men attempting to deny a natural life-force such as sexuality or emotional release. In another timeless classic, [Medea](#), he takes a penetrating look at the frenzied jealousy of a woman who has lost the interest of her middle-aged husband. Perhaps his finest contribution to world drama, however, was the introduction of the common man to the stage. Even his traditional nobles such as Agamemnon and Menelaus were anti-heroic, almost as if he wanted to show the Athenian people what their beloved military heroes were really like.

Although many of Euripides' plays dealt with personal issues, he did not shy away from the social issues of the time. His *Trojan Women* was written in

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response to an Athenian expedition in 416 B.C. which destroyed the city of Melos and slaughtered its men. As the play begins, Troy has fallen, its men have been murdered, its shrines desecrated, and its women bound and enslaved. Ten years earlier, he had written another stinging indictment of war in *Hecuba* which documents the cruelty of Greek warriors who enslave the Trojan queen and sacrifice her daughter at the tomb of Achilles.

However, while Euripides was busy exposing the evils of his society, others were having a good laugh at his expense. The strange, secluded little man was an easy target, and thus was the continual butt of the comic poets, especially [Aristophanes](#). Meanwhile, the playwright's life was beginning to fall apart around him. It was public knowledge that his wife had cuckolded him. One by one, his closest friends were banished and murdered by the State for their liberal views. The only thing that saved Euripides from the same fate was the fact that it was his characters who spoke heresy, not he. In the end, however, he was finally tried for impiety and left Athens in a cloud of controversy. Although he found a temporary respite at the court of King Archelaus in Macedonia, he could not escape the Fates. In less than eighteen months, the tragic playwright was torn to pieces by the King's hounds in a tragic accident.

Euripides' outlook was not a cheerful one. He insisted on emphasizing the uncertainties of life and the fact that "many things we thought could never be, yet the gods contrive." His final play, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, an attack on superstition and cowardice, tells the story of Agamemnon's unfortunate daughter Iphigenia who was lured to the Greek camp under the pretext of marrying the hero Achilles only to find that, instead, she was to be sacrificed by her father and his fleet in order to appease the gods.

Not all of Euripides plays, however, are so heavy. *The Cyclops*, the only complete satyr play in existence, was written early in Euripides' career and exudes the hopeful spirit of a young poet. It is a grotesquely funny account of Odysseus' encounter with the one-eyed cannibal Polyphemus. And although this spirit of hopefulness is difficult to perceive in many of Euripides' later plays, it never entirely disappears. A few of his dramas, such as *Helena*, come surprisingly close to being comedies of character. Even in *The Bacchae*, he mixes comedy with the tragic form as Dionysus coaxes Pentheus into women's garments. Thus, by dissolving the rigid structure of tragedy, Euripides opened the door for new forms of drama, as well as hybrids of existing forms.

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