

Humanities Institute
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Rhesos

Mid-fifth century B.C.E.

Euripides.

Overview.

The dates of composition and production, of the present play, have been disputed since antiquity, and sharply brought to attention by the influential seventeenth century classical scholar, Joseph Scaliger. Estimates of the composition date of the play range from prior to 450 B.C.E. to the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. Stylistic issues, plot control and development issues, and topical relevances—to what event of the time the play seems to refer—have all played a role in the discussions of the dates of the work. Even that it is Euripides' work is not universally agreed. The Trojan War setting is familiar to us from much of Euripides' work, but the compact and allusive brevity of the play, and the rapid changes of scene suggest a different creative optic from the 'social scientific' address with which we are used to seeing Euripides view conflict inside cultures.

Characters

Chorus, of Fifteen Trojan Soldiers

Hector. Crown prince of Troy; husband of Andromache

Aeneas. Cousin of Hector

Dolon, young Trojan recruit

Shepherd

Rhesos King of Thrace

Odysseus, King of Ithaca

Athena

Paris. Brother of Hector

Driver Rhesos' war chariot

Muse. One of the nine muses, mother of Rhesos

Synopsis

Hector, the Trojan commander, is alerted to suspicious night time activity in the Greek camp, at Troy. Tempted to send his troops in, Hector is persuaded to send a spy, Dolon. Dolon agrees, having been promised Achilles' horses at war's end; he wears a wolf skin, to deceive the Greeks. As Dolon is departing, the Thracian King, Rhesos, arrives at the Trojan Camp, eager (if late) to support the Trojan cause. Odysseus and Diomedes meanwhile approach the Trojan camp, where they kill the spy Dolon. They then seek to kill Hector, but are dissuaded by Athena, who directs them to the bivouac of Rhesos, whom Diomedes kills, while Odysseus seizes his two fine horses. Rhesos' mother, one of the nine Muses, puts the blame for her son's death on Odysseus, Dionysus, and Athena. The resurrection of Rhesos is announced.

Story

Sentinels. The leader of the Trojan sentinels, outside the Walls of Troy, wakes Hector, the Trojan commander, to announce that fires and suspicious movements are visible in the Greek camp. Hector wants evidence, suspects the Greeks may be planning to sail away under cover of darkness.

Aeneas warns his cousin Hector against sending troops against the Greeks, and soon convinces Hector that the best move is to send a spy to check out the Greek camp. Dolon volunteers—on condition that after the war he will be given the beautiful horses of Achilles.

Rhesos. While Dolon makes his move, the Thracian king, Rhesos, is just arriving at the Trojan camp; Rhesos is eager to put his forces to work on the side of the Trojans. However Rhesos is destined for a sharp historical reversal.

Odysseus. The Greeks Odysseus and Diomedes set off into the growing light of early morning, on a mission to kill Hector. En route they meet Dolon, dressed in wolf skin, and kill him. Though they then diverge toward Hector's tent, Athena appears to them with a redirect to the bivouac of Rhesos, whom Diomedes murders—while Odysseus takes Rhesos' horses.

Muse. The mother of Rhesos, one of the nine Muses, arrives at the body of her slain son; she lays the blame on Odysseus, Diomedes, and Athena. She proclaims that Rhesos will henceforth be immortal, and will be sent to live in a cave. This entire short play contrasts with the *Doloneia* (the episode, in Book Ten of Homer's *Iliad*, on which Euripides' play is based; in Homer there is much more emphasis, than in Euripides, on Dolon's spying operation, and on the repercussions of the murder of Rhesos in the Trojan camp.)

Themes

Theatricality. A dramatic interplay of choral movement—the sentinels who open the play—dramatic lighting effects, as the dawn gradually emerges out of the dark of night, a spy vanishing into the darkness cloaked in a wolfskin, a barbarian king arriving in the Trojan camp with a robust army, a pervasive stress on beautiful horses: these fragments of high theatricality are concentrated into a short play (1270 lines) with much sensual tension.

Tension. The opening of the play into the middle of the night—some scenes highlighted, others muted or mysterious; the flickering of lights on and off at the enemy camp; the anxious confinement, of the life and death actions of this brief play: these conditions intensify the feeling of impending danger, which pervades the whole play.

Intimacy. The figures in the Trojan camp, just as the Thracian forces with Rhesos, interact with a directness unfamiliar in Greek tragedy. This intimacy of tone is evident from the beginning, in the way the sentinels wake Hektor in the middle of the night, or, later, in the chummy discourse between Odysseus and Diomedes.

Transformation. This is a mysterious play, as hard to interpret as it is to place in time and authorship. Rhesos, a Thracian King—that suggests, as we know from Polymestor in Euripides' *Hecuba*, the King of what would to the Greeks have been a barbaric land—Rhesos appears mysteriously, to offer his aid, proposes unqualified commitment to the Trojan cause, and then upon his death is transformed into immortality, by his Muse mother.

Character Analysis

Rhesos Rhesos is a mystery figure, appearing onto the stage, just when the Trojans especially need a boost, to drive the Greeks back from their position along the seacoast; a position from which they are just at that moment agitating suspiciously, in midnight stirrings. Hektor is quick to force some self-revelations from Rhesos, that the Thracians have been busy protecting their national borders, but that—as Rhesos insists—they are currently ready to support their brother Trojans. The mystery man in the night finally persuades Hector that he is ready to fight the Greeks, but at that very moment Odysseus and Diomedes have infiltrated the Trojan lines, killed Dolon, and are looking for the tent of Hektor, to kill him. Athena intervenes, redirects the Greeks to the temporary bivouac provided for Rhesos by Hector, and lo and behold it is Rhesos whom they find and kill. Rhesos, who has been a sudden apparition in the night, becomes both a target figure and a mysteriously transformed one, when his Muse mother confers immortality on him.

Ready for action Rhesus arrives at the Trojan camp, and immediately converses with Hektor, about how and whether to assault the Greeks. Rhesos is convinced this time to 'break down the walls and burn their fleet.' He is all spit and pzazz.

Direct. 'I am like you, Hektor, my words cut a straight trail.' Slightly pompous, but sparkling and engaged, Rhesos throws himself into the midnight challenge he has taken upon himself.

Decisive. Rhesos assures Hektor that he will make his assault on the Greeks short and sweet, though Hektor continues to demur, convinced that Rhesos is too late to be cut into the action. 'I will cut a quick path to the end of your struggles,' assures Rhesos.

Haughty. Rhesos gathers the impression, quickly, that Odysseus is a no account. Interesting irony that Odysseus is in the end the one who steals the steeds of Rhesos—while Odysseus' buddy, Diomedes, murders Rhesos.

Classy. From his first appearance, to the shepherd who leads him into the Trojan camp, til he wins Hektor's concession to enter the fray, Rhesos is striking, rides in a classy chariot, stands straight and proud. 'I thought some god was driving by,' says the shepherd, noting the exquisite colts who pull Rhesos' vehicle, and the golden medals welded onto his military outfit.

Discussion questions.

What is this play about? The play is episodic, dealing with the infighting that underpins the war on the ground in Troy, with the drama of personal glory and loss that spins into the Trojan camp as Rhesos arrives, and with the mystery/tension of sudden night attacks and night sorties. There is a central irony in the play—that the flashy Rhesos should himself be the one killed in the bivouac provided for him by Hektor. Shall we say that these ingredients add up to a snapshot of the perils of nighttime fighting, the playground it offers for personal courage, and the fascinating power natural lighting effects—the emergent dawn, the brilliance of snow white colts—offer in the hands of a master dramatist—whether or not it is Euripides?

What does Dolon himself contribute to the development of the play? Is he dashing or pitiable? We know of him that he is ugly to look at, but well to do. Sound like a risk taker? Think about some of the characters in this play—the sleepy Hektor, the 'classy' Rhesos, Odysseus the underground thinker, the drowsy shepherd—are we reading the work of a characterological playwright, someone who seems 'not quite Euripides'?

The small play before us has its prototype in Book Ten of Homer's *Iliad*. Review that book and consider what differences in structure and form the Euripides writer has introduced into the play. Do you see how the Dolon part has shrunk, and the reactions of the Trojans, to the murder of Rhesos, have been highlighted?