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Euripides (480-406 B.C.)

All that we have said of the setting of Sophocles and Aeschylus—those second half of the fifth century geniuses—belongs in spades to the ambient culture of Euripides. What *is* that ambient culture? The answer would be long. The Sophists are important. These teachers of wisdom—including public thinkers and discussers like Protagoras and Gorgias—were of great influence in the second half of the fifth century. Why were these figures needed and turned to, and what did they offer? We have seen that there is a tradition of question-asking in Milesian philosophy, and that that tradition burgeons richly into the work of Plato. The Sophists too were perpetual raisers of questions, and in that process, and sometimes in the simple desire to attract pupils/clients, they were often underminers of traditional belief. Euripides was very alert to these voices. We have noted that, in connection with the recitation of the Homeric epics, there was a tradition of itinerant bards, public reciters who drew public crowds around them. By the fifth century Athens was itself ready for public discussion in every sense. There was a buzz on the streets. With the advent of a democratic polity, in the early fifth century, the energy of public outdoor life had grown vibrant in Athens—especially around the central Agora or market place, the Theater of Dionysus, and the Law Courts, not to mention the sacred sites on the Acropolis. In these public venues, and among the sophisticated public dialecticians who frequented them, Athenian culture was being freed up into a passion for ideas and discussion. The Sophists were natural components of this social ferment. And into this fermenting cultural matrix Euripides emerged, writing dramas in great numbers, touching on 'melodramatic passions,' raising controversial issues, striking a 'modern' tone.

That modern tone was of many sorts: Euripides thought himself into the mind of women, and their unique social/personal problems; he explored the passionate and chaotic emotions that have to be pasted over in order for society to exist; and he was a master analyst of the immaturities that frequently underpin the psychology of the hero. Nothing about his daring inquiries will seem irrelevant to an inquiring mind in the early 21st century.

The Medea (431 B.C.). You will see at once that Medea—a slice, of course, from the rich archive of mythical material available to every Greek writer—is par excellence two things typically minimized in fifth century Greek culture: first, a *foreigner*, second, a *woman* who is fully invested with women's needs and attitudes. (Would you say the same of Antigone, or of Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*?) Brought back to Greece from the exotic East, and by a conventional and deceitful mainstreamer, Jason, Medea finds that her marriage and her children have been supplanted by a new bride, and her own exile. She takes a terrible revenge! What has changed here, from Aeschylus and Sophocles? The outsider has been drawn into the Hellenic dialogue, with fierce consequences. We are growing away from the still nobility of the archaic classical posture—and Euripides is taking us there.

The Hippolytus (429 B.C.). The intricacies of jealousy, insinuation, betrayal of innocence, melodramatic finale—all these elements of pop psychology become the raw material of this 'modern' drama, which bathes in the questioning, discussion-rich atmosphere of a literary culture which is conspicuously public. As in the *Medea,* Eurpides penetrates, here, into the feelings which undergird those ritual/mythical behaviors which were the stock of epic, and of the two tragedians we have studied before Euripides. The fixed world of myth has been opened out to reveal the boiling humanity myth was initially created to temper.

Euripides' *Hippolytus*, performed in Athens at the Greater Dionysia in 428 B.C. draws quite naturally from the mythological treasure trove inherited from Homer and the earliest Greek worship, but blends that traditionalism with a profound sense of psychological reality and human dilemma. We will survey this play with an eye to the strategies of Euripides the tragedian.

The plot? Theseus, king of Troezen, lives with his illegitimate son, the handsome youth Hippolytus, whose sole love is hunting in the woods, and whose sole divinity is Artemis, goddess of hunting and wild nature. Nothing could put him at a farther pole from his new step-mother, Phaedra, the fresh bride of Theseus. Phaedra is taken over by Aphrodite, the goddess of love and foe of Artemis, who is the opponent of sexual love, and who makes Phaedra fall in love with Hippolytus. Under this pressure Phaedra, sleepless and desperate, asks her nurse to present a love note to Hippolytus, asking him for an assignation. Hippolytus is horrified—sexually unattracted to his stepmother, and outraged at her infidelity--and makes it clear that he rejects the proposal. At that point Phaedra, knowing the story is out in public, and that her life is doomed, hangs herself, leaving a note saying that Hippolytus has tried to rape her. This treacherous and disastrous move leads to Theseus' outraged fury, and his arousal of the sea goddess Poseidon. Poseidon rises as a huge wave, smites Hippolytus's chariot, as he is fleeing along the beach, and destroys the young man, who in dying comes to understand the whole story and to forgive his father.

This tale presents the same internal self-generating tragic quality as *Oedipus The King*—at least if one accepts that Artemis and Aphrodite, as agents here, are essentially ways of speaking about the mindsets of Hippolytus and Phaedra. Given that interpretation the play deploys as a tragedy of violent lust counterbalanced by an excessive devotion to the life of the forests, a life shunning the demands of society. It is possible, but irresolvable, that to the Athenian audience this play was a dramatic illustration of the belief that we should do nothing in excess.

The Bacchae (405 B.C.). The Athens of the end of century—think of Pythagoras or Socrates-- was concerned not only with the new importance of women and foreigners, the foreign in general, but with psychologically 'modern' modes of feeling, emotional experimentation and quest, and passion breaking out from the mythical mold—where it is confined in the cases of Cassandra, Clytemnestra, or Antigone—square into the midst of Greek society. Pentheus, of course, is the perfect bureaucrat foil against which to read the unlicensed and uncontrollable fury of the Bacchantes, exaggerated representatives of a strain of the demonic, which lurks throughout Greek culture, even when what we most expect is form and reason.