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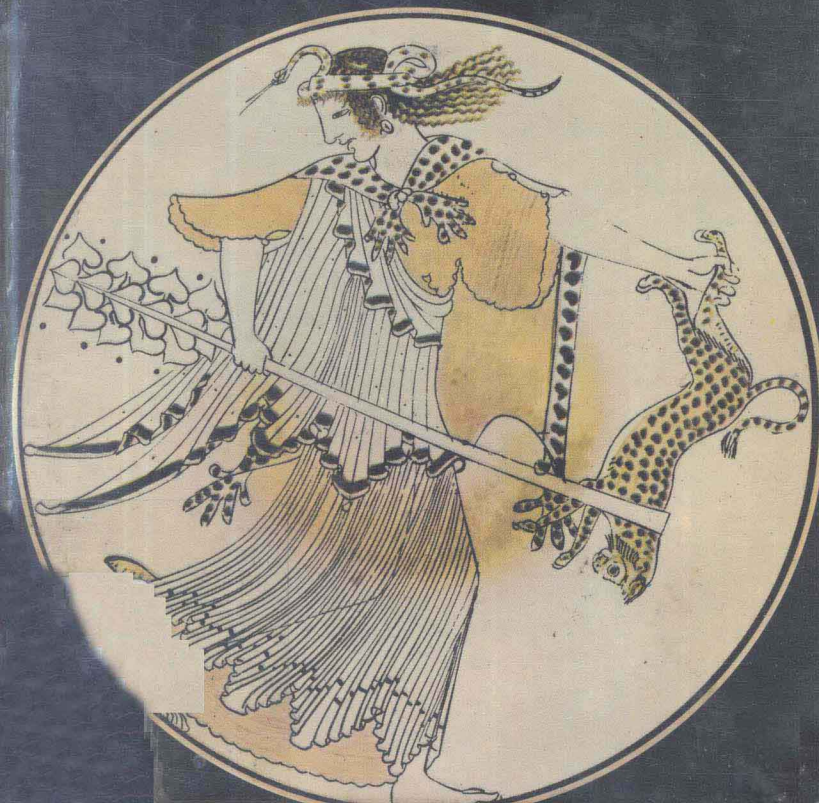
EURIPIDES

MEDEA/HECABE/ELECTRA HERACLES



THE PENGUIN CLASSICS

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EURIPIDES was an Athenian born in 484 B.C. A member of a family of considerable rank, he avoided public duties as far as possible, and devoted his life to the work of a dramatist. His popularity is attested by the survival of seventeen of his plays and by abundant other evidence; though it was partly due to his audience's inability to penetrate the irony of his character-drawing. His unpopularity is equally clear from the constant attacks made upon him in the comedies of Aristophanes, and by the fact that in fifty years he was awarded first prize only four or five times. At the age of seventy-three he found it necessary to leave Athens; he went into voluntary exile at the court of Archelaus, king of Macedon. It was during these last months that he wrote what many consider his greatest work, *The Bacchae*. When the news of his death reached Athens in 406 Sophocles appeared publicly in mourning for him.

PHILIP VELLACOTT has also translated the following volumes for the Penguin Classics: the complete plays of Aeschylus, the complete plays of Euripides, and a volume of Menander and Theophrastus. He was educated at St Paul's School and Magdalen College, Cambridge, and for twenty-four years he taught classics (and drama for twelve years) at Dulwich College. He has lectured on Greek drama on four tours in the U.S.A., and has spent four terms as Visiting Lecturer in the University of California at Santa Cruz. He is also the author of *Sophocles and Oedipus* (1971) and of *Ironic Drama: A Study of Euripides' Method and Meaning* (1975).

EURIPIDES

MEDEA
AND OTHER PLAYS

MEDEA · HECABE · ELECTRA · HERACLES

Translated with an Introduction by

PHILIP VELLACOTT

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INTRODUCTION*

MEDEA (431 B.C.)

Of the four plays in this volume, three have in common a point of special interest for their first audience. *Medea*, *Electra*, and *Heracles* are set respectively in Corinth, Argos, and Thebes; but for the solution of their dilemmas, the cleansing of their guilt, they all look to Athens. This observation perhaps illumines one aspect of the unique greatness of Athens. The hypocrisy of neglected ideals has often been condemned as a major sin; but in the moral world as in the romantic, it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved. The Athenians in their actions were certainly as cruel, as dishonest, as greedy, as revengeful, as irreligious, as other Greeks; but in their thoughts and aspirations many of them loved and honoured justice, integrity, and generosity, and loved their city as the shining embodiment of those virtues – which it was not. Faith without works may be dead – but faith is seldom entirely without works; and the works of the tragedians kept alive the faith of Athenians in the beauty of goodness, and in what their city had sometimes tried to be, even if success had been rare: the sanctuary of Hellas.

In *Electra*, Orestes' guilt was incurred wittingly – but at the command of a god; in *Heracles*, the crime was committed in pure innocence. By contrast, Medea's only excuse was her natural passion for revenge; yet she, no less than the others, could rely on sanctuary in Athens. The Chorus of Corinthian women follow their celebrated hymn of praise for Athens with questions voicing the instinctive protest that there are degrees of wickedness which pollute sanctuary – but that cannot change the story. That this principle of the open gate still had significance in historical times is shown by Thucydides' insistence on it in Pericles' Funeral Speech (in Book ii), where it is stated with pride that Athens allowed free coming and going through her city gates. In *Medea* Euripides' compliment to his city in this hymn of praise appears in some measure to compensate for the effect of the preceding scene.

* A general Introduction to the life and work of Euripides is given in *Alcestis and Other Plays* (Penguin Classics).

The king of Athens and his friendly offer to Medea were part of the unalterable legend, and would be accepted as such by the Athenian audience; but the treatment of the episode in this play is not only curiously arbitrary and unrelated to the rest of the action, but more than a little satirical; and the figure of Aegeus provides the one flicker of relief in the otherwise uniform sombreness of the drama.

This, the earliest extant tragedy of Euripides (it is preceded only by *Alcestis*), shows a moral pattern similar to that of his last work, *The Bacchae*. It opens with an oppressed victim claiming the sympathy of Chorus and audience. As the action develops inevitably, and the punishment shows itself twice as wicked as the crime, sympathy changes sides; and we are left with only one comfort, that since the worst has been reached, there can be no worse thing to follow.

To appreciate the balance of this play, we must take care not to prejudge Jason. He was a man of entirely respectable ambitions; and to these ambitions Medea presented two fatal obstacles: she had involved him in murder before ever he came to Corinth; and as a non-Greek she could never be recognized by Greeks as his wife. And the first of these obstacles is of course part of the reason for the second. Marathon and Salamis had made the Athenians vividly conscious that the establishment and growth of civilized values in a barbarous world lay with them alone as the leaders of Hellenic culture. For Greeks, 'civilized' life meant controlled, orderly, proportionate life, τὸ μηδὲν ἄγαν, 'No excess'. As a principle this applied equally to everything – politics, social habits, art. To them it was the only life, and the want of it a living death. Those who had died for it in the great battles or in resistance to tyranny were their most honoured heroes. This is the principle for which Jason stands. If his behaviour strikes us as repellent, that is how the behaviour of Athenians struck many Greeks of other States in the days when Athens claimed to be the champion of the Greek way of life, and the firm opponent of barbarism and all its ways.

In the great world the forces of civilization are a heroic minority, and their course is simple enough: to win or die. In a Greek city, such as the Corinth of this play, the forces of civilization rule, and barbarism appears – here in the person of Medea – as the heroic minority. The play shows a truth which many Greeks must have recognized, though it was seldom acknowledged in so many words: that when a

community or a nation has adopted, in its political and social institutions, the quality of self-control, *sophrosyne*, it soon learns that this quality belongs only in limited measure to its citizens; that the principle of barbarous excess is predominant in most individuals, so that the constant concern of government is to deal with barbarism inside the walls and in the council-chamber, as well as in foreign lands. Just as in the modern world democracy, desperate to resist totalitarianism, resorts to totalitarian methods, weakening its own life in the process, so the fiery Greek temperament made the menace of barbarism the excuse for its own excesses.

In the character of Jason a concern for civilized values is joined with a calculating coldness and an unscrupulous want of feeling. In that of Medea warmth of feeling grows on the same stem as emotional excess and the propensity to violence. Here we see an issue which again is similar to that found in *The Bacchae*. The lesson of both plays is that civilized men ignore at their peril the world of instinct, emotion, and irrational experience; that carefully worked-out notions of right and wrong are dangerous unless they are flexible and allow for constant adjustment. And the ending of *Medea*, with the Sun himself, the source of all life and warmth, vindicating the cause of passion, disorder, violent cruelty, against the cold, orderly, self-protective processes of civilized man, is a reminder that the universe is not on the side of civilization; and that a life combining order with happiness is something men must win for themselves in continual struggle with an unsympathetic environment.

HECABE (425 B.C.)

This play combines two themes, both of which Euripides treated also in other plays. First, the complacent hypocrisy with which men justify cruelty in the name of military or political necessity; second, the tendency of revenge to be more wicked than the crime which provoked it, and thus to forfeit sympathy and the claim of justice. Besides these two themes we have, in the first part, the heroic figure of Polyxena – enough in itself to make the play memorable; and in the second half the vivid interplay of character between Agamemnon and Hecabe. It is a straightforward play for fine actors, offering simple emotion rather than question or conflict.

It has been strongly criticized on the ground that it falls apart into

two scarcely connected episodes, concerned respectively with Polyxena and with Polydorus and Polymestor. The same criticism is often levelled at other plays such as *Hippolytus* and *Andromache*, and in some cases reflects a feature of Greek plays which arose inevitably from the restriction of the number of actors to three. In this play, however, that excuse is hardly needed. The play is about ruthless cruelty, and the different results it may produce for both sufferer and spectator. The cruelty of the sentence on Polyxena is transmuted by the heroism of Polyxena herself to an episode of awe-inspiring beauty. The cruelty of Polymestor to Hecabe's son is matured by the reaction of revenge into something profitless and repellent. Not even Agamemnon's verdict can justify Hecabe; for it is so evidently the result of a bad conscience over Polyxena. The whole point of the play lies in the contrast between its two halves; so that to criticize this division is largely irrelevant.

Throughout the action Hecabe is the central figure. The legend said that the accumulation of her sufferings drove her mad, and that she was transformed into a dog. The promontory called Cynossema, the Dog's Tomb, on the coast of the Thracian Chersonese (Gallipoli) was familiar to Greek sailors as the traditional site of Hecabe's burial. The legend itself is a comment on the effect of prolonged anguish on the mind; and this was a subject which greatly occupied Euripides. In this play Hecabe's depth of grief has almost reached the limit of endurance when the action begins. Polyxena's death is made endurable by Polyxena's own nobility; but a further blow is fatal, and Hecabe is transformed into a raving savage.

It has to be remembered that the annihilation of a city was an act which Athens, like other military powers, was capable of deciding on and carrying out. It had been decided on (and revoked at the very last moment) in the case of Mytilene in 427 B.C., two years before the production of this play; it was carried out in the case of Melos in 416 B.C., a year before the production of *The Women of Troy*.* The Greeks were a cruel race, and at the same time an emotional race capable of deep feeling. How much real influence a dramatic poet might exert (necessarily after the event) on the public actions of his city is impossible to estimate; but two pieces of evidence come to mind. One is the scene in the second half of Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, where Aeschylus and

* Included in *The Bacchae and Other Plays* (Penguin Classics).

Euripides are matched against each other for their value to the citizens of Athens. The other is the story of the heavy fine inflicted on Phrynichus (an older contemporary of Aeschylus) for moving his audience to tears with his play about the capture of Miletus. However that may be, the chief interest of this play for modern readers is probably its eloquence and pathos.

ELECTRA (415 B.C.)

Electra has often been a puzzling play for modern readers. This has not prevented if from becoming also one of the most popular in translation, probably because of the striking realism which Euripides here employs both in dialogue and in situation. Many performances, however, must have left English audiences largely in the dark on two points at least: the intended characters of Electra and Orestes, and the significance of the curious recognition-scene. Before examining these in detail we should take a general look at Euripides' treatment of one of the best-known stories in the Troy cycle.

The framework of the story, used also by both Aeschylus and Sophocles, was as follows: before Agamemnon returned from Troy, Electra, fearing that Aegisthus would murder Orestes, had sent him away from Argos to be brought up by Strophius, king of Phocis. Orestes at the time of Agamemnon's murder was about eleven years of age. As soon as he reached manhood he was commanded by the Delphic oracle to go to Argos and avenge his father by killing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. He reached Argos in disguise, revealed himself to his sister, and with her help accomplished his mission. As a shedder of kindred blood he was then pursued and tormented by the Furies.

Using this material Aeschylus wrote a drama in which the conflict between divine command and moral instinct is fought out in the person of Orestes. Sophocles wrote a dramatic study of Electra as the daughter who turned against her mother that obsession with revenge which she had inherited from her. In these plays the figures of the protagonists are presented on a heroic scale. Though the horror of matricide is recognized, it is not doubted that such a command might have divine sanction. In Euripides' play both Orestes and Electra are far from heroic; the murder of Aegisthus is shown as, at the best, inglorious; that of Clytemnestra as revolting. Yet then, and only then, when

brother and sister, having achieved their purpose, stand as the trembling victims of a profitless, relentless, and false tradition of glorious revenge, do we, the audience, feel pity for them.

The obligation and indulgence of revenge played a constant and disastrous part in Greek history, and often gave an unpleasant colour to otherwise attractive characters. This feature of Greek life Euripides sometimes (like Aeschylus) regards as an aspect of the search for ideal justice; more often he presents it as sheer folly, as the principle which perpetuates and aggravates evil and produces no good whatever. In this play he was dealing with a revenge-saga in which long and familiar tradition had upheld the principle in spite of every circumstance of horror. Aeschylus had justified and purified Orestes in the end; Sophocles had never questioned the nobility and justice of his act. Euripides here shows the revenge as conceived and executed in fear and weakness. Orestes, faced with his dilemma, trusts the oracle because he has not the strength to trust his own moral instinct; but neither has he the strength to trust in the rightness of what he has done at Apollo's command. For Euripides, the brutality of this command was a challenge to Orestes, just as the command to sacrifice Iphigenia had been a challenge to his father. Both, being weak, preferred sin under authority to the risks of moral independence.

A crucial point in the interpretation of the whole play is the recognition scene (lines 487–581).* Dispute has often turned on the question why Euripides in this scene should make, as it appears, a detailed criticism of Aeschylus' treatment of the recognition in *The Choephori*, and ridicule the use there made of 'signs' such as the lock of hair and the footprints. This question will be considered presently; but it is a secondary one. The prime question is, Why is the recognition so long delayed and so reluctant? To answer this we must look at clues already given in the early scenes to the characters of Electra and Orestes.

Electra in her opening conversation with the Peasant uses several phrases which suggest that her degradation and grief have led to exaggerated self-pity; and that this indulgence is her one luxury in life. The next scene, Electra's conversation with the Chorus, shows clearly

* For ideas contained in this section I am largely indebted to an illuminating article, 'The Anagnorisis in the *Electra* of Euripides' by David Raeburn (not yet published).

that there is no substance in her complaints that she is without friends and cut off from social life; and that the squalor of her personal appearance is a neurotic affectation. Various lines in subsequent scenes suggest further that she exaggerates the dishonour shown to Agamemnon's body; and that Orestes' slowness in appearing to rescue her is one of her favourite grievances.

Next let us turn to Orestes. In Electra's imagination her absent brother is a romantic hero. The suggestion that he might come to Argos secretly makes her indignant. When Orestes himself enters, he soon shows that the notion of matricide is a thing he can hardly bear to put into words. He has not dared to enter the walls of Argos; he is keeping near the frontier, partly to escape quickly if recognized, partly to find his sister and consult with her.

Presently their conversation reaches the point where Orestes asks, 'How would Orestes, if he came, react to your situation?' Electra's answer makes it clear that she expects him to carry out full revenge at once, and that she herself will go to any length in helping him, even to the point of killing Clytemnestra with her own hands. Clearly this is the point where Orestes should reveal himself, so that a plan can be concerted. He does not reveal himself. Why? It can only be because he knows that, once Electra recognizes him, he is irrevocably committed to murdering his mother. Electra will never let him off.

When eventually the Old Man insists on identifying Orestes, Euripides presents us with a scene in which the chief emotion is embarrassment. Orestes is consciously reluctant to be recognized because he sees all too clearly the inevitable consequence; and Electra is unconsciously reluctant to recognize him because, having for so long nursed the grievance of his failure to appear, she cannot bear to see that grievance removed. This tragi-comic situation explains the slowness of the recognition, the nervously foolish remarks of both brother and sister, and the perfunctory exchange of endearments which follows.

A further mystery is solved by this interpretation of Euripides' purpose. The traditional features of this story included not only the Recognition but the 'signs' by which it was effected: the lock of hair, the footprints, and the piece of cloth, woven by Electra, which Orestes wore. These signs might or might not be convincing in themselves: they belonged to an early and unsophisticated period, and were

part of the story. To include them *as the means of recognition* would be incongruous with that realistic treatment of the main characters and situation which was to provide the special interest of the play. What Euripides did, therefore, was to make these signs, not the means of recognition, but an ingenious excuse for that delay of recognition which Electra and Orestes, as he conceived them, desired for their own different reasons. And when Electra has rejected all three in theory, she underlines the ambiguity of her attitude by finally accepting a fourth sign – the scar – which has been plainly visible to her for the last half-hour.

The rest of the play needs little comment. In the account of the killing of Aegisthus no detail is spared which could emphasize that Orestes' exploit is not only unheroic but sacrilegious; and Electra's exalted praises, showing that her mental image of her brother is impervious to sordid fact, add an acutely satirical note. After the Messenger's description of the hearty and hospitable Aegisthus, we are introduced to the quiet, chastened, conciliatory figure of Clytemnestra. Electra is unmoved; she will force Orestes to carry out his undertaking to the end, even in face of this defencelessness. Then, as we learn afterwards, at the crucial moment her nerve fails, and she leaves Orestes to do the actual killing. When the deed has been done, brother and sister, who a little while earlier were trying not to know each other, find themselves alone together in a condemning world; and having discovered that each is the other's only friend, they are forced to part.

HERACLES (420 B.C.?)

The structure of this play is very simple. Neither the course of events nor the interplay of characters provides anything dramatically notable, except for the appearance of immortals in the middle of the play, which will be referred to presently. The story is the vehicle for that straightforward eloquence on the theme of human suffering, of which Euripides was a master. The world presented here is the familiar world where neither birth nor wealth, piety nor courage nor innocence, gives any guarantee against the power of wickedness or the malevolence of chance. What the spirit of man can aim at achieving is a dignity which remains when the gods have withdrawn or joined the side of evil, a serene despair which knows that the world contains no

higher hope than the human spirit can find within itself. And in *Heracles* a further encouragement is given: the firmness of human friendship as the one resource available in the depth of suffering. These simple truths are stated with a spacious and satisfying poetic power; and that is the chief interest of the play.

One unusual feature is worth special notice: the sudden and unexpected appearance, half-way through the play, of Iris and Madness. In Euripides supernatural beings, if they appear at all, generally do so at the beginning of a play to explain a situation, or at the end to provide – or offer – a solution. Critics have sometimes censured this appearance in *Heracles* as arbitrary and unmotivated; for Iris simply announces herself as the agent of Hera's jealousy towards Heracles. But the absence of rational motive is surely the dramatist's point. By this visitation he is describing the character, not of any god or human being, but of events themselves, as he observes them occurring in a world which he regards as ruled by Chance – a divinity not only blind but probably malevolent. His description of the world conveys a message entirely different from that of Sophocles. To the questions of a sufferer Sophocles offers one answer: reverence for the unfathomable wisdom and power of Zeus. Euripides wrote for men who had lost that faith, and exhorted them to rely on themselves, and, if they were fortunate, on the loyalty of friends. In this play Amphitryon in particular illustrates what must have been the progress of many religiously-minded Athenians, from belief in divine goodness and a rather smug confidence in divine favour, to a conviction that the whole concept of moral goodness begins, operates, and ends in man alone.

This theme is given an unusual kind of confirmation by a passage in the last scene. Theseus, trying to dissuade Heracles from suicide, drags in the somewhat irrelevant argument that gods have often been guilty of unchastity and yet continue to live in Olympus and are not beyond consolation. Heracles replies that he has never believed such stories. These words of Theseus are a curious echo from the Nurse's speech to Phaedra in *Hippolytus:* 'Yet they live in heaven, and show no haste to quit the company of gods. Events have proved too strong for them; and they, believe me, are content.' In *Hippolytus* this argument is used by the Nurse, whose moral attitude is more than dubious, while here it is Theseus who speaks, the godlike hero. In both plays

the audience is invited to disbelieve these tales; in *Hippolytus* by the character of the Nurse, here by Heracles' reply. In both cases the implied lesson is that an intelligent man should not rely on the gods for an acceptable standard of moral behaviour, any more than for protection in danger. Man must be his own god, and stand or fall by his own decisions.

Yet another aspect of this kind of 'humanism' is suggested in the same scene. Guilt, and the various ways of dealing with it, are a constant theme of tragedy. Guilt may be punished with death, as in the case of Clytemnestra; or expiated by suffering, as in the case of Orestes; or forgiven by a victim, as in the case of Theseus in *Hippolytus*. What of Heracles' guilt? The modern reader will feel that, since the play clearly shows his madness as sent upon him by divine agency, Heracles is not morally guilty. He himself, however, does not take this view; he knows that he is guilty. But his guilt is not something he can disown; it is a part of his life, which from beginning to end has been a life of violence. Heracles looks at the famous bow which has brought him victory in so many struggles, and has now killed his wife and children. Is he to take it with him to Athens? Or must he abandon it? 'Never! This bow is anguish to me, yet I cannot part with it.' He is Heracles, and can never be any other man; even the madness which came on him is a part of his nature which he must recognize and learn to live with. He is himself the only person who has the right to forgive what he has done. He knows himself; he will keep his bow.

The title of this play is given in some MSS. as 'Heracles Mainomenos', 'The Madness of Heracles'. The addition may have been made to distinguish it in reference from 'The Heracleidae', 'The Children of Heracles'. Most modern editors call it 'Hercules Furens', which is an unnecessary Latinism. Latinism in Hellene affairs is almost always to be deplored.