


**CLIFFS NOTES on**

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**EURIPIDES' ELECTRA  
MEDEA**



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YOUR KEY TO THE CLASSICS

# MEDEA and ELECTRA

## NOTES

*including*

- *Introduction and Backgrounds*
- *Life of Euripides*
- *Summaries and Commentaries*
- *Notes on Main Characters*
- *Suggested Reading*
- *Examination Questions*

*by*

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## INTRODUCTION

Euripides was the last of the three great tragedians who lived and wrote in fifth-century B.C. Athens and whose works still survive today. He introduced many innovations into the drama of his time and experimented with new theatrical forms like tragicomedy and melodrama, all of which still have an important place in modern literature. Euripides approached his characters with a unique psychological insight and compassion that was rare in Greek literature before him and which is now one of the most valued elements of his work. In addition, there is a frankness and freshness about Euripides, the great iconoclast and rationalist, that make many readers compare him to George Bernard Shaw. Thousands of years after his death the plays of Euripides are still read, studied, and performed, and have retained all their magic power of entrancing audiences.

*Medea* and *Electra*, the two plays included in this book, are typical examples of Euripidean drama. They are noted for their enlightening psychological examinations of characters under extreme stress and, despite their ancient settings and conventions, have many valuable rewards to offer the modern reader.

Greek tragedy is the product of a world very different from ours, although contemporary western civilization has its roots in that world. The commentaries and other material in this book will enable you to understand these differences so that you can appreciate the plays more fully.

But remember—a summary is not a substitute for the complete work and the ideas in a commentary are only intended to help you to evaluate the plays and develop your own ideas. If you neglect to read these plays in full or to give them the attention to which they are entitled, you fool no one and cheat only yourself.

## BACKGROUND OF GREEK TRAGEDY

Tragedy was performed in Athens at the three annual festivals of Dionysus, the most important of which was the Great, or City, Dionysia in late March. On three successive mornings at this festival, three tragic poets, who had been selected competitively earlier in the year, each presented a tetralogy consisting of three tragedies and a satyr-play. In addition, the festival featured comic and dithyrambic contests, and religious processions and rituals of various kinds. At the close of the festival ten judges who had been chosen by lot determined the winners and awarded prizes.

Besides writing the plays and composing the accompanying music, the poet was responsible for directing the production and supervising rehearsals. Often, in earlier times, he acted the role of the *protagonist*, or central character, also, but this tradition seems to have been broken in the time of Sophocles. The poets chosen to compete at the festivals were assigned actors, chorus, extras, and musicians by the state. The costs of the production were paid by the *choregus*, a wealthy citizen appointed by the government to do this as a *liturgy*, or public service. The privilege of backing the plays was considered a great honor, and the *choregus* shared the praise and awards given the poet if their plays won first prize.

Because attendance was a civic and religious obligation as well as a source of entertainment, admission to the theater was originally free. When it eventually became necessary to charge for tickets, the state provided funds for all citizens who could not afford the price.

## ORIGINS

Tragedy is thought to have developed from the ancient dithyramb, or choral lyric, which was sung by a male chorus in honor of the god Dionysus at his annual festivals. These performances also included group dancing and probably some brief dialogue between the leader and the chorus. At first the dithyramb was a crude improvisation based on the myths about Dionysus and may have taken the form of a rough burlesque or satire, from which the

satyr-play of classical drama was derived. In time it came to have a more formal artistic structure and its content was expanded to include stories from the whole legendary tradition.

At some point a radical transformation in approach took place and a serious philosophical attitude replaced the older boisterousness. The addition of an actor to the chorus allowed more complicated and lengthy stories to be used. The father of drama was said by the Greeks to have been Thespis. He first used an actor in his productions and was responsible for several other innovations. In 534 B.C. Thespis put on the first tragedy at the festival of Dionysus in Athens, although his new dramatic form may have been in existence for a short while before this in the rural areas of Attica.

There is some reason to believe, however, that it was Aeschylus who first wrote tragedy in the sense that the word is used today, with emphasis on content rather than stylistic matters. During the fifth century tragedy matured and its technique was improved until it became the sophisticated literary form seen in the hands of Sophocles.

Regardless of the changes in style and content, tragic performances remained an important element in the civic worship of Dionysus. The dithyramb also developed along independent lines as a choral medium, and dithyrambic contests continued to be a regular part of the dramatic festivals at Athens along with tragedy for the next few centuries.

## PLOTS

The stories used in tragedy were taken almost exclusively from the great cycles of mythology, although occasionally, as in *The Persians* of Aeschylus, a poet might draw upon a contemporary theme. These ancient myths and heroic legends were like a bible to the Greeks, for they recorded what was thought to be the collective social, political, and religious history of the people, and included many profound and searching tales about the problems of human life and the nature of the gods. The custom requiring the use of these mythological stories in tragedy satisfied an essential



requirement of the religious function of drama, for it enabled the poets to deal with subjects of great moral dignity and emotional significance.

From a dramatic point of view, the use of plots and characters already familiar to the audience gave the poet many opportunities for the use of irony and subtle allusions that are not available to the modern playwright. Suspense as it is known in the present-day theater could not easily be evoked, but the audience's attention was held by the poet's freedom to change or interpret the myths as he thought necessary. The spectators, already aware of the outlines of the story, learned from tragedy what personal motives and outside forces had driven the characters to act as they did. It is thought that the dramatist's reinterpretation and explanation of the ancient myths was one of the important factors considered in evaluating his work. Euripides was particularly renowned for his ingenious adaptations of the ancient tales.

The solemn and exalted quality of Greek tragedy, and the purposeful examination of the meaning of life in which its characters engage, are even today able to make a deep impression on readers, and are direct results of the use of stories based on mythological themes.

## THE THEATER AND THEATRICAL EQUIPMENT

The Greek theater was built in the open air and was generally quite large; the Theater of Dionysus at Athens, for example, had more than 17,000 seats. The theaters were usually built in hollowed-out hillsides, and despite their size had excellent acoustics, so that words spoken by the performers could easily be heard in all sections.

The *theatron* was the area in which the audience sat. It was shaped like a horseshoe and had rows of stone seats rising upward and backward in tiers. In the first row were stone thrones for the principal citizens and the priest of Dionysus.

The circular area at ground level which was enclosed on three sides by the U-shaped *theatron* was known as the *orchestra*, or dancing place of the chorus. In its center was the *thymele*, an

altar to Dionysus on which sacrifices were made and which was sometimes used as a stage prop during plays. The chorus assembled in the *orchestra* after marching in through the right or left *parodos*, or entrance passage, and remained there during the rest of the performance. The flute player and occasional harpist who provided musical accompaniment for the tragedies generally sat in a corner of the *orchestra*.

On the side of the *orchestra* which formed the open end of the *theatron* stood a wooden structure, the *skene*, or scene building. This was a dressing room for the actors, but its facade was usually made to resemble a palace or temple and it served as a backdrop for the action of the play. The three doors of the *skene* were used for entrances and exits.

The *proscenium* was the level area in front of the *skene* on which most of the play's action took place, although at times the actors might move to the *orchestra* or even to the roof of the *skene*. There was no stage, but the *proscenium* may have been raised one step higher than the *orchestra*, and there was no curtain.

A few items of technical equipment were available for special effects. These included devices for imitating lightning and the sound of thunder; other noisemakers; painted scenery; the *eccyclema*, a wheeled platform which was rolled out of the *skene* to reveal a tableau of action that had taken place indoors, e.g., when the doors are opened to show the bodies at the end of *Electra*; and the "machine," some kind of derrick that could be mounted on the roof of the *skene* and was used to bring about the miraculous appearances of gods and similar events (Medea's escape or the appearance of the Dioscuri at the end of *Electra*.——).

The actors performed in elaborate formal costumes and wore masks that emphasized the dominant traits of the characters they were impersonating. All members of the cast were male. They had to be competent singers as well as actors because many of their lyrical lines were chanted to music. The mode of acting seems to have been conventional and stylized rather than naturalistic, but it could not have been too artificial, since many scenes call for lively, realistic action.

On the whole, tragic performances must have been very stately and colorful spectacles, in which a pageant-like quality was derived from the brilliant costumes and organized movements of large numbers of players and extras, and the blending of drama, poetry, music, and dance to create a solemn yet entertaining act of devotion to the gods.

## THE CHORUS

The chorus was the nucleus from which tragedy evolved and it continued to have a central place in the drama throughout classical times. The use of the chorus varied, depending on the method of the playwright and the needs of the play being performed, but most often it acted as the "ideal spectator," as in *King Oedipus*, wherein it clarifies the experiences and feelings of the characters in everyday terms and expresses the conventional attitude toward developments in the story.

In some plays, like *The Suppliants* of Aeschylus, the chorus was itself a central figure in the tragedy rather than a group of interested bystanders, and this had a direct effect on the size and nature of its role, but usually the chorus was not so closely involved in the action of the drama. In general the tragedians used the chorus to create a psychological and emotional background to the action through its odes, to introduce and question new characters, to point out the significance of events as they occurred, to establish facts and affirm the outlook of society, to cover the passage of time between events, and to separate *episodes*.

The trend in tragedy was toward a decline in the importance of the chorus, caused mainly by the introduction of additional actors and increasing sophistication in their dramatic use, and by the more personal and complex nature of the stories selected for dramatization. With the passage of time the proportion of choral to individual lines decreased significantly, and the dramatic functions of the chorus, aside from the continued use of choral odes between *episodes*, were greatly reduced.

At a typical performance of tragedy in the fifth century, the chorus marched into the *orchestra* chanting the *parodos* and

remained drawn up there until the end of the play. At various points it divided into semi-choruses and moved around in the *orchestra* to suit the requirements of the play, but its most important moments came when it chanted the choral odes to music, accompanied by stylized gestures and a series of intricate group dances. At times the chorus also engaged in a lyrical dialogue, or *kommos*, with one of the characters and made brief comments or inquiries during the course of an *episode*.

## STRUCTURE

Classical tragedies were composed within a definite structural framework, although there are occasional minor variations in some plays. These structural divisions are noted in the summaries of the plays in these Notes, but it should be remembered that such notation is artificial and is inserted only for illustrative purposes, since Greek tragedy was performed without intermissions or breaks.

The following are the main elements of a typical tragedy:

*Prologue* – the opening scene, in which the background of the story is established, usually by a single actor or in a dialogue between two actors.

*Parodos* – the entrance of the chorus, usually chanting a lyric which bears some relation to the main theme of the play.

*Episode* – the counterpart of the modern act or scene, in which the plot is developed through action and dialogue between the actors, with the chorus sometimes playing a minor role.

*Stasimon* – the choral ode. A *stasimon* comes at the end of each *episode* so that the tragedy is a measured alternation between these two elements.

*Exodos* – the final action after the last *stasimon*, ended by the ceremonial exit of all the players.

## ARISTOTLE ON TRAGEDY

In the *Poetics*, his famous study of Greek dramatic art, Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) compares tragedy to such other metrical forms as comedy and epic. He determines that tragedy, like all poetry, is a kind of imitation (*mimesis*), but adds that it has a serious purpose and uses direct action rather than narrative to achieve its ends. He says that poetic *mimesis* is imitation of things as they could be, not as they are—i.e., of universals and ideals—thus poetry is a more philosophical and exalted medium than history, which merely records what has actually happened.

The aim of tragedy, he writes, is to bring about a “catharsis” of the spectators—to arouse in them sensations of pity and fear, and to purge them of these emotions so that they leave the theater feeling cleansed and uplifted, with a heightened understanding of the ways of gods and men. This catharsis is brought about by witnessing some disastrous and moving change in the fortunes of the drama’s protagonist (Aristotle recognized that the change might not be disastrous, but felt this was the kind shown in the best tragedies—*Oedipus at Colonus*, for example, was considered a tragedy by the Greeks but does not have an unhappy ending).

According to Aristotle, tragedy has six main elements—plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle (scenic effect), and song (music), of which the first two are primary. Most of the *Poetics* is devoted to analysis of the scope and proper use of these elements, with illustrative examples selected from many tragic dramas, especially those of Sophocles, although Aeschylus, Euripides, and some playwrights whose works no longer survive are also cited.

Several of Aristotle’s main points are of great value for an understanding of Greek tragic drama. Particularly significant is his statement that the plot is the most important element of tragedy. He explains—

...tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of action and life, of happiness and misery. And life consists of action, and

its end is a mode of activity, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is their action that makes them happy or wretched. The purpose of action in the tragedy, therefore, is not the representation of character: character comes in as contributing to the action. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of the tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be one without character.... The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: character holds the second place.

Aristotle goes on to discuss the structure of the ideal tragic plot and spends several chapters on its requirements. He says that the plot must be a complete whole—with a definite beginning, middle, and end—and its length should be such that the spectators can comprehend without difficulty both its separate parts and its overall unity. Moreover, the plot requires a single central theme in which all the elements are logically related to demonstrate the change in the protagonist's fortunes, with emphasis on the dramatic causation and probability of the events.

Aristotle has relatively less to say about the tragic hero because the incidents of tragedy are often beyond the hero's control or not closely related to his personality. The plot is intended to illustrate matters of cosmic rather than individual significance and the protagonist is viewed primarily as the character who experiences the changes which take place. This stress placed by the Greek tragedians on the development of plot and action at the expense of character, and their general lack of interest in exploring psychological motivation, is one of the major differences between ancient and modern drama.

Since the aim of a tragedy is to arouse pity and fear through an alteration in the status of the central character, he must be a figure with whom the audience can identify and whose fate can trigger these emotions. Aristotle says that "pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves." He surveys various possible types of characters on the basis of these premises, then defines the ideal protagonist as—

...a man who is highly renowned and prosperous, but one who is not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgment or frailty; a personage like Oedipus....

In addition, the hero should not offend the moral sensibilities of the spectators, and as a character he must be true to type, true to life, and consistent.

The hero's error or frailty (*harmartia*) is often misleadingly explained as his "tragic flaw," in the sense of that personal quality which inevitably causes his downfall or subjects him to retribution. However, overemphasis on a search for the decisive flaw in the protagonist as the key factor for understanding the tragedy can lead to superficial or false interpretations. It gives more attention to personality than the dramatists intended and ignores the broader philosophical implications of the typical plot's denouement. It is true that the hero frequently takes a step which initiates the events of the tragedy and, owing to his own ignorance or poor judgment, acts in such a way as to bring about his own downfall. In a more sophisticated philosophical sense though, the hero's fate, despite its immediate cause in his finite act, comes about because of the nature of the cosmic moral order and the role played by chance or destiny in human affairs. Unless the conclusions of most tragedies are interpreted on this level, the reader is forced to credit the Greeks (and himself, by implication) with the most primitive of moral systems.

It is worth noting that some scholars believe the "flaw" was intended by Aristotle as a necessary corollary of his requirement that the hero should not be a completely admirable man. *Harmartia* would thus be the factor that delimits the protagonist's imperfection and keeps him on a human plane, making it possible for the audience to sympathize with him. This view tends to give the "flaw" an ethical definition, but relates it only to the spectators' reaction to the hero and does not increase its importance for interpreting the tragedies.

The remainder of the *Poetics* is given over to examination of the other elements of tragedy, and discussion of various techniques,

devices, and stylistic principles. Aristotle mentions two features of the plot, both of which are related to the concept of *harmartia*, as crucial components of any well-made tragedy. These are "reversal" (*peripeteia*), where the opposite of what was planned or hoped for by the protagonist takes place, as when Oedipus' investigation of the murder of Laius leads to a catastrophic and unexpected conclusion; and "recognition" (*anagnorisis*), the point when the protagonist recognizes the truth of a situation, discovers another character's identity, or comes to a realization about himself. This sudden acquisition of knowledge or insight by the hero arouses the desired intense emotional reaction in the spectators, as when Oedipus finds out his true parentage and realizes what crimes he has been responsible for.

Aristotle wrote the *Poetics* nearly a century after the greatest Greek tragedians had already died, in a period when there had been radical transformations in nearly all aspects of Athenian society and culture. The tragic drama of his day was not the same as that of the fifth century, and to a certain extent his work must be construed as a historical study of a genre that no longer existed rather than as a description of a living art form.

In the *Poetics* Aristotle used the same analytical methods that he had successfully applied in studies of politics, ethics, and the natural sciences, in order to determine tragedy's fundamental principles of composition and content. This approach is not completely suited to a literary study and it is sometimes too artificial or formula-prone in its conclusions.

Nonetheless, the *Poetics* is the only critical study of Greek drama to have been made by a near-contemporary. It contains much valuable information about the origins, methods, and purposes of tragedy, and to a degree shows us how the Greeks themselves reacted to their theater. In addition, Aristotle's work had an overwhelming influence on the development of drama long after it was compiled. The ideas and principles of the *Poetics* are reflected in the drama of the Roman Empire and dominated the composition of tragedy in western Europe during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.



## LIFE OF EURIPIDES

Euripides was born around 480 B.C. on the island of Salamis near Athens. One tradition relates that his birth took place on the very same day as the great Athenian naval victory over the Persians, but an ancient inscription indicates that it may actually have been around 484 B.C.

The parents of Euripides were wealthy and gave their son a good education. They made him concentrate on athletics and gymnastics because an oracle they had received before his birth predicted that their son would win a crown of victory and it never occurred to them that the prophecy might refer to prowess in poetry. Euripides became well-known for his gymnastic feats while still a boy, but he disliked athletics and decided to cultivate his other interests. He studied philosophy, rhetoric, and poetry, and began to write tragedy at the age of eighteen. It was not until many years later, however, that any of his plays were accepted for performance at the annual dramatic festival.

His family's wealth allowed Euripides to devote most of his time to poetry, and he was able to collect a large personal library, a great treasure in those days because every book had to be written out painstakingly by hand. Like all Athenians, he fulfilled such civic obligations as military service, but he had no real interest in the day-to-day business of government and politics and rarely participated in public affairs. Euripides' main concern was drama and he put all his energy into his literary efforts.

Euripides is said to have been a serious, contemplative, and moody man. He took part in few social activities and had a reputation as an eccentric because he spent much of his time alone, brooding or writing, in a cave near the seashore on Salamis. Among his few intimates were the philosophers Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Socrates, and the brilliant young politician Alcibiades. He was acquainted with Sophocles, since the two poets were contemporaries and rivals in the theater, but they had little in common and never became friends. Hardly anything else is known about Euripides'