Euripides

The date of Euripides' birth is uncertain. One ancient source places it in 484; another tradition says that he was born in the year of the battle of Salamis, 480. Although comic poets characterized Euripides as having parents of little wealth and low birth (they said Euripides' mother sold vegetables), these slanders cannot be confirmed, and other information about Euripides suggests that his parents were respectable and had a healthy income. Inscriptions record that Euripides served as wine pourer for well-born young males who honored Apollo, and on another occasion he served as torch bearer in a procession for Apollo. Euripides is said to have been an athlete early in his career, then to have taken up painting, and finally become a poet. Euripides was a member of the deme of Phyla, but his family had property on the island of Salamis and he is said to have done some of his writing there. Ancient sources often stated that Euripides studied with thinkers such as Protagoras and Socrates. Euripides' writing also shows that he knew something of the work of Anaxagoras and Prodicus, and after his lifetime Euripides was called the philosopher of the stage. Tradition reports that Euripides was married twice (to Melito and Choirile) and had three sons, Euripides the younger, Mnesarchides, and Mnesilochus. After Euripides died, the younger Euripides produced his *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Bacchae* for competition in Athens.

According to one rumor, Euripides' slave Cephisophon, who was said to have helped Euripides compose his plays, seduced Euripides' wife. This cannot be confirmed, however, and the rumor may have evolved from another stereotype about Euripides, namely, that he hated women (compare Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*). This stereotype arises from statements made by characters in some of Euripides' plays, both male and female, who make remarks about the evils of women. Euripides has an equal number of negative remarks about men, however, and one later writer, Athenaeus, calls him not a hater, but a lover of women. Euripides died at the court of the Macedonian king Archelaus, where he spent the last two years of his life. One tradition says that Euripides died after being tore apart by dogs. This story, however, should be dismissed as being modeled on the death of Actaeon, a character in mythology who died in that manner. Sophocles, who himself would die within another year, is said to have honored Euripides by wearing mourning clothes and by summoning his chorus before the play without their usual garlands.

Although Euripides did not gain as much critical acclaim as Aeschylus or Sophocles during his lifetime (Euripidean dramas had only four victories, more than three times fewer than those of Aeschylus), after his death Euripides' plays continue to enjoy more popularity than those of Aeschylus or Sophocles. Euripides' first known play, *Peliades* (*The Daughters of Pelias*), was staged in 455 (the year after Aeschylus' death), and he had his first victory in 442 (with which plays is unknown). Euripides put some 90 plays on the stage, of which 19 survive (five more than the combined surviving plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles): *Alcestis* (438), *Medea* (431), *The Children of Heracles* (ca. 430), *Hippolytus* (428), *Andromache* (ca. 426), *Hecabe* (ca. 424), *Suppliant Women* (ca. 422), *Heracles* (ca. 417), *Trojan Women* (415), *Electra* (ca. 415), *Iphigenia in Tauris* (414 or 413), *Helen* (412), *Ion* (ca. 410), *Phoenician Women* (ca. 410), *Orestes* (408), *Bacchae* (405), *Iphigenia at Aulis* (405), *Cyclops* (a satyr play), and *Rhesus* (which some scholars do not believe Euripides wrote).

Not only did Euripides write plays, but, as alluded to, a fictional Euripides appeared as a character in several plays. Three of Aristophanes' surviving plays have Euripides as a character. In *Acharnians*, Aristophanes satirizes Euripides' practice of having major characters on stage dressed in rags when Dicaeopolis goes to the tragedian's house to borrow the costume of Telephus from Euripides' play of the same name. In *Thesmophoriazusae*, Aristophanes portrays Euripides as a hater of women and has the women at the Thesmophoria decree death for the tragedian. Finally, in *Frogs*, Dionysus goes to the underworld with the intention of taking back Euripides because all of the other good poets have left Athens or are dead. At the play's conclusion, however, Dionysus decides to take Aeschylus back to the upper world because he judges him better able to advise the Athenians than Euripides.

If one compares Aristophanes' portrayal of Socrates in *Clouds* and of Euripides' in *Frogs*, one finds a great number of similarities and none of them speaks well of Euripides. Both are described as worshiping unusual divinities, corrupting people with their ideas, and expressing themselves in ways that were difficult for people to understand. On several occasions, Aristophanes quotes lines from Euripides' plays that the comic playwright found bizarre (e.g., "My tongue has sworn, my mind remains unsworn"; "What is shameful unless it seems so to those who do it?"); "Who knows if life is death or death is life?").
Although much of Aristophanes' criticism of Euripides is exaggerated, in contrast to Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides definitely seems to have tested the limits of dramatic art. His expository prologues, in which a single character appears at the beginning and "sets the stage" for the events that will ensue, were criticized as rather bland, but we find the same sort of prologues in Plautus. Euripides is also criticized for not integrating the chorus skillfully into the action of his plays, but in some cases (e.g., Orestes) this may have been done to create a particular dramatic effect or emphasize a particular theme. Critics have often noted the artificial or contrived endings of many of his plays through a deus ex machina (see mechane). Women, common people, and slaves receive more attention in Euripides' plays than in those of the other two great playwrights. Electra's peasant husband has more lines than Clytemnestra in Euripides' Electra, and in Iphigenia in Tauris a cowherd's speaking role is more extensive than that of the Taurian king, Thoas. Euripides was interested in the psychological motivation of his characters, and sometimes his characters seem inconsistently drawn as they waver back and forth between courses of action (e.g., Medea in Medea, Agamemnon in Iphigenia at Aulis). They often express a cynical attitude toward the behavior of their fellow humans and the divinities that control the world.

Further Information


