With Euripides, the youngest of the three great Athenian tragedians of the fifth century B.C., Attic drama takes on a familiarly modern tone. Although Aristotle regarded Euripides as "the most tragic of the tragic poets," such critics as Friedrich von Schlegel and Friedrich Nietzsche blamed him for the death of tragedy and the end of the cohesion of Attic drama. A more balanced view is that Euripides fulfilled drama's capacity to expand its range, combining elements of tragedy and comedy, realism and fantasy, as well as extending spiritual, moral, and psychological explorations to the realm of ordinary life. It was Euripides, not Aeschylus [27] or Sophocles [13], who depicted on stage the various intellectual controversies of his day and captured the growing anxiety and doubt that beset Athenian society at the end of fifth century. Through his techniques and themes, Euripides became the true progenitor of drama and it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the world after Athens's golden age became Euripidean, as did the drama that reflected it.

Euripides wrote 92 plays, of which 18 have survived. This is by far the largest number of surviving plays among the great Athenian playwrights, a testimony both to the accidents of literary survival and of high regard for Euripides by succeeding generations. An iconoclast in his life and art, Euripides is the prototype for the modern alienated artist. Euripides played no role in public life. An intellectual who wrote in isolation (according to tradition, in a cave in his native Salamis), he won first prize for his plays at the annual Great Dionysia only four times, far fewer than did Aeschylus or Sophocles, and his critics, particularly Aristophanes [34], who treated Euripides as a frequent comic target, were severe. According to Aristophanes, Euripides persuaded men that the gods did not exist, debunked the heroic, and taught the moral degeneration that transformed Athenians into "marketplace loungers, tricksters, and scoundrels." The last years of Euripides' life were spent away from Athens in Macedonia, although the reason for his departure is unknown. His immense popularity came only after his death, when, in the fourth century and after, his plays eclipsed in popularity those of all of the other great Athenian playwrights.

As his life redefined the status and place of the artist in society, his plays provided challenges to established dramatic technique and the tragic vision of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Since so many examples of his work have survived and can be accurately dated, it is possible to trace Euripides' artistic development to a greater degree than the other Attic playwrights. His early plays (Medea, Hippolytus) show his achievement in heroic tragedy. In the opening years of the Peloponnesian War, Euripides wrote patriotic plays (Heraclidae, Suppliants), followed by plays expressing disapproval of the war (Hecuba, The Trojan Women). His later plays show him turning away from tragedy to romantic intrigue (Ion, Iphigenia in Taurus, Helen), in the process developing a new theatrical genre that has come to be labeled tragicomedy. He then returned to tragedy in a more violent and despairing mode (Orestes, Phoenissae, The Bacchae).

Euripides' remarkable range includes many contradictions. His skepticism concerning divine will and purpose earned him the title of "the poet of the Greek enlightenment," yet he is also the preeminent explorer of human nature's passionate and irrational side. The first playwright to put women at the center of the action, Euripides has been labeled both a feminist and a misogynist for portraying his female characters in believable yet unflattering ways. Finally, Euripides has been seen as drama's first great realist, the playwright who relocated tragic action in everyday life and portrayed gods and heroes with recognizable human and psychological traits. Yet his realism shares the stage with supernatural elements, exotic settings, and a reliance on the deus ex machina, the fortuitous arrival of a god to provide a climactic resolution to the play's complex dilemmas.

The essential component, however, of all Euripides' plays is a challenging reexamination of orthodoxy and conventional beliefs. In the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the ways of men may be hard to fathom, but the will and purpose of the gods are assumed, if not always accepted. For Euripides, the ability of the gods to provide certainty and order is as doubtful as an individual's preference for the good. In Euripides gods resemble those of Homer, full of pride, passion, vindictiveness, and irrational characteristics that resemble those of humans. Divine will and order are replaced by an indifferent fate, and the tragic hero is the victim of forces beyond his control. The playwright reinterprets the myths to emphasize their human relevance, and, as
Sophocles observed, men are shown as they are, full of contradictions and mixed qualities of strengths and weaknesses. Contrary to the generic types and monolithic characters of Sophocles, for whom consistency is primary, Euripides' characters are marked by their changeability and contradictions. Medea, for example, changes her mind so often that the effect is dizzying yet believable. Because Euripides' characters offer us so many different sides and are haunted by both the rational and the irrational, the playwright earns the distinction of being the first great psychological artist in the modern sense, in an awareness of complex motives and contradictions that make up identity and determine actions.

Euripides also was revolutionary in the way he extended drama's range. His plays dramatize subjects and perspectives never depicted before on stage. *The Trojan Women*, for example, shows war from the point of view of its casualties, not its combatants. Eric Havelock has summarized the Euripidean revolution as "putting on stage rooms never seen before." Instead of the throne room, Euripides takes his audience into the living room and presents the drama of characters who resemble the audience members instead of heroic paragons. As Aristophanes correctly pointed out, Euripides brought to the stage "familiar affairs" and "household things." He allowed drama to explore central questions of the day in education, politics, and religion.

Euripides' drama also takes the audience to the limits of endurance by portraying suffering in the absence of any consolation and without the promise of order and reconciliation. In his masterpiece *The Bacchae*, Pentheus, the young Theban ruler who refuses to acknowledge the power of Dionysus, god of wine and ecstasy, is literally torn apart through the agency of Dionysus's destructiveness and his own revealed irrationality. Pentheus's experiences reflect the process of Euripides' drama to shatter illusion and force the audience to confront the chaotic nature of human existence. The existential tone of Euripidean drama became an integral feature of drama in the West, from Shakespeare [1] through Henrik Ibsen [36], August Strindberg [56], and Eugene O'Neill [59].

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