

anese geisha are the nearest modern parallels to the Greek hetaira, and all three owe their existence as a class to much the same social conditions, a high standard of culture and intelligence, a low standard of sexual morality.

Such were the conditions of Athenian life, and we shall find them reflected in literature. The great lyric poets, Simonides, Pindar, Bacchylides, concern themselves almost exclusively with men; Æschylus alone, in this, as in most things, the exact antithesis of the typical Athenian, regards women as creatures possessed of mind and soul. In sharp contrast to the tragedian is Herodotus, and a comparison between their views is possible, for, although the historian is a considerably younger man, a good deal of his material goes back to an earlier date, and in social matters especially he often represents the ideas of the first years of the fifth century.

Herodotus, great traveller and charming personality though he is, is still a true Ionian. There is frequently a Milesian flavour about his tales—for instance the story of Rhapsinitus and the robber—and it is not unfair to say that in his researches into ancient tribal life and folklore he is especially interested in such savage customs as put women in an inferior place. The account of the native races of Libya in the last chapters of the fourth book of the History will afford an example.



But the grandeur of his main theme, the struggle between Athens and Persia, raised the historian from these doubtful interests, and in the last five books of his work there is little depreciation of women as a class. It is true that women scarcely come into the narrative, and that Xerxes' remark about Artemisia, 'My men have become women and my women have become men,' is framed to suit the ideas of an Athenian, as it would have suited the Romans, who could hardly conceive of a Queen. It is scarcely as appropriate in the mouth of a Persian whose own mother, Atossa, was then acting as regent. But this is a small point and, speaking generally, there is little in the last part of the History to offend.

Herodotus is really animated by an ardent patriotism and a genuine love of liberty. 'Isonomy,' he says—and many English race-goers will agree with him—'the very sound of the word is most excellent.' But it must be remembered that his patriotism is for males only, and that his equality before the law is an equality from which women were shut out; for even Plato makes isonomy between men and women the last and almost incredible stage of democratic licence.

So it is in the earlier books alone that the baser manner is evident, and one example of it will suffice to give a proof of the difference between the Ionian spirit which brought about the enslavement of



women and the spirit of enlightenment which rebelled against that servitude.

We will take the story of Io, as told by Æschylus and Herodotus, for the ancient legends of Greece, subjects alike for history and drama, have one great advantage: their main outlines were impersonal and known to all; details, treatment, and interpretation could be varied to express the artist's personal thought. Io, the daughter of Inachus, king of Argos, was beloved by Zeus: through the jealousy of Hera she was changed into a cow, and after long wanderings regained her mortal shape and found rest in Egypt, where she became mother of Epaphus, first king of the land. Such is the legend, and this is Herodotus' version of it:

The Persians say that some Phœnicians once brought a cargo of merchandise to Argos. The women of the town, among them Io, came down to the seashore to bargain. The Phœnicians seized the women and carried them off to Egypt. Now to carry off women by violence the Persians think is the act of a wicked man; to trouble about avenging them is the act of a fool; to pay no regard to them when carried off is the part of a wise man; for it is clear that, if they had not wished it themselves, they would not be ravished. Such is the Persian account, but as regards Io the Phœnicians do not agree. They say that they used no violence in taking her to Egypt, but that she had an intrigue with their captain when he was at Argos. When she discovered that she was likely to become a



mother she was afraid of her parents, and to hide her secret came of her own accord with them to Egypt.'

All the poetry and romance of the story have disappeared : realism has triumphed. Io is a woman ; on the best interpretation of her conduct she is vain and imprudent ; she shows herself to strange men, and is carried off by them, although, as the story is at pains, though not very logically, to add, it must have been with her own consent. On the worst interpretation she is a mere wanton. She allows a sea-captain to seduce her, and then deserts her home, her parents, and her native land.

Listen now to Æschylus—in the beautiful version by Mr. E. R. Bevan :

The chambers, where I housed, a virgin hidden,  
Strange faces aye in the night would visit, wooing  
With sooth suggestion : ' Oh, most huge in fortune,  
Most happiest of all maidens—wherefore maiden,  
Oh, wherefore so long maiden, when there waits  
thee

Wedlock the highest ? He, the Lord of Heaven,  
Is waxen hot, pierced with desire of thee,  
Yea, and with thee would tread the passages  
Of love's delight. Now therefore foot not from thee,  
O child, the bed of the Highest ; but do this,  
Go forth to where the meadow is deep, the field  
Of Lerna—stations of the household flock,  
Home of thy father's herds—go even thither,  
That so the eye of Zeus may ease desire.'

With such-like dreams the kingly dark for me  
Was ever fraught, me miserable : till, ridden,



I gat me heart to open to my father  
 The visions and the dreams of night. And he  
 To Pytho, yea, and even to Dodona,  
 Sent embassy on embassy, inquiring  
 What thing he had need to do, or what word speak,  
 To pleasure them that rule us. And they came,  
 Bringing still back burden of wavering lips,  
 Sentences, blind, dark syllables. At last  
 A word clear-visaged came to Machus  
 Enjoining plainly and saying he should thrust me  
 Forth of the house, forth of the land, to wander  
 At large, a separate thing even to the last  
 Confines of earth.

The story is the same, but the treatment is different, and the two passages illustrate the difference between romantic idealism and realistic depreciation.

But Io, in the *Prometheus*, is only one of the gallery of Æschylus' heroines, for in his art women take the foremost place. The dramatist is at variance with his age, and his fervent patriotism is almost the sole bond of union between him and his fellows. Æschylus is a mystic; he believed in the Delphic inspiration, and took an interest in religious speculation. His contemporaries were materialists, suspected the politics of Delphi, and regarded religion simply as a ceremony. Æschylus was a conservative in politics, although a liberal in thought; Athens was already becoming an extreme democracy. Finally, Æschylus bases his theatre on women, and makes them the chief agents



of the drama, while the ordinary woman of his time was shut out altogether from the active business of life.

But he is an unconscious feminist, and the definite purpose which we find in Euripides is quite absent from his plays. It shows, however, a strange lack of appreciation to reproach him, as some critics have done, with neglecting the feminine interest. Of the seven tragedies that the Byzantine tradition has preserved for us, four, if their subject was handled by a modern dramatist, would be called feminist problem plays, and in the other three the female characters supply most of the dramatic interest, even though the first idea of the plot might seem to put them in the second plan of action.

Of the lost plays, many, as far as we may judge by their titles and meagre fragments, have the same characteristic. The most famous, the *Niobe*, had for its central figure the sorrowing mother, such another as Euripides' Hecuba in the first scene of the *Trojan Women*, and represented perhaps in much the same fashion, for Æschylus, like most Athenian women, knew full well the dramatic value of silence, and the pathos of Niobe's situation needs no long speeches. So, if we possessed the *Callisto*, the legend of the maiden changed into a bear, the *Penelope*, the *Iphigenia*, or the *Oreithyia*, that favourite Athenian story of the young girl roaming



on the sea-shore and carried off by the fierce god to his northern fastness, we should appreciate even more vividly than we can now the romantic side of the tragedian's art. It is a significant fact in this connection that of the sixty odd titles of lost plays which have come down to us, nearly half are names of women. Moreover, in seventeen of these plays, the title is taken from the chorus, and in the Æschylean Theatre the chorus is generally the central figure in the dramatic action. Such titles as the 'Daughters of the Sun,' the 'Nurses of Dionysus,' the 'Daughters of Nereus,' and the 'Bacchanal Women,' suggest at any rate romantic plays with a strong feminine interest; such others as the 'Women of the Bedchamber,' the 'Water-carriers,' and the 'Women of Etna,' might well be examples of that realistic treatment of women's life of which we have an example in the Nurse of the 'Libation-bearers.' Arguments drawn merely from the names of lost plays are obviously of little value, except in so far as they strengthen the definite evidence which the existing tragedies supply, but an examination of the remaining seven plays will show that the first and greatest of Athenian dramatists was deeply impressed with the potentialities for good and evil of the female mind.



## VI.—ÆSCHYLUS AND SOPHOCLES

OF the seven plays of Æschylus that remain, three—the *Seven against Thebes*, the *Persians*, and the *Prometheus*—are concerned with battles, and with strife among men and among gods. It might be expected that women here would play but a small part, but, as a matter of fact, in two of the three the chorus, the intermediary between poet and audience, is composed of women, and in the third a woman is the chief character.

The *Seven against Thebes* is a patriotic drama, 'crammed full of the spirit of war,' as the poet himself describes it, and also full of speeches. The male characters talk; what little action there is in the play falls to the women of the chorus. Their first song, for example, when they call on the gods to save them from the ravages of war, was probably accompanied by more vigorous movements than anything in the rest of the tragedy. The unsympathetic male, Eteocles, addresses them, it is true, as 'unbearable creatures' and 'detestable animals,' and says, 'For my own part, I never want to share my house with any womankind, nor take them to



my troubles and my joys ;' but his remarks are strictly in keeping with his unpleasant character, and the poet instinctively relies on the female characters for his chief dramatic interest. So in the *Persians*, a chronicle play composed mainly of choral odes and messengers' speeches, the queen-mother, Atossa, takes the first place in the action, and the psychological contrast lies between her womanly strength and Xerxes' manly weakness. In the *Prometheus*, certainly, most of the characters—gods and demi-gods—are males, but they have little dramatic significance. As far as they are concerned, the play is a good example of what Maeterlinck calls the 'static drama.' The characters stand still, *and talk*. The action is in the hands of the female characters, the pathetic figure of the wandering cow-maiden, Io, and the contrasted group of the mermaid chorus, the daughters of the sea. These latter are perhaps the most charming of all the poet's creations, and the fragrance that heralds their approach, when, casting away modesty, they venture to appear before a man, spreads through the whole play. Sympathising, but not quite without merriment ; inquisitive, but staunch in the hour of danger ; they are just such characters as Nausicaa herself.

In these three plays, then, the feminine interest has forced its way, as it were, into the plot, which in



its first form offered women no place. The *Seven against Thebes*, a 'fragment from the table of Homer,' differs chiefly from the epic in the feminine element that has been imported by the chorus; the *Persians*, dealing with the same events as those described by Herodotus, has for its point of difference the prominence given to the female character, Atossa; the *Prometheus*, which tells the story of the conflict between the fierce young god and the philanthropic old demiurge, relies for its dramatic interest largely on the episodes of the Nereides and Io; episodes which, strictly speaking, have nothing to do with the main plot.

This feminism, inherent in the poet's mind, finds full expression in the remaining four plays. The *Suppliant Women*, for example, archaic though it seems to us, deals with a social problem and a question of law, which was hotly debated in the poet's time, and finally, in spite of his advocacy, settled against the women. The question is this—'Should a woman be compelled to marry a man she dislikes, and to hand over to him the control of her property, merely because he is the nearest male relative?' Æschylus answers in the negative; Athenian law decided in the affirmative.

The characters in the play are nearly all women, the fifty daughters of Danaus, accompanied by their old father, who have fled from Egypt to Greece in



order to escape from the violence of their cousins, the sons of Ægyptus, who wish to marry them by force. It is a lyric drama, and the burden of the action and the music rests with the women. The agony of the crowd of girls crouching helpless at the altar is depicted in the most entrancing melody; they are not regarded as separate individuals, but as representing women in general; their plight is that of all womankind, and the problem is presented as universal. Swarthy daughters of the South, they call upon their god to help them, the god who once found delight in the arms of their ancestress, Io; and in the play their prayer is answered. The King of Argos protects and gives them shelter, the Egyptian herald who would have taken them back is scornfully dismissed. Of the three male characters Danaus is the most interesting, and his advice to his daughters is applicable to women generally in ancient times:

Children, you must be prudent: let your utterance be attended before all by absence of boldness: a modest face and a tranquil eye: no wanton looks. Be not forward in your speech nor prolix: people here are very prone to take offence. And remember to be submissive—you are needy foreign fugitives—it is not seemly for the weak to be bold in speech.

So in his concluding words he hints at some of the difficulties of a woman's life:



I charge you, bring me not to shame, you whose youthful bloom is so attractive to men. Ripe tender fruit is never easy to protect; men are like animals, they seek only to destroy. Your gardens fair, the lady of love herself proclaims their dewy freshness, and when a virgin comes in dainty loveliness every man as he passes by falls victim to desire, and shoots a swift glance to win her fancy. . . . Observe, then, this your father's charge, and value chastity more than life itself.

The *Suppliant Women* presents one particular phase of women's subjection considered impersonally, and scarcely deals with the great question of how far force may be rightly met by force. In the legend the daughters of Danaus escape from slavery by killing their husbands on their wedding night, but of that Æschylus in this play tells us nothing.

The problem, however, is too vital to escape his notice, and it forms the central motive of the greatest play in world-literature, the *Agamemnon*. 'Is a woman ever justified in killing her husband?' The question had a special interest in Athens, as it must have in any society where women are kept enslaved, for the tyrant always walks in dread of the assassin's knife. Euripides, with his stinging irony, reveals the secret fear: 'If women are to be allowed to shed male blood,' he makes Orestes cry, 'then we men had better commit suicide at once; if it is a matter only of the will to kill, we may be sure that all



women have that already.' The *Agamemnon* deals with this problem; the sequel plays with a second question, 'Is it right for a son to kill his mother in order to avenge his father's death?'

But the trilogy of the *Oresteia*, besides being concerned with feminist problems, is a living gallery of woman types: Clytemnestra and Cassandra, Electra and the Nurse, the chorus of maidens in the *Choephoroi*, and the chorus of women furies in the *Eumenides*. In the *Agamemnon* the two women are sharply contrasted; Clytemnestra, the queen who will not submit to man's rule; Cassandra, the victim predestined by fate to suffer the caprices of a master, and to pass from the treacherous lover, Apollo, to the brutal owner, Agamemnon. No one can read the play and feel much sympathy with the murdered king. He is done to death with every circumstance of horror; returning home after many years' absence in a foreign land, where he has been fighting for his country, he finds within his house not a faithful wife, but a secret enemy; she conceals her hatred, allures him to the bath, and there, with her own hands, murders him.

And yet the dramatist, and his readers, find the wife rather than the husband the sympathetic character. It is partly the intolerable callousness and brutal pride of Agamemnon, who has sacrificed his daughter's life to help on his political schemes,



and now brings home with him from Troy the concubine whom he has compelled to share his bed. But there is also the feeling that Clytemnestra is really the better man of the pair : that she is naturally born to rule, and that her subjection to a man would be against the law of nature. Certainly in the play she takes the first place, and Cassandra, a part vocally the most important of any, comes next. The men, Agamemnon, the Watchman, the Herald, Ægisthus, and the helpless chorus of aged councillors, are merely foils to the 'manlike' queen. The contrast, indeed, between the resolute woman and the irresolute men in the closing scenes is almost comic, and the play ends with her triumph. In the sequel, *The Libation Bearers*, the main action is again in the hands of women, Electra and her friends, the maidens of the chorus. Orestes, it is true, does the actual killing ; but there is this difference between brother and sister : Electra acts on her own initiative, and is a woman as strong-willed as Clytemnestra herself ; Orestes acts only in obedience to the promptings of others. Electra feels no remorse ; Orestes, as soon as he has killed his mother, is tormented by imaginary terrors. Among the characters of the second play, by far the most interesting is the old Nurse. She is obviously studied from the life, and is one of the most vivid figures of Greek Drama : her kindly temper and affection for her for-



mer charge are contrasted with the fierce bitterness of Electra, and she supplies the one touch of humour that lightens the mournful music of this play.

Last comes the *Eumenides*, which discusses with almost embarrassing frankness the physical problems of relationship. 'Is the mother who conceives, or the father who begets the child, the nearer relative?' And again, 'Is not the murder of a husband, who is no relation by blood, less heinous than the murder of the mother who brought you into the world?' These are some of the questions that are raised but not answered, for the final reconciliation satisfies the religious rather than the practical sense. The plot may be put briefly :

A band of women are pursuing a man over the earth ; pursuing relentlessly until he shall die of fatigue. Whenever the pursuit slackens, another woman—or rather her spirit—urges on the chase. The man appeals in vain for help from men, and at last a third woman by skilful diplomacy persuades the avengers—or at least some of them—to agree to a reconciliation.

Such is the Æschylean theatre ; but, as we have said, Æschylus is a lonely spirit in Athens. The general view of women is represented by the next generation, Pericles, Sophocles, and Thucydides, the greatest statesman, dramatist, and historian of their time. The last of the three is particularly



significant. You may read through his *History* from beginning to end—and if you are a student of affairs you will not find any other book in the world quite so valuable—but, concerning one-half of the human race, you will get scarcely a word. Even in the hortatory speeches, when soldiers are being encouraged to fight for their possessions, women only come in the second place after the children. In the rest of the *History* they are practically never mentioned.

To Thucydides, women, even such a woman as Aspasia, hardly existed. Politics were to him the serious business, war the great game of life, and in neither of these did women take part. He probably would have agreed with his hero Pericles, 'a woman's highest glory is not to fall below the standard of such natural powers as she possesses: that woman is best of whom there is the least talk among men, whether in the way of praise or blame.'

In his indifference the historian faithfully follows the example of the statesman. Pericles, of whose mistress, Aspasia, we hear so much, and of whose wife, the mother of his sons, we hear so little, appears never to have considered the part that nature has assigned to women in the creation and management of a state. In his day Athens was faced by a war that in one year robbed her of many of the bravest of her sons. A state funeral was given them at which, as Thucydides tells us: 'Any one who



wished, stranger or citizen, could be present: even women were there to mourn for their relatives at the grave.' At the end of the ceremony Pericles made that Funeral Oration in praise of Athens of which echoes are to be found in all contemporary Greek literature. Most of the speech dwells resolutely on the glory of these heroic deaths and the grandeur of the sacrifices made, but at the last the orator condescends to human feeling and addresses some noble words of comfort to the men before him, taking them in succession as fathers, sons, and brothers of the dead. Then comes the one final cold sentence addressed not to the mothers, but to the widows in his audience: 'a few words of advice,' Pericles calls it, and it is the language of reproof rather than that of sympathy.

Their ignorance of women made even the greatest minds in Athens insensible to women's true position, and in the case of Thucydides there is a further reason. When the historian came to compose his work he was too bitterly disillusioned to concern himself with anything but his main subject, the failure of Athens to maintain the Periclean system. In a world where blind chance seemed to rule and the highest political ideals went unrealised, the social position of women may well have seemed to him a trifle.

But Thucydides' testimony is chiefly negative:



we get clearer evidence from Sophocles. Sophocles is the typical Athenian, versatile and ingratiating, '*eutrapelos, eukolos*.' Actor, poet, priest, and general, he was one of the most popular men of his time—*with men*. Of his family life we have not quite such a brilliant picture. His wife is one of the many anonymous women, the wives of great men. His children did not apparently regard their father with as much affection as did the outside world, and in his old age tried to deprive him of the control of his property. As to women, and the softer affections of life, outside his own writing we have the anecdote in Plato's *Republic*. The poet in his old age was asked how he felt in regard to love: 'Hush, hush,' he replied; 'I have escaped and right gladly. I feel like a slave who has escaped from a mad master.'

That was the feeling which the conditions of life at Athens engendered. Woman and woman's love was a necessary weakness: happy the man who could break free, and if we believe the stories in Athenæus, Sophocles also in escaping from women fell into the Ionian snare. In his plays women are generally a negligible quantity; at least the only women whom he succeeds in making lifelike are the slave women, the ministering angels like Deianira and Tecmessa who meekly respect their master's words, 'oft dinned into their ears'—'Woman, for women silence is the finest robe.'



Tecmessa, beautiful character though she is, and far superior to Ajax in moral strength, has no independent existence apart from her lord and master. Deianira, deserted by her errant husband, has no thought of resentment: she only wants to get her master back, and is prepared to stoop to any means if she may regain his company. And it is obvious that these two ladies, who would make a modern woman despair, are Sophocles' ideals of feminine excellence.

Of the other plays, the *Œdipus Tyrannus* contains only one woman character—Jocasta; the mother married to her own son, a dreadful figure, and one almost impossible to dramatise successfully. In the play she takes only a minor part, and her silent exit is the most effective touch; but it is interesting here to compare Sophocles with Euripides, who in the *Phœnician Women* does succeed in making Jocasta a real and most pathetic figure. The *Œdipus at Colonus* has the two girls, Antigone and Ismene, but they are sexless and dramatically only important as types of girlish devotion. The *Philoctetes*, like the two *Œdipus* plays, has a male chorus and alone among Greek tragedies, if we except the *Rhesus*, has no female characters. It is also, whatever the reason, the dullest play we possess.

There remain the *Electra* and the *Antigone*, and the first of these is a signal example of the importance



for a dramatist of choice of subject. Æschylus and Euripides have both left us plays dealing with the same story, and a comparison with the three tragedies will reveal the essential differences between the three poets. A dramatist must share—imaginatively at least—in his characters' thoughts; and women like Clytemnestra and Electra were so beyond the range of Sophocles' experience and sympathy that he is quite unable to make them live. Like everything that Sophocles wrote, the *Electra* is full of literary accomplishment. The epic method, for example, is most ingeniously adapted to the theatre, and a vivid narrative of the chariot race in which Orestes is supposed to meet his death forms the centre of the play, but there is no real grip on the dramatic situation: it is literature, not life.

In the *Antigone*, on the other hand, the poet is dealing with a subject thoroughly congenial to his temperament, the conflict between law and the individual, and one independent of sex, and the play is a magnificent example of his art.

Here certainly the central figure is a woman, or, at least, a girl; but the interest does not depend upon her sex, for little dramatic use is made of the Hæmon episode. It is not her sex but her social position that affects the problem of the play, a problem vital enough in itself without any sex interest—'How far is an individual justified in



setting his or her conscience against the law of the State?'

Antigone is a girl orphan, born out of legal wedlock, a slave without a master; and it is a crowning stroke of irony to pit her lonely figure against the majesty of man-made law. To modern readers she seems intensely pathetic, and an Athenian audience would, doubtless, have sympathised with her as a rebel, if not as a woman. There is no word in Greek for 'to command,' and their only word for 'to obey' means literally 'to allow oneself to be persuaded,' so that the conscientious objector was not uncommon. But Sophocles had been a general, and knew by experience the way of Athenian soldiers, and it is not certain that he appreciates his heroine's wilfulness in quite so favourable a light; for, as we see in his other plays, he was essentially on the side of law. He was rather an observer, with a wonderful command of language, than an original thinker or critic of the established order; and it is a curious turn of fortune for a poet, who had by no means a close or a sympathetic knowledge of woman's character, that the *Antigone*, the only play where a woman takes a vital part, should be by far the greatest of his works.

The titles and fragments of his lost plays confirm the impression given by the extant tragedies. We have nearly a hundred names of lost plays, and barely one-fifth are called after women. Moreover,



a consideration of the titles of those plays that bear one woman's name will reveal the fact that the majority were probably rather anti-feminist than feminist. Helen, Eriphylë, Pandora, Procris, Tyro : Helen, who deserted her husband and her home ; Eriphyle, who sold her husband for gold ; Pandora, the incarnate cause of trouble among men ; Procris, bought by a paramour ; Tyro, seduced by a second lover : the legends of these ladies were arranged to please the Athenian public. Venal and fickle creatures, they show plainly how necessary it is to keep a close guard over women, and it may be suspected that Sophocles, in his treatment of the plot, did not disappoint the expectations of his audience.

In five plays only is the title taken from the chorus, the *Spartan Women*, the *Lemnian Women*, the *Water-carriers*, the *Women of Scyros*, and the *Captive Women* ; and it is very unlikely, considering the titles, that any one of the five was written with much sympathy with feminine ideals. 'Spartan' and 'Lemnian' women were at Athens almost proverbial for 'unwomanly' females ; a 'Water-carrier' was synonymous with a gossip. Of the other two we have a little definite information. Philostratus tells us that the *Women of Scyros* treated of the not very pleasant tale of the young Achilles, disguised as a girl in the king's harem, and becoming there the father of Neoptolemus, by the young princess,



Deidameia. Of the *Captive Women* we know that it had the same plot as Euripides' *Trojan Women*, but the incidents were treated—*humorously*. It is not, perhaps, impossible that an author even to-day might regard the troubles of women in war as a fit subject for a jest ; but things have advanced so far that we should hardly regard him now as a flawless genius, or hold him up as the highest product of our civilisation.



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In five plays only is the title taken from the female: the *Spartan Women*, the *Lemnian Women*, the *Water-carriers*, the *Women of Scyros*, and the *Women*; and it is very unlikely, considering the general attitude of the Athenians, that any one of the five was written with sympathy with feminine ideals. 'Spartan' women were at Athens almost proverbial for 'unwomanly' females; a 'Water-carrier' was synonymous with a gossip. Of the other three we have a little definite information. Philostratus tells us that the *Women of Scyros* treated of the pleasant tale of the young Achilles, disguised as a girl in the king's harem, and becoming the father of Neoptolemus, by the young I

ostensibly a servant of the state and the majority, but by no means all, of his countrymen supported the doctrines of the infallibility of the Delphian god and the Athenian man, so that he is compelled to work in exactly the opposite method to that of the misogynists. He does not labour his argument: he does not paint with a heavy brush. If you like to disregard this point of view you can do so, and still find much that is supremely interesting—his gift of vivid narrative, the light music of his verse, and his unrivalled sense of dramatic effect. But every dramatist, consciously or unconsciously, has some groundwork of thought, some criticism of life, which will appear more or less plainly through the dramatic action of his plays. In Euripides that criticism is directed chiefly to the testing of three assumptions current in his day: that God reveals his purposes to men, that war has an ennobling effect on a nation and on individuals, that women are by nature inferior to men.

With the first two of these dogmas we are not now concerned. As to the real nature of Euripides' ideas on the third, we shall get the clearest view if we consider first the characters of his theatre, then the general body of his plays, and lastly, those four dramas which are particularly concerned with the relations between men and women.

The two sexes may be sub-divided, according to



seriously, would form a very wrong idea of the estimation in which—we will say the Prime Minister—is held by most of his countrymen. A perversion of the facts is even with us regarded as humorous in politics, and it is thus that we should regard Aristophanes. Classical scholars, however, have always been a serious class and while they recognise the grossness of Aristophanes they often fail to see his humour. The irony of Euripides and the humour of Aristophanes are both alien to the Puritan spirit, when they are understood, and to appreciate the first it is necessary to make a close study of all the plays. Euripides was, first of all, a dramatist, and his main business is with his play. But behind the playwright stands the poet and idealist, a man not at all inclined to look on life with philosophic detachment, but feeling, as deeply and as bitterly as any man has ever done, the basis of injustice on which too often human society has been reared.

Euripides championed the cause of woman's freedom against the decadents of Ionia as he championed the cause of religious freedom against the reactionaries of Delphi. He realised that the best method of defence is to attack the other side : that successful defence is impossible, unless at any rate you are prepared to take the aggressive. Open militancy in his case was impossible, for the dramatic poet was



ostensibly a servant of the state and the majority, but by no means all, of his countrymen supported the doctrines of the infallibility of the Delphian god and the Athenian man, so that he is compelled to work in exactly the opposite method to that of the misogynists. He does not labour his argument: he does not paint with a heavy brush. If you like to disregard this point of view you can do so, and still find much that is supremely interesting—his gift of vivid narrative, the light music of his verse, and his unrivalled sense of dramatic effect. But every dramatist, consciously or unconsciously, has some groundwork of thought, some criticism of life, which will appear more or less plainly through the dramatic action of his plays. In Euripides that criticism is directed chiefly to the testing of three assumptions current in his day: that God reveals his purposes to men, that war has an ennobling effect on a nation and on individuals, that women are by nature inferior to men.

With the first two of these dogmas we are not now concerned. As to the real nature of Euripides' ideas on the third, we shall get the clearest view if we consider first the characters of his theatre, then the general body of his plays, and lastly, those four dramas which are particularly concerned with the relations between men and women.

The two sexes may be sub-divided, according to



Greek fashion, into six classes: Old man, man, young man, old woman, woman, young woman; and it must be acknowledged at once that Euripides, like most Greeks, is quite lacking in any reverence for age. His old men are apt to be dotards and are treated with humorous contempt. Amphitryon in the *Hercules* is a type: he lives in a world of illusion: he sees visions and dreams dreams, but when serious counsel or vigorous action are necessary he is useless. Cadmus and Teiresias in the *Bacchae* are characters of the same sort. They are meant to be humorous, and the scene in which the two old men, wagging their hoary heads, prepare to dance and sing is pure burlesque. Cadmus agrees with Amphitryon in his religious views: he is ready to accept the miraculous, if it is profitable; and he scarcely troubles to make any pretence. As regards the divinity of the new god Dionysus, his sentiments are that, as 'The fellow anyhow is my daughter's son: it is my duty as head of the family to make out that he is a great god'. Cadmus and Amphitryon are at least partly self-deceived; Ægeus is a mere butt. The old gentleman, who believes that his virility can be restored by magic art, is a child in Medea's hands, and the scene between the two is Aristophanic in its outspoken frankness.

Generally speaking, old men in Euripides are impotent: when they are allowed to act, their



energies—Tyndareus for example, and the old servant in the *Ion*—are mischievous. In one case only do old men play a worthy part; when they are resisting the wanton violence of some full-grown man who is attacking women and children. Sometimes, as with Peleus and Iolaus, they succeed; sometimes they fail; but in either case their essential weakness is a foil to the presumptuous strength of their opponent.

Coming now to the second class, that of grown men, we get three main types: there is the mean man, the blusterer, and the simpleton. Jason and Admetus are mean men: mean, selfish and cowardly: capable of asking a woman to save their lives at the risk of her own, but incapable of gratitude. Still they are handsome, good company, and quite unconscious of their own shortcomings. Menelaus is a worse type and one that the poet especially disliked. He adds to meanness the vices of cruelty and treachery and is the slave of passion. In the *Orestes* he is coldly treacherous, in the *Andromache* treacherous and cruel, in the other plays where he appears merely despicable. Then come the blusterers: Agamemnon and Heracles, Lycus and Eurystheus. The first two are the ordinary sensual man: brave enough and capable of great deeds, but unfaithful, untruthful and self-indulgent: they seem to be strong, and they are strong in body; but they have



no strength of mind. Lycus and Eurystheus are men of a lower type, mere bullies depending solely on force, and Euripides does not attempt to make them interesting. Lastly, there are the simpletons: Xuthus, Thoas and Theoclymenus—an easy prey for the clever women—the Priestess, Iphigenia, Helen who use them as they will. They are the men who with advancing age will be such as Ægeus and Amphitryon. And they almost exhaust the list in our second class. There remain only Theseus, a patriotic abstraction, the male counterpart of Athena; Creon, 'the King'—the name is given to more than one person—an official rather than a living character; and some few persons in the second plan of action: such as the herald Talthybius and the peasant farmer in the *Electra*. These two latter occupy very subordinate positions, but they are in every way more manly, more generous, more lovable than the great men whom they serve. If we except them, there is not a grown man in the whole theatre of Euripides who can be regarded with sympathy.

When we come to the young men we are in a brighter world. Euripides is essentially the poet of youth, and his younger characters are always lovable. The heroic boy Menœceus and the kind lad Ion are figures drawn with a tender hand. But soon the shadows of the prison house draw in,



and the slight hardness which is visible even in Ion becomes intensified in Achilles, and still more in Hippolytus. The older the person, the less attractive he becomes. Achilles and Hippolytus are very much like the public school boy of our day; in many spheres of conduct they are thoroughly reliable: truthful, self-denying and courageous: but they are cruelly hampered by the influence of an environment which shuts out the influence of woman at the most impressionable time of a man's life. Hippolytus is something of a prig and into his mouth, in the well-known speech, Euripides puts all the stock invective against women. The words are not the lad's own views: he is too young to have had much experience of women, good or bad: they are literature, the views of other men expressed in books and unconsciously assimilated by the younger generation.

Hippolytus is an ascetic and exaggerates: Achilles is a more manly character. His first impulses are generous, but he does not carry them into effect, for he is too much under the influence of other people's opinion: 'good form' is his guide in life. He has moreover, all a young man's vanity. 'Countless girls are setting traps to catch me as husband' he says; and he is deeply hurt to think that he is not consulted—'I would have agreed to her death, if I had been asked, but I was not: so I will help you.'



This is the best champion that Clytemnestra can find to save her daughter.

The remaining five characters, men unmarried, but full-grown, are less interesting. Pentheus is the typical 'self-pleaser': wilful, violent and intolerant. That he happens to be right in his particular case does not make him more sympathetic nor does it alter the justice of his fate. His mode of thought is wrong. Savage repression is not the way to deal with a cause which enlists women as its chief votaries and is kept active by their enthusiasm. The other pairs, Orestes and Pylades, Eteocles and Polynices, require little notice. All four have the curse of Cain upon them: they draw the sword and fall by the sword. They are murderers first and foremost, and chiefly interesting to the criminologist.

So much then for Euripides' men. Let us now contrast them in their monotony of type—impute it to the poet or the sex as you will—with the infinite variety of his women: Phædra, Andromache, Hermione, Creüsa, Megara, Helen, Alcestis, Clytemnestra, Medea. There is every shade of conduct here and nearly every form of marital complication, if we remember that none of these wives are in love with their husbands and that romantic affection between husband and wife is impossible. They are all—when they have children—mothers first and wives afterwards: the childless woman—Hermionë and,



apparently, Creüsa—is embittered by her state and her conduct also is abnormal : she is anxious to take life because she has not given life.

The poet is at pains to show the impossibility of married love under Greek conditions. Phædra is married to an old man, who years before had seduced her sister. Andromache has been forcibly taken by the son of the man who slew her first husband. Hermione has been compelled for political reasons to give up her cousin-lover and marry a stranger. Medea after abandoning everything for her husband is deserted by him. Creüsa has been seduced as a girl and as a ' *pis aller* ' has married an elderly man. Megara has been abandoned by her roving husband : she and her children are on the point of being killed by a stranger when Heracles returns and murders them himself. Helen runs away from her lord ; Clytemnestra has no words bad enough to use of hers.

None of these women are impeccable—Alcestis is the only flawless character and she is meant to be a saint—their tempers are as composite as we find them in real life ; but, however wrong or mistaken some of their actions may be, not one is altogether unsympathetic. So with the old women. They are sometimes malignant, but they are never contemptible. Their worst deeds are prompted by maternal affection. Phædra's foster-mother is a mischievous and



immoral old lady, but her only wish is to gratify her foster child. Hecuba takes a ruthless vengeance on the Thracian king, but she is a mother avenging a murdered son. It is a favourite motive with Euripides; the pathos of the old mother, her sons killed, her daughters ravished, her grandchildren sold into slavery. Hecuba in the *Trojan Women*, Jocasta in the *Phœnician Women*, the chorus of old women in the *Suppliants*: all represent the reverse side of war's pomp and glory. The men triumph and the women suffer. The method is realistic: there is little romance, in the baser sense of the word, in these unkempt, miserable, old figures, and yet they supply the poet with some of his most poignant passages.

But Euripides is especially successful with his pictures of young girls, virgin martyrs—the type is not extinct—anxious and willing to sacrifice themselves for their male relatives. Iphigenia, Polyxena and Macaria are subtle variations of one character, and upon the figure of the first the poet spends all his skill. At the time of the sacrifice at Aulis she is a sentimental girl, so full of timid modesty that the very thought of marriage fills her with shame. "I hid my face," she says, "in the soft wrappings of my veil and would not take my baby brother in my arms nor kiss my sister on the lips—I felt ashamed before them. No, I laid up for myself many a



fond embrace which I would give them when I should come back, a married woman.' The arguments she uses to her mother to justify her sacrifice are poor enough: vague talk of honour, patriotism and the insignificance of women—'Tis better that one man should live than ten thousand women'; but her heart is right.

For Iphigenia both marriage and sacrifice prove a delusion. She never returns home; she is defrauded of the joy of motherhood, and spends many years of lonely virginity among strangers and in a strange land. When we see her again she is a bitter woman, more sensible, indeed, than the simple girl, but infinitely less lovable. Her thoughts are all of vengeance: against Menelaus, against Helen, against mankind. She performs her horrible task of human sacrifice with no very great reluctance; 'Parcelling out a tear in sympathy for kindred blood' when any Greek victims fall into her hands; but killing them all the same. For one person alone she still cherishes some affection, her brother Orestes, whom she had left a baby at home, and on him she concentrates her frustrated motherhood.

The final stage of this rancour against life is seen in the character of Iphigenia's sister Electra—'the unwed'—as we have her in the *Orestes* and the play that bears her name.

Electra's loneliness and suffering, her long brood-



ing, her craving for revenge have turned her mad : she again has only one sound sentiment, her love for her brother. She is a dreadful figure, but a real one. Fire and the knife : murder, treachery, arson : she is ready for all. Her character is the logical outcome of many years of injuries and insults : of denial of rights and of subjection. She is a proud spirit and will not submit, but her pride cannot alter the situation. At last the strain of hopeless rebellion is too great, and she becomes mad.

They make, indeed, a gloomy picture, these unmarried women, for Euripides does not shrink from the darker side of a woman's revolt. As Medea bitterly says ' Even a bad husband is better than none,' and for the unwedded girl there are only two alternatives, a voluntary sacrifice, such as that whereby Macaria escapes from life, or a hopeless struggle against the powers that be, such as Electra tries to wage.

We have now taken all the characters of the Euripidean theatre, except one, and that one the most important of all—the permanent character of tragedy, the chorus.

The chorus is the ideal spectator, the intermediary between audience and actor, the interpreter of the poet's own thoughts. It might be expected that a poet who was a feminist at heart would usually have his chorus composed of women, while a poet



who had little sympathy with women would prefer a chorus of men. In our extant plays this is exactly what happens. It is a curious fact that most of the received ideas about the Greek drama; the chorus of elders, the statuesque movements, the dignity of tragedy, etc., etc., are drawn from the theatre of Sophocles, the most academic of the three dramatists: they would never be deduced from the usage of Æschylus or Euripides.

In the seven plays of Æschylus, the chorus is composed five times of women, twice only of men. In both cases they are old men, and the weakness of their old age is necessary to the dramatic action. In Sophocles the proportion is exactly reversed. The chorus is five times composed of men, twice of women. Moreover, it is not the dramatic action that fixes either the sex or the age of the chorus in the *Œdipus Tyrannus*, the *Œdipus Colonus*, or the *Antigone*. In the latter play, indeed, most readers will feel that a chorus of women would be more appropriate; the chorus with Sophocles are old men because the old man is the poet's ideal character.

Of the seventeen plays of Euripides, in only three cases—the *Heracles*, the *Heraclidæ* and the *Alcestis*—is the chorus composed of men. In the first two cases, as in Æschylus, the ineffectiveness of old men in actual danger is part of the plot; the chorus



strengthens the impression made by Iolaus and Amphitryon. In the *Alcestis*, that the chorus are men is part of the general irony of the play.

In the other fourteen plays the chorus is composed of women, and it is into the mouth of these women that Euripides puts all the most intimate part of his work. Sometimes it is a scene of home life as in the *Hecuba* where a woman describes her last night in Troy.

‘ It was at midnight that ruin came. Dinner was over and upon men’s eyes sweet sleep began to spread. All the songs had been sung : my lord had done with the sacrificial feast and its revelry and was lying in my bower, spear on peg, for no longer had he to keep watch against the throng of shipmen who had set foot on our Ilian land of Troy. As for me, one ringlet of hair I had still to bring to order under my tight-bound snood, and I was gazing into the infinite reflections of my golden mirror ere I should throw myself upon the pillows of my bed. But lo ! a cry went through the city and a cheer rang out in Troy-town—“ Sons of the Greeks—when, ah when, will you sack the watch tower of Ilion and get you home at last ? ” Then I fled from my dear couch, with only my smock upon me, like some Dorian maid, and crouched by Artemis’ holy shrine. But woe is me, no help found I there. My own man, my bed-fellow, I saw slain before me ; and then I



was dragged down to the sea shore, and in anguish swooned away.'

Sometimes it is a vivid description of outdoor life, such as the picture of the washing-place, where the humbler sort of women could meet and enjoy a little leisure, 'that pleasant evil,' and gossip together. 'There is a rock that drips, men say, with water from the Ocean's bed and sends from the cliff an ever-running stream, for us to catch in our pitchers. There I met a friend who was washing pieces of fresh-dyed cloth in the river water and laying them in the warm sun upon the flat stones. From her lips first this news of my lady came to me.'

Every mood of a woman's mind is represented :  
now sad—

'Discordant is the music of a woman's life : pitiable helplessness is her lot, an evil housemate, indeed. There is the trouble of child birth, the trouble of woman's weakness.'—(*Hippolytus*.)

or—

'A censorious thing is womankind. If women get a small basis for scandal they soon add more. Women take a kind of pleasure in talking insincerely about one another.'—(*Phoenissae*.)

now triumphant—

'Children, promise of children's children to be,  
Children to help their sorrow, to make more sweet  
their pleasure,



To speak with their enemy !  
 Rather, I say, than gold, than a palace of pride,  
 Give me children at home, right heritors of my  
 blood.

Let the miser plead for the childless side :  
 I will none of it. Wealth denied,  
 Children given, I bless them and cleave to the  
 better good.'—(*Ion. Verrall's translation.*)

or—

A strange and wondrous thing for women are the children they bear in travail. Womankind loves a baby.—(*Phoenissae.*)

All the questions of sex are considered and judged with clearest sense.

' Man's love when it is excessive is neither excellent nor, indeed, creditable. But still, sex is a divine thing and a gracious, if kept within bounds. A moderate temper, for that I pray: avaunt, contentious anger and the ceaseless bickering that drives a husband astray to another woman's arms.'—(*Medea.*)

Sometimes the question takes a wider range as in the difficult chorus of the *Iphigenia in Aulis*.

' The stuff of which men and women are made is different : their ways are different too. But what is really good, of that there is no doubt. The different methods of rearing and education have a great influence on ideas of excellence. Humble modesty is a form of wisdom ; and yet it is wondrous good to use your own judgment and see your duty for yourself. Then life is honourable and your frame



grows not old. It is a great thing to seek after excellence. For us women the quest is secret down the secret ways of love ; for men the marshalled state and the thronging crowd make a city to increase and prosper.'

But the topic on which Euripides insists most is the scandal of literature, the unfair ideas of woman that have been created and fostered by the perversity of writers. Two quotations will suffice. One from the *Ion* :—

' Ye scandal-masters of the lyre,  
That harping still upon the lust  
Of losel women never tire,  
Her lewdness ever, now be just.  
How doth her faith superior show  
Beside the lust of losel man !  
See it, and change your music. Go  
Another way than once ye ran,  
Ye lyric libels, go, and vex  
The faithless found, the elder sex.'

*(Ion. Verrall's translation.)*

another from the *Medea* :

' It is men now that are crafty in counsel, and keep not their pledges by the gods ; the scandal will turn and honour come to a woman's life. 'Tis coming—respect for womankind. No longer will pestilent scandal attack women, and women alone. The music of ancient bards will die away, harping ever on woman's perfidy. Phœbus is the guide of melody and in my heart he never set the wondrous music of his lyre. Else I would soon have raised a song that would have stayed the



brood of male singers. The long years have many a tale to tell, of men as well as of women.'

This last sentence represents Euripides' reasoned judgment on the problems of feminism. Women are different from men, but they are not inferior: all the arguments that are used to prove woman's weakness could be used equally well against men.

So we may leave the characters and turn now to the separate plays.

Of the complete dramas that we now possess, the *Rhesus* is probably spurious, the *Cyclops* is a comic play, the *Helena* is a burlesque of the tragic manner. Of the remaining sixteen, two, the *Suppliant Women* and the *Children of Heracles*, are political plays, written to glorify Athens as the champion of oppressed nationalities, and their interest is manly political. But nothing that Euripides wrote is altogether lacking in vivid touches of feminism. In the *Children of Heracles*, for example, there is one character who in a few words reveals the position of women in Athenian life: 'For a woman silence and discretion are best, and to remain quiet within doors.' So speaks the maiden *Macaria* before she consents to a voluntary death. She has had bitter experience of life and she is willing to die, for existence offers her no very pleasant prospect.

'A friendless girl—' she says 'who will take me for



his wife? Who will have children by me? It is better for me to die.' Her one pathetic desire is to die, not on compulsion but as a willing sacrifice,—to escape from life *nobly* (the word recurs as often in Euripides as it does in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*), to leave the ignoble servitude of woman's lot. She begs Iolaus to deal the death-blow and to cover her dead body. But Iolaus, brave old man though he is, cannot bring himself to see her die, and her last request is that at least she may die not among men, but in the arms of women. These are her final words: 'For my people I die. That is my treasure in death: that I take instead of children and my virgin bloom; if indeed anything exists below. I pray for my part that there be *nothing* there: if we mortals who must die shall find life's business in that land also, I know not where to turn. Death is counted the surest potion against pain.'

A similar incident forms the most striking scene of the *Suppliant Women*. Here it is not a young girl, but a married woman, Evadne, who of her own accord goes to death. But her motive is much the same: 'for the sake of a noble repute I die,' she cries 'that I may surpass all women in generous courage.' Her husband is dead, she is a childless woman, and she refuses to live on as a widow. Her father is anxious that she should nurse him in his old age, but with strange perversity she prefers death and



the old man is left to make lament. 'My daughter is dead;' he cries, 'she who used to draw down my face to her lips and would hold my head fast in her arms. Nothing is so sweet as a daughter when a father grows old. A son's life is a thing of greater importance, but sons are not so pleasant when we need fond endearments.'

The main interest of the Suppliant Women is the same as that of three other plays: the Phoenician Women, the Trojan Women, and the Hecuba. They are concerned with war; but war, as seen from the woman's side, a thing of unredeemed and useless suffering. All the 'glory of conquest' disappears: women and children are seen paying the price of men's ambition and pride. The Trojan Women is the most lamentable and the most effective of the series. Written according to the oldest formula of tragedy, the chorus are the chief persons in the action. Hecuba, Cassandra and Andromache are only particular representatives of the sufferings which all the women in the play endure. The two male characters, the lustful hypocrite Menelaus and the honest servant Talthybius are of quite subordinate interest.

The play is an accumulation of sorrow upon sorrow, but the climax is the murder of the little child Astyanax, a political crime, not inspired by any of the human feelings of hatred and revenge, but coldly



calculated by men for the sake of future advantage. It is the women, the mother and grandmother of the child, who have to suffer, that men may sleep in safety. As Andromache bitterly says, she has always followed out the whole duty of woman.

‘ Those things that have been invented as virtuous pursuits for women, at those I laboured ever in Hector’s house. To begin with—whether censure should attach to women for it or not, I may not say—but at any rate, the thing in itself brings a woman an evil name when she does not remain ever within doors. So I put aside the desire for going out and stayed at home. Moreover, I never admitted within our house the fantastic talk that some females enjoy : I found my own sound sense the best teacher in domestic matters, and made myself sufficing. A silent tongue and a quiet face—that was what I rendered to my lord.’

And now she has her reward : she is to become a concubine in the house of her husband’s murderer, and is told that one night in the arms of her new lord will make her forget the past. As for her baby boy ; ‘ dear youngling nestling in your mother’s arms, your skin so sweet and fragrant,’ he is torn away and hurled down to death.

But Andromache is not worse treated than the other women. Hecuba is handed over to Odysseus to be his slave, to sweep the floor and grind the



daily corn. The virgin Polyxena is reserved to be slain over the tomb of Achilles ; for it is not enough that living men should make women their chattels ; even the dead hero demands the tribute of a maiden's life. Cassandra has lived a vestal, dedicated to the service of the god, and she too has her reward. The great king deigns to take her to his bed, and in a scene of the grimmest irony the unhappy girl sings her own marriage hymn. There is all the music of the hymeneal chorus, but we have one solitary figure—the unwedded bride—instead of the joyful procession of youths and maidens.

The Hecuba deals with the same events as the Trojan Women and in the same spirit. The sacrifice of Polyxena is consummated and Hecuba takes vengeance on one of her children's murderers, the Thracian king Polymnestor. Beguiled into the captive women's tent he sees his own children murdered and is then blinded. The scene where he comes reeling out with blood-dripping eyes reaches the limits of the horrible, but Euripides does not forget to draw the feminist moral.

'If any one,' the king says, 'has spoken ill of women in the past, or is now in the act of speaking or will some day speak, I will cut all his words short—listen—Neither sea nor land breeds such a race as women are : only the man who has to do with them from time to time knows what they can do.'



The unhappy victim of a single woman forgets his logic and imputes the fault of an individual to the sex. If the aggressor had been a man, his thoughts would have been different and so the chorus tell him.

‘Be not over-fierce against us nor bring the feminine element into your troubles. There is no need to blame all womankind.’

The particular note of realistic horror that marks the closing scenes of the *Hecuba* appears in another group of four plays, the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the *Heracles*, the *Orestes* and the *Electra*. The first three have been exhaustively studied by Dr. Verrall, and it is enough now to say that the methods of criticism which Thucydides and Euripides use upon the Trojan War, are here applied to other tales of the remote and heroic past. Both writers—the historian and the dramatist—know that human nature does not change, and they strip away remorselessly the glamour of ancient legend. If such things happened, *this* is how they happened, says Euripides; and so we have the half-mad, half-heroic figure of Heracles: the sinister Orestes always ready to unsheath his dagger: the ludicrous yet pitiable Phrygian eunuch stuttering and trembling in panic fear, and most terrible of all the unsexed woman Electra. Each play has its own scene of horror, but the climax, perhaps, comes when



Electra takes the head of the murdered Ægisthus in both hands and pours forth all her bitterness into the deaf ears.

The Hippolytus strikes an entirely different note, and is, perhaps, the best known of all the plays. It has been adapted by Seneca and Racine, used as material by Ovid and transposed into a romantic drama by Professor Murray. But in spite of all this, Phædra's position and motives are often misunderstood. Hippolytus is her natural enemy and the enemy of her children. The bastard son of Theseus, if his father died, would probably oust the legitimate but younger children of the wife from their father's throne and himself seize the power. Phædra, a young woman married to an old husband, is possessed by a physical desire for the young man, but she struggles against her passion *for her children's sake*. When she finally gives up the struggle, she secures her children's safety by ensuring Hippolytus' death or banishment. She knows Theseus and she knows that he will bitterly resent any trespass on his property and punish that trespass with all the severity in his power. The charge is a false one, but it is only thus that her children's future can be protected.

The last two plays, the Bacchæ and the Iphigenia in Aulis, written in old age and in exile at Macedonia, still deal with the double problem, the sacrifice



to God and the sacrifice to man; and they are constructed on the same lines.

In the *Bacchæ* the men are of three sorts. There is the Adept—an imposter, who has taken to religion as a trade; the old men Cadmus and Teiresias who are 'religious' for social and family reasons: finally the young Pentheus who is openly 'irreligious' and comes to a bad end.

The women alone *believe*: they are deceived by the adept, and much of their belief is delusion, but it is a real spiritual benefit—to them. The ritual of Bacchus was the one chance of escape in a Greek woman's life from the stifling seclusion of the harem home. For a few days at least she became a free creature, allowed to roam at large upon the mountains. The thyrsus of the god took the place of her master's company: the sky was her roof: the grass was her bed: she could put aside the wine press and the flour mill and live on milk and honey. The ecstasy of such an escape has never found more intense expression than in the narrative speeches and the choric songs of the *Bacchæ*.

In the *Iphigenia at Aulis* the men again are of three types, foils all and each to the idealism of Iphigenia and the practical sense of Clytemnestra. Menelaus is the meanest: the slave of desire, ready for any crime to gratify his passions. Agamemnon is the ordinary middle-aged man, afraid of his wife



and fond of his family, but capable of deceiving the one and ruining the other. Achilles is the young man of the governing classes, brought up to despise women, and to think that every girl is anxious to become his wife. The men quarrel and plot for their own selfish ends, but their schemes are detected by the keen wit of Clytemnestra and rendered useless by the unselfish devotion of Iphigenia.



### VIII.—EURIPIDES. THE FOUR FEMINIST PLAYS

THE three main interests of Euripides' mind, realist, pacifist and feminist—to use our ugly jargon—are to be found in all his theatre; but there are four plays which are especially concerned with the relations between women and men, the *Alcestis*, *Medea*, *Ion* and *Andromache*. They are not pleasant plays: indeed, to a lover of sentimental idealism they would be conspicuously unpleasant if they were fully understood. Nor are they to be recommended to women readers. The relations between the sexes are a delicate thing; and human nature, male humanity at any rate, is generally none the worse for discreet reticence and tender handling. But in these plays Euripides uses the surgeon's knife. They were meant for an audience of men, grown callous by time and custom; and the treatment is ruthless. They should be regarded as the painful but necessary operation, needed to rid a patient of some long-festering ulcer, and the dramatist deserves the thanks that we give to the skilful surgeon.

The particular flaws in the male character with



which Euripides deals in the four plays are these—meanness, cowardice, selfishness, and treachery. They are not the faults, it will be noticed, that are especially appropriate to a ruling class. Man is not indicted on the score of haughtiness, pride or cruelty: his weaknesses are of a less 'manly' sort. It is his position as the natural lord of creation that is questioned and put to the test of dramatic action.

If Jason, Admetus, Apollo and Menelaus are *impossible* characters, then Euripides fails altogether in his lesson: if their actions, though possible, are improbable, then again he fails in an artistic sense. Some may think that no one could be quite so mean as Jason, quite so cowardly and selfish as Apollo and Admetus, quite so treacherous as Menelaus; but if we apply the test of experience, the cruel facts of life will justify the poet. None of the four are 'tragedies,' in the sense in which we use the word. They are as good examples as we are ever likely to see of 'la haute comédie'; the *Ion* and *Andromache*, perhaps, a little melodramatic, the *Alcestis* and the *Medea* in places almost farcical; but all depending eventually on a subtle study of psychology and social relationships.

It is probable that they were not originally composed for public representation in the great theatre of Dionysus. They are intimate studies of humanity



and can quite easily be divested of the official chorus, prologue and epilogue, which are independent of the dramatic action of the play. What is left is Euripides' own teaching, put as plainly as the ironical spirit will allow. The frequency of translation must not blind us to the fact that in essentials Euripides is untranslatable. He is one of the greatest masters of irony and there is nothing that is so apt to vanish in translation, or create confusion in the English mind.

All four plays are concerned with problems of motherhood and children, especially male children. In three, child-actors are required and play an important part in the action: the fourth play, the *Ion*, has for its hero a lad, just emerging from the 'awkward age' of boyhood.

Between the *Ion* and the *Andromache* there is a curious resemblance of plot. The case was probably not uncommon in the circumstances of race-degeneration that prevailed at Athens during the fifth century. In both plays a husband has a childless wife, but a son by an irregular union. There are two women to one man, and in each case there is another man in the background, Apollo who has seduced Creüsa, and Orestes who has been the affianced lover to Hermione. The husbands, Xuthus and Pyrrhus, are the least important figures in the action; indeed, Pyrrhus does not appear in person



at all. They are represented as colourless characters ; men of position and personal courage, dangerous, perhaps, when roused, but generally negligible. Their young wives, Hermionë and Creüsa, regard them with a mixture of contemptuous fear and jealous affection.

The interest is concentrated on the women, and the plays are studies of wifely jealousy—‘ Why should my husband have a child, while I am childless ? ’—and maternal love.

Euripides knows well that motherhood is a woman’s natural sphere : a childless woman is for him an abnormal woman, and behaves in an abnormal and anti-social fashion. Both wives attribute their barrenness, probably the natural result of their past history, to supernatural causes. Hermionë believes that the foreign concubine Andromache has bewitched her : Creüsa, that she has incurred the anger of a god. Hermionë accordingly proposes to break the spell by killing the witch ; Creüsa goes to Delphi to propitiate the divinity and seek his aid.

Both women, also, in their jealous hate are anxious to kill their husband’s bastard. Hermionë uses her father’s help and nearly succeeds in murdering the boy Molossus. Creüsa employs her father’s old slave as her agent, and all but poisons the boy Ion. In neither case is the crime accomplished,



for the plays are not 'tragedies'; but the criminal purpose is there. The women have been injured in the past and they are childless. They are embittered against life and ready to requite evil for evil. On the other hand, the unwedded mothers in both plays are ready to sacrifice themselves for their children. Andromache offers her life to save her son—'What pleasure have I in life?' she cries, 'In him all my hopes centre: it would be a disgrace for me not to die on behalf of the child I bore. Children, indeed, are life: those who in ignorance disparage them, may feel less pain than we do, but they are miserable in their happiness.'

In the *Ion* Pythia consents to an even harder sacrifice: she hands over her child to another woman, saves him thereby from the guilt of murder and makes him prince of Athens. Andromache and the Priestess have been injured in the past, but they are saved by their children: the maternal, not the marital, is the holy state.

But in both plays the feminist interest is complicated by other motives, political and religious. In the *Andromache* a bitter attack is made upon the Spartan system in the person of Menelaus. 'You a man?' old Peleus cries, 'You dastard son of dastard parents. What claim have you to be counted among men? A fine *man* it was, a Phrygian, that robbed you of your wife. You left your hearth and home



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But though Xuthus has now got a son, Creüsa is still a childless wife. In passionate anger she reveals her long hidden secret, denounces the god as the author of her ruin, and with the help of a slave, attempts to poison Ion. The plot fails, she is pursued as a murderess by Ion and is on the point of being put to death. Then the priestess once more intervenes. She has heard Creüsa's story—in some details not unlike though more lamentable than her own—and she determines to help a fellow sufferer. She has already given up her son to his father, and she now arranges a second trick whereby Creüsa shall believe Ion to be her child. She has in her possession a baby's wicker cradle, a piece of cloth similar to that in which the dead baby was wrapped, and Creüsa's own bracelet which has been used in the poisoning plot. By an ingenious subterfuge she makes all three appear to be the recognition tokens of Creüsa's child. Creüsa with joy, Ion with some painful doubts, accept the new relationship; and so the play ends.

The Ion and the Andromache both abound in incident: the Medea and the Alcestis depend more on a psychological interest. They are 'one-part' plays—the strong woman Medea and the weak man Admetus—and they have many points of resemblance. In the Medea a mother kills her children to save her own pride: in the Alcestis a mother



his escape. She faints, and on awakening imagines that her assailant, who has disappeared as suddenly as he came, was a being from another world: she had seen him in the full sunlight; he is the sun-god Apollo. She tells no one of her adventure, conceals her condition and when her time comes, makes her way alone to the same cave. The child is born, wrapped by the girl mother in a piece of cloth, and placed, together with a golden bracelet as token, in a wicker basket. Then he is abandoned, and of his fate we hear no more.

About the same time at Delphi, in one of those periods of promiscuous sexual intercourse allowed and encouraged by temple ritual, one of the Delphian women becomes a mother, by a roving soldier of fortune named Xuthus. The latter leaves Delphi, ignorant of his paternity, and the woman is soon after appointed priestess of the temple. Her child, Ion, ostensibly a foundling, is reared within the temple precinct and regards the priestess as his foster mother. Meanwhile, the soldier Xuthus makes his way to Athens and marries Creusa. They have no children, and come to Delphi to ask advice of the oracle. The priestess recognises Xuthus as the father of her son, and so arranges matters—remaining herself unseen—that after a conversation with the boy he acknowledges him as his child, the result of the former hasty connexion.



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consents to death to save her children's position. Alcestis is a saint: Medea—to some people—a devil.

Medea is certainly not meant to be a pleasant character. She has laboured too long under a sense of injustice to be pleasant either in her thoughts or behaviour. 'You are always abusing the government;' Jason says to her, 'and so you will have to be ejected.' She expresses the revolt of women in its bitterest form. 'Of all things that draw breath,' she cries, 'and have understanding, we women are the most miserable; we are merely *a thing that exists*. To begin with, we must outbid each other to buy ourselves a lord and take a master of our body. 'Tis a risky business—we may get a knave or an honest man. To leave her husband brings a woman no honour, and we may not refuse our lords. When a woman comes to fresh ways and pastures new, she needs must be a prophet, for she has never been taught at home how best to use the man who now shares her bed. If we work our task aright, and our lord keeps house with us, and does not kick against the yoke, then our life is enviable. If not—better to be dead. A man, if he is vexed with the company of his household, goes out and purges away his heart's annoyance; but we women are compelled to look ever at one soul.'



This isolation was the worst feature in a Greek woman's life : to a clever woman it was soul-destroying, and Medea is incomparably cleverer than any man in the play. The scenes where she forces the two old men, ' King ' Creon and ' King ' Ægeus to do, not what they want, but what she wants, are masterpieces of satirical humour. With her husband her cleverness fails her : she is too angry to reason : she hisses her scorn and foams her disgust. Jason keeps cool and so far has the best of the argument.

' You certainly are a clever woman,' he says, ' but you are only a woman. I am a very fine figure of a man : you fell in love with me ; and it was only natural.'

Jason is in many ways like Admetus. Both are lovers of outward show and have a great regard for men's opinion. Both say with some emphasis that a family of two children is quite large enough. Both have the same opinion of women ; and this is how Jason concludes—' Men ought to be able to get their children from some other source : the female sex should not exist : and then there would be no trouble for mankind.'

Such sentiments naturally fail to please either the chorus or Medea. The comment of the chorus is, ' You have made the best of your case, but still, surprising though it may seem to you, I think you



are acting unfairly in betraying the woman who has shared your bed.' Medea gives full vent to her anger: she contemptuously refuses the help in money which Jason says he is 'ready to give with an ungrudging hand,' and at last scornfully dismisses him—'Be off with you. You are yearning for the new girl you have broken in, all the time that you linger outside her house. Go and play the bridegroom with her.'

But in the next scene Medea has mastered her temper and pretends to submit. 'We are but what we are,' she says, 'just women. You must not take pattern by the evil nor answer folly with foolishness. I give way: I acknowledge that I was wrong.' Jason is patronising and friendly in his answer: 'I approve your present attitude, and, indeed, I do not blame your past behaviour: it is only to be expected: woman is a thing of moods.' He consents to ask his new wife for a remission of the children's exile. 'Certainly I will, and I fancy that I shall persuade her.' 'Yes, indeed, you will,' Medea says, 'if she is one of us: all women are alike. But I will help you once again in this enterprise, too.' And as in the past she had given him an antidote against the fire-breathing bulls, so now she gives him the fiery robe which is to destroy the young bride.

Then comes the crucial scene of the play: Medea



kills her children and we are faced by the problem—when is killing murder?

A mother who kills her child is to us a dreadful figure, and the death penalty is invoked against the deserted girl-mother: no punishment is inflicted upon the father, perhaps because no punishment can be adequate. Greek law and custom went further and in a different direction. The father was allowed to decide whether the child whom his wife had brought forth should be reared. Child killing in this fashion, when done by the father, was not a crime, and the exposure of children after birth was a common, and by no means held to be a reprehensible act. Plato, indeed, thinks it a fit subject for a jest in the *Theætetus* (p. 161). 'Do you think,' says Socrates, 'that it is right in all cases to rear your own child? Will you be very angry if we take it—the argument—from you, as we might take a baby from a young mother with her first child?' 'Oh, no,' answers the other. 'Theætetus will not mind: he is not at all hard to get on with.'

The mother who did mind was regarded as a difficult person, but whether she minded or not, decision lay with the father—as we see in Terence's play, *The Self Tormentor*. There the wife says to her husband, 'You remember, don't you, when I was pregnant, you told me emphatically that if the child should be a girl you would refuse to rear it.' The



child proved to be a girl, and so without further question it was got rid of. Male children were more valuable, and unless the circumstances of their birth were exceptional, as in the case of Paris and Ædipus, they were not often exposed.

There is this further point: what differentiates killing from murder is the question of risk. You kill, you do not murder, when you risk your own life. A soldier is not a murderer, and in sport a fox-hunter is a man of different type from a pigeon shooter. Now the Athenian women were not Amazons, but they fought a battle no less dangerous. 'They say of us,' cries Medea, 'that we live a life free from danger within doors, while men are fighting like heroes with the spear. But men are fools. Rather would I stand three times in the battle line of shields than bear one child.' A mother had already risked her life in bringing a child to birth; is she not far more justified than the father in ending that child's life, if such be her will? Moreover, children are the pledges of marriage, the securities given for a business arrangement. Is it right that the party who wilfully breaks the compact should retain possession of the securities?

Such I believe are some of the questions that Euripides meant to suggest. It is no answer to them to say that it is an unnatural crime for a mother to kill her children, for it is equally unnatural



and criminal for a father, and yet ancient fathers killed their children without compunction and without blame.

The *Medea* then is realistic and little else: the *Alcestis*, the first in time of Euripides' plays, is a blend of style, and demands a fuller treatment.

There are no villains in the *Alcestis*, and there are no heroes. There is one heroic character, but her heroism is of so common a type that it usually passes unnoticed. The three men, Admetus, Pheres and Heracles, in varying degrees are animated by the strongest of all male motives, self-preservation. *Alcestis* lacks their sound common-sense; she is guided by passion, by the strongest of all female passions and that which comes nearest to the divine, the maternal passion of self-sacrifice. She has given life once, she is prepared to give it again.

It is commonly assumed—and even Verrall tacitly allows this to go unchallenged—that *Alcestis* 'is in love with' Admetus, and Admetus 'is in love with' *Alcestis*. The affection which, happily for us, may usually be expected to exist between husband and wife, is taken for granted in the very different conditions of Euripides' time.

Now, as we have seen, this is a cardinal error. Mutual affection and esteem did *not* reign in an ordinary Athenian household. Husband and wife were



usually indifferent one to another, and even this indifference was an improvement upon the Ionian relationship when husband and wife were often natural enemies.

That a wife should give up her life out of love for her husband is a state of things so agreeable to the natural man that it is, perhaps, not surprising if the language of the play has never been too closely examined.

*Alcestis' motive is not love for her husband, but love for her children.* Euripides, following Æschylus, knew that maternal love is a far stronger force than conjugal affection, even when the latter exists. The mother and the children—on them he spends all the resources of his unrivalled pathos—the husband is a mark for his bitterest irony. It is because Alcestis does not wish her children to be left *fatherless* that she consents to death.

The position of the widow—as indeed, is implied in our language by the form of the word—is definitely worse than that of the widower. The orphan in ancient times was the fatherless child, and the position of the chief's son whose father died in his childhood was particularly unenviable. It is described in two of the most pathetic passages in Greek literature, by Andromache in the twenty-second book of the Iliad and by Tecmessa, in the most Euripidean of all the plays of Sophocles, the



Ajax. Under the old tribal system, a chief's power depended very largely on personal ascendancy, so that old men like Laertes and Pheres found it expedient to retire in favour of their grown-up son. A small boy like Eumelus could not have maintained his father's position, and his father's death would probably have meant considerable danger to his life. All this in Euripides' time was a commonplace and needed no emphasis. He prefers, indeed, to deal with the reverse picture—the sorrows of the motherless children and especially of the motherless girl; for the pathos of the sacrifice is partly this. It is for the sake of the boy and his future position in life, and not so much for the girl, that the mother dies.

Let us now examine the play itself. Admetus, chief of Pheræ, has been told by his medicine man that he is a very bad life: that, indeed, he cannot hope to live much longer—three months, perhaps; six months, say, at the most. But he has been a generous benefactor to the profession, and in particular has rendered some quite exceptional services to the arch-physician, Apollo himself. Accordingly a special provision is made in his case. If he can get some one of his own family to transfer to him their vitality, the operation may be feasible. The problem is, to find the man—or woman—for his family is very small. Admetus goes to his father and his



mother, but both, even his mother, refuse ; for, as we shall see, Admetus is not a very sympathetic character, or likely to arouse the spirit of self-sacrifice even in a mother's heart. Finally he asks his young wife, the mother of his two little children, and she consents.

At this point the play opens. Admetus believes what he is told ; Alcestis believes what she is told : the sixth month is ending and she is marked out for death. So Death appears, and the burlesque dialogue between Death and the Doctor, Thanatos and Apollo, forms the prologue, where the arch-physician, who can cure all diseases but one, is confronted by that One himself. But the prologue and the entrance of the chorus need not detain us. The first intimate details about Alcestis are given by the servant woman in her long speech to the chorus, and it will be noticed that in the picture of the household which she draws for them the central point is the marriage bed. Twice already has Alcestis risked her life upon that bed, and now another sacrifice has to be made. A childless woman might refuse. Her husband demands her life, and she must give it for the sake of the children whom on that bed she has borne. It is of her children that Alcestis thinks : for them she prays : she has no petition to make on her husband's behalf. In all the narrative, indeed, the husband scarcely appears. The chorus