

Euripides

RHESOS

Translated by Richard Emil Braun



THE GREEK TRAGEDY  
IN NEW TRANSLATIONS

GENERAL EDITORS William Arrowsmith  
and Herbert Golder

EURIPIDES: *Rhesos*

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EURIPIDES

# Rhesos

Translated by  
RICHARD EMIL BRAUN

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For K. J. B.

Sodalis, hoc factum

Nec factum dum premit

Opus me labentem

Usque sustinebas.

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## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

The Greek Tragedy in New Translations is based on the conviction that poets like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides can only be properly rendered by translators who are themselves poets. Scholars may, it is true, produce useful and perceptive versions. But our most urgent present need is for a *re-creation* of these plays—as though they had been written, freshly and greatly, by masters fully at home in the English of our own times. Unless the translator is a poet, his original is likely to reach us in crippled form: deprived of the power and pertinence it must have if it is to speak to us of what is permanent in the Greek. But poetry is not enough; the translator must obviously *know* what he is doing, or he is bound to do it badly. Clearly, few contemporary poets possess enough Greek to undertake the complex and formidable task of transplanting a Greek play without also “colonializing” it or stripping it of its deep cultural difference, its remoteness from us. And that means depriving the play of that critical *otherness* of Greek experience—a quality no less valuable to us than its closeness. Collaboration between scholar and poet is therefore the essential operating principle of the series. In fortunate cases scholar and poet co-exist; elsewhere we have teamed able poets and scholars in an effort to supply, through affinity and intimate collaboration, the necessary combination of skills.

An effort has been made to provide the general reader or student with first-rate critical introductions, clear expositions of translators' principles, commentary on difficult passages, ample stage directions, and glossaries of mythical and geographical terms encountered in the plays. Our purpose throughout has been to make the reading of the plays as vivid

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as possible. But our poets have constantly tried to remember that they were translating *plays*—plays meant to be produced, in language that actors could speak, naturally and with dignity. The poetry aims at being *dramatic* poetry and realizing itself in words and actions that are both speakable and playable.

Finally, the reader should perhaps be aware that no pains have been spared in order that the “minor” plays should be translated as carefully and brilliantly as the acknowledged masterpieces. For the Greek Tragedy in New Translations aims to be, in the fullest sense, *new*. If we need vigorous new poetic versions, we also need to see the plays with fresh eyes, to reassess the plays *for ourselves*, in terms of our own needs. This means translations that liberate us from the canons of an earlier age because the translators have recognized, and discovered, in often neglected works, the perceptions and wisdom that make these works ours and necessary to us.

### A NOTE ON THE SERIES FORMAT

If only for the illusion of coherence, a series of thirty-three Greek plays requires a consistent format. Different translators, each with his individual voice, cannot possibly develop the sense of a single coherent style for each of the three tragedians; nor even the illusion that, despite the differences, the tragedians share a common set of conventions and a generic, or period, style. But they can at least share a common approach to orthography and a common vocabulary of conventions.

#### 1. *Spelling of Greek Names*

Adherence to the old convention whereby Greek names were first Latinized before being housed in English is gradually disappearing. We are now clearly moving away from Latinization and toward precise transliteration. The break with tradition may be regrettable, but there is much to be said for hearing and seeing Greek names as though they were both Greek and new, instead of Roman or neo-classical importations. We cannot of course see them as wholly new. For better or worse certain names and myths are too deeply rooted in our literature and thought to be dislodged. To speak of “Helene” and “Hekabe” would be no less pedantic and absurd than to write “Aischylos” or “Platon” or “Thoukydides.” There are of course borderline cases. “Jocasta” (as opposed to “Tokaste”) is not a major mythical figure in her own right; her familiarity in her Latin form is a function of the fame of Sophocles’ play as the tragedy *par excellence*. And as tourists we go to Delphi, not Delphoi.

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The precisely transliterated form may be pedantically "right," but the pedantry goes against the grain of cultural habit and actual usage.

As a general rule, we have therefore adopted a "mixed" orthography according to the principles suggested above. When a name has been firmly housed in English (admittedly the question of domestication is often moot), the traditional spelling has been kept. Otherwise names have been transliterated. Throughout the series the -os termination of masculine names has been adopted, and Greek diphthongs (as in Iphigeneia) have normally been retained. We cannot expect complete agreement from readers (or from translators, for that matter) about borderline cases. But we want at least to make the operative principle clear: to walk a narrow line between orthographical extremes in the hope of keeping what should not, if possible, be lost; and refreshing, in however tenuous a way, the specific sound and name-boundedness of Greek experience.

### 2. *Stage directions*

The ancient manuscripts of the Greek plays do not supply stage directions (though the ancient commentators often provide information relevant to staging, delivery, "blocking," etc.) Hence stage directions must be inferred from words and situations and our knowledge of Greek theatrical conventions. At best this is a ticklish and uncertain procedure. But it is surely preferable that good stage directions should be provided by the translator than that the reader should be left to his own devices in visualizing action, gesture, and spectacle. Obviously the directions supplied should be both spare and defensible. Ancient tragedy was austere and "distanced" by means of masks, which means that the reader must not expect the detailed intimacy ("He shrugs and turns wearily away," "She speaks with deliberate slowness, as though to emphasize the point," etc.) which characterizes stage directions in modern naturalistic drama. Because Greek drama is highly rhetorical and stylized, the translator knows that his words must do the real work of inflection and nuance. Therefore every effort has been made to supply the visual and tonal sense required by a given scene and the reader's (or actor's) putative unfamiliarity with the ancient conventions.

### 3. *Numbering of lines*

For the convenience of the reader who may wish to check the English against the Greek text or vice versa, the lines have been numbered according to both the Greek text and the translation. The lines of the English translation have been numbered in multiples of ten, and these

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numbers have been set in the right-hand margin. The (inclusive) Greek numeration will be found bracketed at the top of the page. The reader will doubtless note that in many plays the English lines outnumber the Greek, but he should not therefore conclude that the translator has been unduly prolix. In most cases the reason is simply that the translator has adopted the free-flowing norms of modern Anglo-American prosody, with its brief, breath- and emphasis-determined lines, and its habit of indicating cadence and caesuras by line length and setting rather than by conventioned punctuation. Other translators have preferred four-beat or five-beat lines, and in these cases Greek and English numerations will tend to converge.

### 4. *Notes and Glossary*

In addition to the Introduction, each play has been supplemented by Notes (identified by the line numbers of the translation) and a Glossary. The Notes are meant to supply information which the translators deem important to the interpretation of a passage; they also afford the translator an opportunity to justify what he has done. The Glossary is intended to spare the reader the trouble of going elsewhere to look up mythical or geographical terms. The entries are not meant to be comprehensive; when a fuller explanation is needed, it will be found in the Notes

### ABOUT THE TRANSLATION

Like Richmond Lattimore, Professor Richard Braun is that *rara avis*, a professional poet who is also a superb Hellenist. Now increasingly regarded as one of the outstanding poets of the American postwar generation, Braun is the author of four volumes of verse, including *Bad Land* (1971) and *The Foreclosure* (1972). At present he is professor of Classics at the University of Alberta. Besides his version of Sophocles' *Antigone*, published several years ago in this series, he has translated a wide variety of ancient authors, ranging from Herondas to Horace, Propertius, and Ausonius.

For years it has been critical and scholarly custom to patronize the *Rhesos* either by casting doubts on Euripides' authorship or by exaggerating the play's supposed flaws. Yet in the ancient world the *Rhesos* was highly regarded and Euripides' authorship undoubted. Only now, at long last, has modern scholarly opinion begun to veer, recognizing in the *Rhesos* what is probably Euripides' earliest surviving play (which does not mean "juvenile" work; for if this is an "apprentice play," it is

by an apprentice of genius). What for the general reader has not been available was some poetic or dramatic evidence of the play's power; it is the outstanding merit of Braun's version that it gives us, in English poetry, a remarkable play. In Braun's persuasively argued interpretation, but above all in his translation, we at last possess a *Rhesos* that is both playable and, it seems to me, intensely readable.

For obvious reasons it is more likely to be read than performed. A pity, no doubt about it; but, for us at least, it is likely to remain—with Aeschylus' *Suppliants* and Sophocles' *Ajax*—a “poet's play.” Not because it is undramatic, but because its theatrical power and accessibility derive in large part from its saturation in Homer's poetry. Indeed, its essential theatricality depends largely upon its elegant and skillful adaptation of the *Iliad* to the stage. The dramatist's purpose and virtuosity reveal themselves only if we possess, as ancient audiences presumably did, something like full control, and full recall, of Homeric poetry. For Euripides has not simply *retold* Homer, but everywhere shaped his Homeric material to his own individual ends, even while relying upon his audience's ability to respond “Homerically” to the material so reshaped by the dramatist. It is here that the dramatist's hand is, as in the *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, most clearly revealed. We feel the Euripidean drama in the foreground, but always in creative tension, and even rivalry, with the epic material that provides its informing and contrasting background. The whole play, as Braun points out, moves relentlessly toward its finale: the revelation, in the epiphany of the Muse, of the truth, like a cold, bleak dawn resolving the long night of uncertainty and illusion. “Night has no answers,” and the final perception of tragic truth is the governing theatrical idea of the play.

Everything culminates here where, in this kind of revelatory drama, it should: in the Muse's final appearance *ex machina*, holding in her arms the dead body of her son, and speaking, as only a Muse could speak, the grave and beautiful words of a divine *mater dolorosa*. Like Thetis who, at the close of the *Andromache*, speaks the unspeakable words of eternal sorrow, so the Muse here reveals, in words and action, what all the action—all the deceit and “strategy,” all those heroic postures and real *arete*—has finally come to. Pure Euripidean compassion, the fear or horror compounded with the glory; the note of transient bravery and beauty:

You work, you struggle, suffer and die.

Do you see?

Count yourselves. Add the evidence.

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If you live through the night of your lives  
childless  
you will never  
bury boys

*The MUSE vanishes.*

The Euripidean "dislocation" of the heroic Homeric material is profound; there is a real jar between the tonalities of epic *arete* and the sense of real futility, of a bitterness that abides. Yet that jar is, if not reduced or resolved, to some degree informed and even enlarged by the poet's insistence that we should correct Homer with our own reality at the same time that Homeric perspective corrects our immersion in immediacy, in *our war, our outrage, and our futility*. Our tragedy is, it may seem, unendurable; but the worst tragedy of all is the intolerable repetition of what has happened to us, the eternal—perhaps preventable—pattern of the human tragedy itself. All we have to do is to open our ears to the poetry of Homer which floods the whole play and which here, at the close, fills the Muse's lament. Behind Euripides' Muse at 1243 ff. we are *required*, I think, to hear Homer's immortal Thetis in Bk. xviii of the *Iliad*, the greatest of all mourning mothers in the greatest lament in literature, as she grieves for her mortal son:

Hear me, sister Nereids,  
so you shall know it all, all the grief in my heart,  
this anguish there is in bearing even the best of sons.  
For I gave birth to a boy who was strong and in courage flawless,  
greatest of heroes, who ran to manhood like a green shoot,  
and I nurtured his growing years like a vineyard in its glory.  
Then I sent him away, sent him with his curving ships to Troy  
to fight with the Trojans. Never again shall I welcome him back  
nor see his day of returning home to the house of Peleus. . . .

Here, nourished on the poetry of Homer, we can see the mature or maturing work of the "most tragic" of Greek tragedians, the one in whom the futility of war—its futile bravery and its wretched politics—is most compassionately and tragically stated.

*Baltimore, Maryland*

William Arrowsmith

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# INTRODUCTION

*John Ferguson ends his generally perceptive remarks on the Rhesos*<sup>1</sup> by observing that this is a play “to see, to enjoy, and to forget.” From an otherwise intelligent critic, this is a disturbingly captious judgment. After all, a work forgotten is dismissed and lost. Our understanding and enjoyment of art depend upon remembering, upon imaginatively re-experiencing, what we have heard or read or seen. It is enjoyment, surely, that makes a play memorable in the first place. If we did not know for a fact that Shakespeare had written *Macbeth* and Sophocles the *Oedipus*, we might be tempted, on the basis of our immediate enjoyment of their value as “entertainment,” to assign them to a similar oblivion. The final revelations of Birnam Wood’s mobility and of Macduff’s Caesarean birth are dramatically surprising and diverting; but diversion should not be allowed to eclipse the play’s earlier metaphysical speculations. As epiphanies, these last-moment disclosures crown the work’s action and thought; and the proper critical procedure is to re-examine the play—especially Macbeth’s motivation and the ideas of reality which enforce his bitter valor to the end—in the *light* of improbable revelation. Oedipus’ self-blinding is also a *coup de théâtre*, but it symbolically completes the dramatic action.

So great is the power of names and dates, that most scholars who deny Euripidean authorship grossly undervalue the *Rhesos*. Those who, like Ferguson, argue for a fourth-century date, tend to patronize or condemn the play. But, for the literary men and scholars of antiquity, whose Greek libraries were far larger than ours, *Rhesos* stood in the company of *Hippolytos* and *The Bacchae*, *Hecuba* and *The Trojan*

1. *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1972 (499).

*Women, Alcestis and Medea*. Its authorship is as well attested as that of most ancient works. As far as can be determined from the meager remnants of the corpus of Greek tragedy, the style, language, and metrical usages of the *Rhesos* most resemble Euripides' before 428 B.C. How much earlier the play may be, it is impossible to tell, but 445-441 is a good guess.<sup>2</sup> I am personally inclined to see elements of topical inspiration for *Rhesos* in two events: the nine-month siege of Samos by Athens in 439, and the dedication of Phidias' gold-clad image of Athena the next year. During this time also, Athenians would have witnessed the building of a Thracian kingdom by Sitalkes. Finally, these dates would be fairly close to the time when Euripides presumably became acquainted with Protagoras of Abdera. However, I shall not insist upon authenticity, date, or possible influences. The foregoing are merely suggestions which may help to define my viewpoint.

The *Macbeth* analogy offered earlier must be qualified, of course, by pointing out that *Rhesos* is a short play; that it works through tidy echoes and ironies, rather than by elaborate twists of plot or depths of characterization. Its power—that is, its memorability—is rooted in its terseness. The audience must be quick to recapture hints in the light of later revelations. *Rhesos* is created by cumulative suggestion, almost like a series of tableaux; but its summary meaning largely depends upon its concluding scene. It is a thrifty play, and its riches must be sought by compilation.

This kind of composition is linked to a stern view of life. Euripides tells us that truth, if it comes, comes late; that evidence does not proclaim itself moment by moment, but lies hidden in a profusion of surfaces. Protagoras carried this notion further by asserting that all human decisions are tentative, and that men should therefore be content with such insight as chance offers. But the *Rhesos* implies that the sudden impression, the illuminated minute, may be a safer guide toward the truth than the analysis and dialectical reasoning which proceed "step by step." This, Protagoras would probably deny.

The *Rhesos* is the story of a futile quest for truth. The quest fails because it is methodical and straightforward, while the world is deceptive, and the gods who rule the world are deceitful. The story shows that the life of men is a fabric of crossing expectations. In this perplexed life, purpose is lost in forgetfulness or diverted by dialectic. Reason is defeated by improbability. It is in this respect that *Rhesos* resembles *Mac-*

2. Ancient testimony states that Euripides was "still young" when he produced *Rhesos*. Probable dates of his birth are 484 to 480 B.C. For the arguments, see William Ritchie, *The Authenticity of the Rhesus of Euripides*, Cambridge, 1964. Protagoras came to Athens from his Thracian home around 445 B.C.

both and Oedipus. Euripides dramatizes the corollary to Protagoras' statement that "Man is the measure of all things." The corollary to this motto of humanist relativism is the axiom that the human mind—unable to discover anything certain about the gods or to reach back to the first links in the chain of causation—cannot discern ultimate reality. *Rhesos* might be called an epistemological melodrama.

As might be expected, the element of surprise is important in the *Rhesos*. The plot draws force not only from internal memory of its own hints and echoes, but from the audience's knowledge of the epic version of the material. Euripides imaginatively shifts the traditional story of Homer and his successors, to create a different picture of life. The first such surprise is the discovery that Hektor is sleeping. In the *Iliad* (X, 299 ff.) he is watching out the night. The second change is the information that watch-fires are blazing in the Greek camp. In the *Iliad* (X, 11 ff.) it is the fires and hubbub in the Trojan camp which have kept Agamemnon awake. These reversals of the received story are warnings that sleep and wakefulness, light and darkness, are important for all that follows. This is indeed so; for the first scene turns into an attempt to interpret the significance of these fiery signs on the night sky. The shifts of interpretation quickly show that the play is concerned with knowledge and with misunderstanding.

Hektor, immediately upon hearing of the fires, makes a strange statement: that the Greeks are about to run from Troy. The sentries have reasonably assumed that the fires indicate that the Greeks are preparing to attack. This happens not to be true either. But Hektor's belief is based on a prophecy (73-7) not found in the Homeric version. At once scornful of his priests' predictions, and accepting the fulfillment of them, Hektor seems to have as little self-control as the sentries. Yet, from them, he has demanded coherence and clarity.

From the start, Hektor has seemed in an abnormal condition of mind. His eyes (6-8) have the terrifying look of the Gorgon mask, a gaze that reduces the beholder to a state of childlike helplessness. The first sentry to see Hektor is afraid to speak to him. The audience is being prepared, by small but abrupt shifts from Homer's familiar tale, by the unusual night setting of the play, where shadows drift and flame is reflected on cusps of spears, for weirdness and for further prophecy. One senses that Hektor is hovering in the state of consciousness between sleep and waking. He stays in this rapt balance of thought long enough to retrieve, in the manner of a Thracian shaman,<sup>3</sup> a vision of what may yet be. He sees (84-95) sudden victory and bloody vengeance.

This vision is shattered by "reason." The Chorus of sentries urges

3. See note on 1199-1206.