

**RHESUS, A TRAGEDY OF
EURIPIDES: AN ESSAY FOR
SPECIAL HONORS IN GREEK
FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF
WISCONSIN, JUNE, 1880**

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Rhesus, a Tragedy of Euripides: An Essay for Special Honors in Greek from the University of Wisconsin, June, 1880 by Henry Decker Goodwin

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HENRY DECKER GOODWIN

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FOR

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—BY—

HENRY DECKER GOODWIN.



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IN
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RHESUS

A TRAGEDY OF EURIPIDES.

I.

INTRODUCTION.

I. Since the days of Scaliger scholars have doubted whether Rhesus is a genuine tragedy of Euripides, and diverse theories have been advanced. Frederic Allen gives the present status of the question thus: "The Rhesus * * * is almost universally thought to be spurious." However, the question at this time is an open one and debate is in order. The basis for doubts as to the authenticity of the play rests on the words of the Greek Argument saying that certain persons have regarded the play as spurious and not a genuine work of Euripides, as its character seems rather Sophoclean. With this clue, scholars have examined the style of the play and have in most cases decided the play to be spurious, not, however, strange as it may seem, on the ground taken by the argument, but on the ground that the play is unworthy of Euripides.

II. In a question of authorship, we must always be conservative, allowing our confidence to be shaken by nothing short of demonstration. This principle explains the failure of the somewhat plausible "Baconian theory of the authorship of Shakespeare's plays." It is probable that the Coriolanus of Shakespeare was merely touched up by the master, yet on this same principle, we are loth to call the play spurious.

III. In criticising a Greek play, we must put ourselves in the place of the Greeks and in imagination surround ourselves

with their associations, otherwise our criticism must in many instances be at fault. Owing to difference in associations we differ markedly from the Greeks in the manner of viewing their whole scenic development. What seems ridiculous to us might seem to them most solemn and affecting. No one can read the Philoctetes without laughing heartily at the hero who goes limping about, caressing his sore heel, all the while uttering the most lugubrious and heart-rending *ὡς οἰμοῖς* and *ὀτοτοιοῖς*. Every one is disgusted at the Hercules in the "Maidens of Trachis" because he does not endure his death more calmly. (v. Trach. 983 sqq.) But in the world's childhood man is a child and expresses his feelings as a child. Achilles cries with rage. Venus screams because her hand is hurt and flies away leaving her son to the mercy of his foes "*ἦ δὲ μέγα ἰάχουσα ἀπὸ ἔο κάββαλεν υἱόν.*" Mars roars like nine or ten thousand men shouting the war cry in battle just because he is not victorious in the tumult.

*“ὁ δ’ ἔβραχε χάλκεος Ἄρης,
ὅσσον τ’ ἐννεάχιλοι ἐπίαχον ἢ δεκάχιλοι
ἀνέρες ἐν πολέμῳ, ἐριδα ξυνάγοντες Ἄρηος.
τοὺς δ’ ἄρ’ ὑπὸ τρόμος εἶλεν Ἀχαιοὺς τε Τρῳάας τε
δείσαντας· τόσον ἔβραχ’ Ἄρης ἄτος πολέμοιο.”* (II.
V. 859-864.

The volatile Athenians could appreciate and reciprocate these sentiments inasmuch as they did not regard our law that it is manly and noble to conceal physical suffering and *vice versa*. The Greek laws of scenic representation caused to us many strange and even ludicrous scenes. The chorus in the Medea of Euripides, although the slightest interference on its part could have prevented a terrible tragedy, exhibits a most puerile hesitation. Medea has entered the palace gates with the avowed purpose of murdering her children, while the chorus moves helplessly through strophe and antistrophe calling upon Earth and Sun, talking of blood and pity, etc. till Medea seizes the children and their pitiful screams are heard, whereupon the chorus debates whether it would not be as well to step into the court to arrest the murder; but after mature de-

liberation, during which the children are murdered, the chorus concludes that instead of rendering assistance it would be as well to have a song, and they strike up:

τάλαιν' ὡς ἄρ' ἤσθα πέτρος ἢ σίδαρος &c., &c.

This affects us as it does because we fail to appreciate the law that the chorus must take no part in the development of the plot, which law occasionally put the tragedian in most desperate straits. Walter Scott well illustrates this point in his "Essay on the Drama." We quote: "When a deed of violence was to be acted, the helpless chorus, instead of interfering to prevent the atrocity to which the perpetrator had made them privy, could only, by the rules of the theater, exhaust their sorrow and surprise in dithyrambrics. This was well ridiculed by Bentley in his farce called the 'Wishes,' in one part of which strange performance he introduced a chorus after the manner of the ancient Greeks, who are informed by one of the *dramatis personæ*, that a madman with a firebrand had just entered the vaults beneath the place which they occupy, and which contains a magazine of gun-powder. The chorus, instead of stirring from the dangerous vicinity, immediately commence a long complaint of the hardship of their fate exclaiming pathetically 'Oh! unhappy madman—or, rather, unhappy we, the victims of this madman's fury—or thrice, thrice unhappy the friends of the madman, who did not secure him and restrain him from the perpetration of such deeds of phrensy—or three and four times hapless the keeper of the magazine who forgot the keys in the door.'"

Then, to be successful critics of the Greek stage, we must be Greeks, fight their battles, live with them, imbue ourselves with their spirit. We must feel heart-broken at the apparent childishness of Ajax. We must not blame Medea—nay, we must sympathize with her in that terrible revenge on her faithless husband. Bearing these principles in mind may aid us in the explanation of some of the difficulties in Rhesus.

II.

THE RHESUS OF EURIPIDES AND HOMER.

I. The scene of the play lies in the Trojan camp near the tent