

**CLASSICAL  
WRITERS.  
EURIPIDES**

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Classical Writers. Euripides by J. P. Mahaffy

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**J. P. MAHAFFY**

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*Edited by* JOHN RICHARD GREE

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BY

J. P. MAHAFFY, A.M.,

FELLOW OF TRINITY COLLEGE

AND

PROFESSOR OF ANCIENT HISTORY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN.



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# EURIPIDES.

## CHAPTER I.

### HIS AGE AND SURROUNDINGS.

1. Nothing is more disappointing to the student of the literature of Greece than the obscurity which clouds the life of almost all her greatest authors. Except in those few cases where our Greek books imply an autobiography by their very contents, such as the fragments of Solon, the *Anabasis* of Xenophon, or the speeches of Demosthenes, we are thrown back upon notices exceedingly scanty and exceedingly untrustworthy. We may therefore best learn to know the real author, apart from vulgar gossip or trivial anecdote, by studying the age in which he lived and the society in which he moved. Every Greek poet (I might indeed say every poet) is strictly the child of his day, the exponent of a national want, the preacher of a national aspiration, at once the outcome and the leader of a literary public, or at least of a public which craves after spiritual sustenance. From Homer to Menander this feature marks social life in Greece, and makes the history of Greek literature pre-eminently the history of the Hellenic people.\*

\* We have nothing analogous, in modern days, to this intimate connection of poet and public, except the relation of the daily press to the people in England, where it is hard to say, in any single case, whether the public leads the papers, or the reverse, action and reaction being constant and immediate.

But in no case are these considerations more important than in that of Euripides, the poet who has bequeathed to us the largest and most varied materials to estimate his age ; while on the other hand, his age—the age of Thucydides and of Aristophanes, of Pericles and of Alkibiades, of Phidias, and of Alkamenes—is the best known and most brilliant epoch in Athenian history. He was indeed no public man, but a confirmed student, a lover of books and of solitude ; but yet certainly the personal friend of Pericles and Socrates, his elder and younger contemporaries, the hearer of Anaxagoras and Prodicus ; if not the active promoter, at least the close observer of all that was great and brilliant in Athens, then the Hellas of Hellas, the inmost and purest shrine of all the national culture. We will therefore introduce the poet by a short survey of the society in which he lived, and the conditions under which he pursued his art. For those who desire to know more of this inexhaustible subject,—the Periclean age—there is a whole library of fuller books in various languages.\*

a. The life of Euripides reached from the battle of Salamis almost to that of Ægospotami ; his boyhood therefore was in that very obscure period which precedes the blaze of light shed by Pericles and his contemporaries on the full-grown Athenian empire. Except Thucydides' valuable summary at the opening of his *History*, and Plutarch's *Life of Kimon*, we have no account of the means by which Athens attained her greatness. But we know that an extraordinary and feverish activity inspired every Athenian, high and low, to build up the imperial sway of his native city. The wise reforms of Cleisthenes had given each citizen an interest in the constitution and a voice in the management of public affairs. The common calamities of poverty and exile, the common glories of victory, especially of naval victory, in which the poorest classes had the main share, welded together all ranks

\* Viz. Watkiss Lloyd, *The Age of Pericles* ; Filleul, *L'Age de Pericles* ; Oncken, *Athen und Hellas* ; and many others.



and fired all hearts with a common patriotism. And for the first decade, at least, men were content to let internal politics alone, and pursue the foreign policy of which Kimon was the most eminent instrument. It was in fact a democracy still managed by aristocrats, in whom the people saw their natural leaders, and whose social prestige ensured them the suffrages of the lower classes.

But before the poet was come to years of discretion, Pericles had inaugurated a new internal policy, in opposition to Kimon. He was no less an aristocrat; nay, he was the lineal descendant of the old tyrants, who had educated Athens in letters, while they retarded her political development. But, like the old Whig nobility of England, he led the Liberal party against the Tories under Kimon. Hence came constitutional conflicts of great bitterness, terminating in the victory of the popular party and the administration of Pericles. The old aristocratic party, however, remained still a considerable power—an opposition not always constitutional, and always a danger to the Athenian demos, until the Revolution of 411 and the Tyranny of the Thirty forced all its leaders into plain treason towards the State. Then the restored democracy so secured itself that we hear of its opponents as a party no more. But in Pericles' earlier days, we must conceive the Athenians as well versed in constitutional discussions, as perpetually debating the limits and value of an aristocracy, the sovereign rights of the people, the responsibility of magistrates; while no less important questions of foreign policy, of the rights of subjects, of the administration of finance, were brought before the mind of every citizen.

3. Thus the political education which is obtained by the public discussion of constitutional questions, and by that alone, was certainly one of the leading attributes of Athenian society as Euripides grew up. We endeavour nowadays to attain this diffusion of political sense by a public press; but I need hardly remind anyone who has even once joined in a formal

debate on any such question, how infinitely better a man is educated by one debate than by a thousand leading articles or reports. We may therefore subscribe to Mr. Freeman's statement—that the average Athenian citizen, who performed the duties of jurymen in the imperial courts, who judged the greater disputes of all the subjects, and who listened regularly to the debates in the Assembly, was better educated in politics than the average members of our House of Commons.

4. On the other hand, it is by no means so certain that the social growth of Athens profited absolutely by this great development of energy and of political insight. There was, of course, a general increase of intelligence, of knowledge about the outlying parts of the Greek world, of intercourse with men from foreign cities, particularly, moreover, of talking power, transferred from public debate to private conversation; all these advances were indisputable. But it is not so clear that the social intercourse did not become too serious a mental exercise, especially when the country life of the old Attic gentry decayed, and Athens began to absorb all the life and intellect of the people. The picture we have of Kimon at the supper-table, singing his song among the guests in his turn, and narrating his military experiences, is somewhat different from the ideal talk set down for us by later authors, in which we miss the ease and freedom and want of purpose which characterise the social intercourse of the sporting aristocrat. So also the influence of the gentler sex must have been waning rapidly, when power passed from the Alcmaeonids to the charcoal burners of Acharnæ or the sailors of the Piræus. The lady of the old country seats in Attica was a very different power from the immured upper servant we find in the plays of Aristophanes and the dialogues of Xenophon.

We may best describe the life of the Periclean citizen in Euripides' youth by comparing it to the life of a *London man*, who, though married and having children,

goes early to his business, and spends his afternoon and evening in the club or the House of Commons, only returning to dine or to sleep at home. The Attic boys were sent to day-schools, and attended by old slaves, who were unfit for harder work. The girls were brought up in seclusion as strict as that of a convent. In no case does the Athenian citizen seem to have had time or inclination to educate them himself.

5. There was, moreover, an immense population of slaves, which did all menial work, and made the life of even poorer people a life free from drudgery, with a certain sense of power and superiority foreign to modern democratic society. The great majority of these slaves were not Hellenes, but from the wilds of Thrace and the effete populations of Asia Minor. The Athenians regarded them as the American planters in our day regarded their negroes. But as in the States the frequent case of slaves almost purely European was the weak point of the system, and that which gave the orator and the novelist their chief ground of attack, so the existence of Greek slaves, chiefly prisoners of war who could procure no ransom, was felt a hardship and a misfortune by those who reflected on the improvement of society. Nothing was further from the Greek democrat than to assert by proclamation or otherwise the equality of men. Even the Greek theorists who propounded socialist and communist schemes, propounded them on the aristocratic basis of a select society of privileged equals, served by subjects and slaves. Nevertheless the social discomfort of a wife who was no companion, and of slaves who were not loyal, led to the practical conclusion that the one ought to be educated and the others conciliated, and we hear that before the end of the Periclean period the condition of slaves at Athens was so much better than elsewhere as to suggest the sneer that you might mistake them for freemen in the streets, for they dressed no worse, and the laws forbade you to strike any but your own.