

**THE TRAGEDY
RHESUS, PP. 61-94**

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TRAGEDY RHESUS

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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THE TRAGEDY RHESUS.¹

BY JOHN C. ROLFE.

ALTHOUGH the Rhesus has been handed down to us as one of the tragedies of Euripides, its genuineness was suspected even in antiquity, for in the first of the two arguments which we possess, after a brief outline of the plot, we read these words: *τοῦτο τὸ δράμα ἐνὶ νόθον ὑπενόησαν, Εὐριπίδου δὲ μὴ εἶναι· τὸν γὰρ Σοφοκλεῖον μᾶλλον ἐποφαίνεον χαρακτήρα. ἐν μόντοι ταῖς διδασκαλίαις ὡς γνήσιον ἀναγίγραπται, καὶ ἢ περὶ τὰ μετάρσια δὲ ἐν αὐτῷ πολυπραγμοσύνη τὸν Εὐριπίδην ὁμολογεῖ.*

In modern times the discussion was first revived over two centuries ago by Joseph Scaliger, whose conclusion is: ² 'auctor Rhesi vetustissimus, qui sine dubio non est Euripides.'

Since his time the discussion has been vigorously carried on, and almost every one who has given his attention to the study of Euripides, or of the Greek drama in general, has had something to say on the question. In 1863 Frederic Hagenbach, who took the authorship of the Rhesus as the subject of his inaugural dissertation,³ did a service to future investigators by giving⁴ a full list of those who had discussed the question up to his time, together with a brief summary of their views.

To this dissertation the reader may be referred for fuller particulars. It is enough to say here that while the majority of critics are of the opinion that the play is not the work of Euripides, hardly any two agree as to the author or the time in which he lived. It has

¹ This paper, written in Latin, was accepted in 1885 by the classical faculty of the Cornell University as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. While the general plan of the dissertation remains unchanged, it has been wholly rewritten, and a number of additions and corrections have been made.

² *Proleg. ad Manilium*, pp. vi. fol.

³ *De Rheso Tragedia*, Basle, 1863.

⁴ pp. 6, 7, and 51-62.

been ascribed to Sophocles,¹ to the younger Euripides,² to one of the Alexandrine Pleiad,³ and to an obscure and tasteless imitator,⁴ about whose period there is a wide divergence of opinion. One distinguished critic⁵ thought that the many absurdities which he saw in the Rhesus could best be accounted for by supposing that it was a combination of a tragedy and a comedy, intended for the fourth place in a tetralogy, in lieu of a satyric drama. This last view has found only a single supporter.⁶

The opposite view, that our Rhesus was written by Euripides, was ably sustained by Vater⁷ and Hartung,⁸ and is still held by some competent critics.

Hagenbach's dissertation was reviewed favorably by Rauchenstein,⁹ and unfavorably by Schenkel.¹⁰ The question has since been made the subject of special discussion by Menzer,¹¹ who supported Hermann's view; by Albert,¹² who thought the Rhesus a youthful work of Euripides; by Nöldecke,¹³ who merely decides that the drama was not written by any one of the three great tragedians, nor in their time; and by Eysert,¹⁴ who does not attempt to determine the author and date of the play, but only to show that it is not abnormal in its language, and that it is not the work of an imitator.

Views on the date and authorship of the Rhesus have also been pronounced incidentally in histories of Greek literature and works of various kinds dealing with the Greek drama. Such views are more likely to be unbiased, and the present state of the controversy may be shown, and incidentally that the question is still an open one, by quoting three opinions of this kind.

¹ Gruppe, *Ariadne*, pp. vii-x.

² M. Anton. Delrio, *Proleg. in Senecae Tragoediis*, p. xcd.

³ Hermann, *Opuscula*, III. pp. 262-310.

⁴ Hagenbach and others.

⁵ Dindorf, *Euripides, Ed. Oxon.* pp. 560 fol.

⁶ Spengler, *De Rheso Tragoedia*, Program d. gym. z. Düren, 1857.

⁷ *Vindiciae*.

⁸ *Euripides Restitutus*.

⁹ *Jahn's Jahrb. f. Phil.* 89, pp. 569-571.

¹⁰ *Philologus*, XX. p. 484.

¹¹ *De Rheso Tragoedia*, Berlin, 1867.

¹² *De Rheso Tragoedia*, Halle, 1876.

¹³ *De Rhesi fabulae aetate et forma*, Schwerin, 1877.

¹⁴ *Rhesus im Lichte des Eur. Sprachgebrauches*, Böhm. Leipa, 1891.

Bergk in his *Griechische Literaturgeschichte*¹ discusses the matter at some length; his view may be summarized as follows:—

The Rhesus is the work of an imitator of Aeschylus, who lived after the close of the Peloponnesian war, but before the time of Alexander the Great. He has followed his model closely in the language and in the external details, but has missed the Aeschylean spirit. The play does not deserve the excessively severe criticism which has been passed on it. The choruses, especially the beautiful one beginning with v. 527, are deserving of the highest praise.² It must be admitted, however, that the author lacked dramatic power, and that he has not made the most of his subject, which is well adapted to a drama.³ *The play shows not the slightest sign of the style of Euripides.*⁴ It cannot be Alexandrine. The author has been indirectly influenced by Euripides and his school. Bergk's view with regard to the alleged Σοφοκλειον χαρακτήρα of the Rhesus had best be quoted in full: '*Von dem Geiste des Sophokles ist hier nichts wahrzunehmen, und wenn uns auch keine von den frühesten Tragödien des Sophokles erhalten ist, so können wir doch zuversichtlich voraussetzen, dass sie des grossen Namens nicht unwürdig waren. Indes enthält jene Bemerkung, richtig verstanden, einen beachtenswerthen Fingerzeig. Sophokles hat in der ersten Periode seiner dichterischen Thätigkeit sich vorzugsweise an Aeschylus angeschlossen und namentlich den Stil jene Meisters sich angeeignet, jedoch in der massvollen Weise, die jedes Werk des Sophokles kennzeichnet. An diese älteren Tragödien des Sophokles mochte der Rhesus hinsichtlich der Behandlung der Sprache erinnern; denn nur diesen Punkt hatten jene Kritiker im Auge.*'

The other side of the question is supported by Christ in his *Griechische Literaturgeschichte*.⁵ He says: 'Der Rhesus ist nichts anderes als ein *Iliadis carmen diductum in actus*. Die Echtheit der Tragödie ward nach den Didaskalien schon in dem Altertum angezweifelt, in-

¹ Vol. III. pp. 612-619.

² Bergk thinks that this chorus may be derived from an old 'Volkslied.'

³ The opposite view is held by many critics. See especially Beck, *Diatribes*, p. 266.

⁴ P. 615. 'Im Uebrigen hat der Rhesus nicht die entfernteste Aehnlichkeit mit der Weise des Euripides . . . wovon sich nicht die geringste Spur zeigt.'

⁵ In Iwan Müllers *Handbuch*, Vol. VII. pp. 203, 204.

dem die alexandrinischen Kunstrichter in ihr mehr den sophokleischen Character finden wollten. *Das kann sich nun kaum auf etwas anderes als den Mangel an euripideischem Pathos beziehen; denn von der eigentlichen Kunst des Sophokles lässt sich noch weniger etwas in der Tragödie finden.* Aber dieselbe weicht so sehr von der Art der Medea, der Troades, und aller erhaltenen Tragödien des Euripides ab, dass sie entweder aus ein ganz anderen Kunstperiode unseres Dichters stammt oder überhaupt fälschlich demselben zugeschrieben wurde. Für die Unechtheit sprachen sich Valckenaer und Hermann; aber dass Chorlieder¹ von so kunstvollem und reichem Versbau wie die des Rhesos sind, in der Zeit der alexandrinischen Pleias, an welchem Hermann dachte, noch gedichtet worden seien, *hat durchaus keine Wahrscheinlichkeit.* Glaubwürdiger ist daher die Ansicht der alten Grammatiker Krates, Dionysodorus, und Parmeniskos,² denen sich in unserer Zeit Vater und Hartung angeschlossen haben, dass der Rhesos ein Jugendstück des Euripides sei. In der That hatte Euripides nach den Didaskalien, wie in der Hypothese bezeugt ist, einen Rhesos geschrieben, und konnte demnach höchstens nur davon die Rede sein, dass der euripideische Rhesos durch das gleichnamige Stück eines anderen Tragikers verdrängt worden sei. Auf die Jugendzeit des Euripides führt aber auch der politische Hintergrund der erhaltenen Tragödie, der mit der Gründung von Amphipolis am Strymon (um 453) zusammenhängt. Der Rhesos ist also das älteste Stück des Euripides, und aus dem Vergleich desselben mit der Medea kann man ermessen, welche ausserordentliche Fortschritte der Dichter in der Darstellungen der Leidenschaft und der Erregung tragischer Effecte gemacht hat.³

If beside these views we set those of v. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, we shall see how little the best scholars agree about the Rhesus. In his brilliant monograph entitled *De Rhesi scholiis disputatiuncula* he says:⁴ 'Constat hanc tragoediam circa Demosthenis aetatem ex imitatione cum Sophoclis tum Euripidis ortam esse Athenis.' In his edition of the Herakles⁴ of Euripides he adds: 'Die nachahmung des Sophokles ist in den motiven und der stilisierung der personen nicht minder greifbar als in der diction und namentlich der metrik.'

¹ Cf. Bergk's opinion of the Choruses, p. 63 above.

² As v. Wilamowitz says (p. 71 below) it is not certain that Parmeniscus held this view.

³ p. 12.

⁴ p. 41.

Foreseeing that this view will be assailed, he says: 'Quaesiverit quispiam ex caecis praecipue quorum ferax haec aetas est Sophoclis admiratoribus, quomodo is qui tot et tam gravia vitia Rheso expro- baverit, de Sophoclea cogitare potuerit imitatione.' His answer is that the '*plumbeus imitator*' did not do justice to his model. He has but a slight opinion of the play, which he characterizes as '*mediocris ingeni fetus*.'

That two centuries of discussion have led to so little result, and that there is still an excuse for writing on the question, is due in a great measure to the methods of the disputants. Almost without exception they have begun with a preconceived theory of the authorship of the play, and have supported their theory without regard to any other possibility. This is especially true of Valckenaer, Beck, Hermann, Gruppe, Vater, and Hartung. These earlier disputants, too, have argued largely on what are called aesthetic grounds; that is to say, they have attempted to show that the Rhesus is or is not worthy of Euripides. How subjective and how thoroughly unsatisfactory this kind of criticism is, especially when used to support a preconceived view, may be judged from the results. Valckenaer, Hermann, and others of that faction saw absolutely no merit in the drama; it seemed to them a pitiful piece of patchwork, made of bits taken from Homer and the three great tragedians, put together without taste or skill. To Vater and Hartung, on the contrary, it seemed a very meritorious piece of work, and Gruppe reached the climax by regarding the Rhesus as an early work of Sophocles, part of a trilogy with which he won his first dramatic victory! In supporting these views their authors have heaped on the play the most extravagant praise and the most unreasonable condemnation, and have thus offered opportunities to their adversaries, without strengthening their own cause.

The problem has also been attacked from the point of view of the language and style¹ and of the metre,² but no more satisfactory conclusions have been reached, mainly because no one apparently has begun the investigation with an unbiased mind.

In this paper the non-aesthetic arguments, from the didascaliae and

¹ *De Rhesi Scholii*, p. 12.

² Hermann, Hagenbach, Menzer, Albert.

³ Spengler, Menzer, and others.