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Euripides

Euripides is one of the great Greek tragic authors. He was born around 484 BC in the *deme*, or district, of Phyla. Only a few pieces of evidence about his early life survive, yet those that do indicate he was born into a noble family. As a child, records show he poured wine for the dancers in the temples of the god Apollo, and he served as a torch-bearer in celebratory processions honoring this same god. To perform responsibilities such as these was seen to be a mark of honor, generally only granted to the aristocracy.

As a son of a noble home, Euripides would have received a thorough education. Tradition suggests that he would have been assigned private tutors to teach him reading, writing, and language, and that he would have been encouraged to study additionally with philosophers, mathematicians, and poets.

The first record of Euripides' literary handiwork dates from 455 BC, when he submitted a series of tragedies to the Great Dionysia, a competition for tragic literature. He won third, or last, place for this first submission. Thirteen years later, in 442 BC, he won the first prize in the same contest, an honor that he was to receive four more times during his life.

Euripides was a highly prolific author. Scholars in the second and third centuries found that over 90 plays had been attributed to this Greek dramatist. Unfortunately, over the centuries many of his works were lost. Today, only 16 complete plays remain.

The tragedies that do remain indicate that Euripides was a gifted playwright. The subjects of his plays range from the serious political commentary shown in plays such as *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*, to the earnest religious inquiries shown in *The Bacchae*, to the passionate psychological explorations of *Medea* and *Hippolytus*. His work reveals his familiarity with classical tragic traditions of the age, both in the way he employs traditional literary techniques regarding plot, setting, and dialog, and in the way he continually addresses the traditional themes of Greek tragedy such as the nature of human existence, human weakness in the face of divine power, and mortality.

Euripides died around 406 BC, at the court of King Archelaus in Macedon. Rumors circulated that he had been torn to pieces by hunting dogs, yet historical evidence for such a mishap is nonexistent. Although the means of his death may never be known, it is certain that when news of it reached Athens, his contemporaries, including Sophocles, went into mourning.

Euripides is regarded as having been one of the great Greek tragic poets. Although he received little recognition during his lifetime, the nearly 25 centuries since have testified to the enduring popularity of his work, and to his well-earned place in the ranks of tragic giants such as Aeschylus and Sophocles.

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Comprehension

Read the following questions based on the text, and select the best answer. You may look back at the text for assistance.

1. Why do scholars think Euripides was born into a noble home?
 - a. He received an education.
 - b. He won third place in the Great Dionysia in 455 BC.
 - c. He was born in the demes of Phyla.
 - d. He served as a wine-pourer.

2. How many times did Euripides win first place in the Great Dionysia?
 - a. five
 - b. four
 - c. three
 - d. one

3. Which of the following statements is NOT true?
 - a. Euripides was a dancer at the temples of Apollo.
 - b. Euripides wrote over 90 plays.
 - c. Euripides probably had private tutors.
 - d. Euripides was a torch-bearer in religious processions honoring Apollo.

4. Why are only 16 of Euripides' plays known to us today?
 - a. The others are very bad, and no one reads them anymore.
 - b. The others were destroyed by scholars in the second and third centuries.
 - c. The others have not been translated from Greek.
 - d. The others have been lost.

5. Which of the following is NOT a subject that Euripides wrote about?
 - a. religion
 - b. politics
 - c. hunting
 - d. psychology

6. Which of the following are ways that Euripides' plays follow tragic literary traditions?
 - a. the style of dialog and the theme of human powerfulness
 - b. the themes of human mortality and the nature of human existence
 - c. the style of costumes and dialog
 - d. the theme of human weakness, and the simple beauty of romance

7. Which of the following BEST describes the historical details of Euripides' death?
 - a. He was torn apart by hunting dogs.
 - b. He was torn apart by hunting dogs at the court of King Archelaus.
 - c. He died at the court of King Archelaus, and was mourned in Athens.
 - d. He was mourned in Macedon.

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Answer Key for Euripides

1. d
2. a
3. a
4. d
5. c
6. b
7. c