



## **Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides**

*Euripides , Anne Carson (Translator)*

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Writing with a pitch and heat that gets to the heart of the unforgiving classical world, Carson, a poet and classicist, translates four of the 18 surviving plays by Euripides.

Includes Heracles, Hecuba, Hippolytus, Alcestis.

## **Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides Details**

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### Victoriano says

I was initially drawn to this book because I'm a big fan of the translator (Anne Carson) - okay, I can't honestly say that I've read a lot of her work, but I've seen her commentary referenced from time to time, and I'm a big fan of the concepts that she focuses on in her writing.

I guess it goes without saying that my favourite parts of this book were the introductions to the actual plays. It's great to see what Carson has personally highlighted in each translation, but I found myself skimming a lot of the actual content since on the surface, a lot of the stories read like basic soap operas with predictable plots. The book didn't live up to my expectations of it though (probably because not a lot of this could be seen as original content from Carson), which is why my review is neutral.

In a way, I found it difficult to relate to the characters (or the language that they use) but, after a considerable amount of mental effort, I can say that each play frames grief in the same way - as a looming storm that you can see a mile away (and most often premeditated); a mental prompt that makes you consider yourself and your beliefs (in monologues and metered verse); and, most consolingly, an opportunity to turn your darkness into triumph.

Grief itself touches not only those close to you, but leaves a deep indent on the culture that you live in - and in this way, the grieved spirit returns - not just a shadow, not just a dream, but a hero and a lesson in the eyes of many.

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### El says

I fell in love with Euripides a couple years ago when I read *Medea* and Other Plays because *Medea* is such a bad-ass and frightening character. He convinced me of her craziness, and that's half the battle right there. Would I get up and let *Medea* have my seat on the bus if I saw her coming down the aisle? Hell, yes.

This collection has four of his tragedies, all of which are pretty fantastic, though maybe not as great as *Medea*. Or maybe I'm just blinded by love for *Medea*. In any case, the four characters who got their fifteen minutes of fame in this college are Herakles, Hekabe, Hippolytos, and Alkestis. Like *Medea* there is some infanticide, but really - what do you expect from Euripides?

What surprised me more with this collection, especially in the *Alkestis*, is just how funny a dude Euripides could be. Some of the dialogue in this play made me think of much more contemporary geniuses. In the scene where Herakles discovers that he's shown up during the middle of a funeral he tries to get out of it, but the deceased's husband, Ademtos, isn't hearing of it.

HERAKLES

I'll go to someone else's house.

ADMETOS

Impossible, dear man. I wouldn't consider it.

HERAKLES

A guest is a burden when people are grieving.

ADMETOS

The dead are dead. Please come into my house.

HERAKLES

It's not right to have guests mixed up with a funeral.

ADMETOS

But the guest rooms are quite separate.

The accessibility of these plays was impressive. They read quickly and I was entertained throughout - as much as one reading about infanticide and suicide can be entertained, of course. I think Euripides would have been a hoot at dinner parties. I'd put him right next to Mel Brooks and Peter Sellers.

[image error]

Also included is a short essay by Euripides about why he wrote two plays about Phaidra. Again, I was surprised at how modern his voice, which may be attributed more to the translator, Anne Carson, but his humor again was evident.

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### **Robert Reinhard says**

Translations by Anne Carson that sing with the voice of a modern poet but seem to reach back to the original real meaning. The Alcestis play deserves a lot of attention, a perfect plot, great dialogue, a demonstration of the role of hospitality so central to the Greek ethos and how it is wrapped up into the basic energy of life and death. Important to remember that the background myth before the story of the play begins was how Admetos won the right to cheat death because of his hospitality to the disguised Apollo. He is then redeemed by Euripides for exchanging his heroic, magnificent wife Alcestis because of his hospitality to Herakles who pulls off a startling reversal. I hadn't thought also before now how the Euripides play must have been linked by Shakespeare in Much Ado About Nothing.

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### **Chris says**

Translations (into a fairly loose and readable modern English, although curiously cries of woe and such are kept in Greek) of four of Euripedes' more obscure tragedies.

"Hekabe" has long been a favourite of mine, for reasons that I'm not entirely clear on. It's just a Very Bad Day Indeed for her; her city, Troy, has just fallen, and most of her children have died, and look, now two more are dead. And so Hekabe has her revenge, and it is brutal and hardly feels like a happy ending.

"Herakles" is quite boring for much of it, but then suddenly becomes very interesting indeed once most of the characters have been killed off; suddenly and unexpected it becomes a play about the nature of true friendship (and the price of knowing true friendship).

"Hippolytos" never quite gets interesting, alas. "Alkestis", on the other hand, has some very nice moral calculus going on in the midst of an ethically complicated situation.

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### brian says

i hear lots of people claim to 'love the translation' of a text of which they don't speak the language of the original. am i stupid for wondering, if you don't speak the original, how you can judge the translation? I mean, you can admit to digging many aspects of the language... but the translation? people must say this because it sounds literary, right? there's not even an agreed upon standard of what a great translation means... is it:

1) the most accurate? – and this is troublesome, as well. does most accurate mean the most precise word-for-word translation? or, as many phrases and words don't have exact translations, does it mean most accurately conveying the spirit of the original? and if so, what kind of parameters are we talking about?

or

2) the most appealing by contemporary standards? in other words, a lyrical and lush stylist in a time or land of lyrical and lush prose/poetry would, say, translate li po so that one could best approach his poetry... or so that one could best understand *now*, in our language, what li po's contemporaries were given in theirs? but, then, are they still li po's poems?

it's all very confusing.

whatever. i had to will myself through the stodgy boring dusty penguin editions. these breezed by. they were riveting. and i'm in no way suggesting that easier is better – only that in this particular case, i found Anne Carson's translation not only more readable, but with greater rhythm and fluidity and verve. who's responsible? euripides? carson? i don't know and i kinda don't care. it's great shit.

one play in particular, *Hekabe*, really destroyed me... euripides -- who aristotle called 'the most tragic of them all' and carson compares to beckett -- depicts Troy after having fallen to the Greeks as a brutal and immoral civilization quickly slipping into total chaos...

and writing about the Trojan War (and dying civilizations) was probably pretty easy for euripides as, through the whole of his life, Greece was engaged in the Peloponnesian War... this is, of course, impossible for most of my generation to imagine. It amuses me to hear my fellow countrymen state with misty-eyed pride that "we are at war" -- what a farce. we are a populace with our heads up our asses with the vague notion that *our government* is at war, that our government is quite engaged in torture and thuggery and the indiscriminate raining down of bombs, etc...

a semantical distinction, maybe, but an important one. there is little sense of 'the end' in american life – our playwrights are not writing plays such as *Hekabe* and our artists are not painting, say, george grosz's eyeless, armless, legless men...\* the fallen nation-state of Troy, on the other hand, has been suddenly transformed

into a moral blackhole: meaning has been sucked from anything and everything; the family unit has been destroyed; kings and queens are now prisoners, slaves, or defiled corpses; the very definition of morality has been irrevocably altered or erased... and at the end of Hekabe our 'heroine' leaves the play with the knowledge that she will soon be transformed into the form of a mangy dog. an appropriate fate.

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\* we make movies such as *Iron Man* with a most vile message: our 'hero' Tony Stark exists as kind of a one-man manifestation or surrogate for the country as a whole. a man (and country) who has been involved in serious bad behavior, one who has been involved in the business of war and guns and bombs, but who really hasn't taken much notice because well gee! life is just so damn fun and easy when one is tony stark (read: american)... but you know, of course, (gets all teary-eyed) that if we had the chance, like Tony Stark, to do the right thing... we'd renounce all this bad behavior and turn into a good guy! ugh. the liberal fantasy that is *Iron Man* is nearly as repellent as the thugs that make up our federal government.

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### **Matthieu says**

Quite an enjoyable edition. I read the original versions many years ago, though that hardly matters now, as my knowledge of Greek has markedly diminished. Unfortunately, I'm also sadly unfamiliar with the poetry of Anne Carson; I hope to rectify this situation right away. Solid translation.

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### **Elizabeth says**

Every time I encounter a classical text I haven't read before, I am smacked in the face afresh by how *on crack* these texts are. Like, I'm USED to the crack of Homer, I'm USED to the crack of Ovid and Vergil, I'm USED to the total crack of everything I read & retained from my various classics courses. But somehow I had not encountered "Hippolytus" or "Alketis" before, and holy WOW are they on CRACK.

Like, I cannot even wrap my head around what happened in those stories. They *make no sense*.

Carson's translations are gorgeous, of course, as Carson's work so reliably is, and her short introductory essays are evocative and haunting. I would highly recommend this if you have a good supply of acid or a high tolerance for WTF.

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### **Charles Dee Mitchell says**

From The Preface:

"Violence occurs; through violence we are intimate with some characters onstage in an exorbitant way for a brief time; that's all it is."

From *Hippolytus*"

### PHAIDRA

I am a sad one! What have I done?  
Where have I gone from my own good mind?  
I went mad, a god hurt me, I fell.

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### max says

There are four plays here: Heracles, Hecuba, Hippolytus, Alcestis.

Greek tragedy is not difficult to translate literally, although literal translations are often laughable. See A. E. Housman's "Fragment of A Greek Tragedy," a hilarious parody of a brutally literal translation of a segment of a hypothetical Greek tragedy.

Anne Carson is a superb translator. She takes Euripides' verses and turns them into English that is highly readable while remaining faithful to the spirit of the original Greek. To cite a random example, here are two lines from the opening of Alcestis' speech to her husband at vv. 280-81.

First, my literal translation (as close to the Greek as possible):

"Admetus, since you see how my situation is,  
I wish to say to you some things I want (to say) before I die."

Here is Paul Roche Ten Plays by Euripides:

"Admetus, you see how matters stand with me,  
so let me tell you my last wish before I die."

Here's Carson's version:

"Admetus, you see my condition.  
Now listen to my dying wish."

This is what she does everywhere with Euripides. She takes the art of translation into a new dimension. Some might accuse her of taking gross liberties with the text, yet what she sacrifices in word for word renderings she more than makes up for by capturing the pacing, substance, and tone of the original. She makes Euripides a joy to read in English, and this is by no means an easy task.

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### Elizabeth says

Not yet having read, but this quote makes me want to:

"Myths are stories about people who become too big for their lives temporarily, so that they crash into other

lives or brush against gods. In crisis their souls are visible."

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### **Julia says**

copied out the uh Absolute Banger of an opening essay, "Tragedy: A Curious Art Form" way back in like second week, early october, in the co-op, to email out to the cast & crew of a production of medea that i dramaturged. lol that i dramaturg sometimes. so that production uh happened and incompetent dramaturg that i am, i realized later that the listhost i'd sent it to was the production-team only listhost, so the actors never received it. and they were who the essay was for, really. whatever, whatever. the point is that a few weeks later i bought the book at powell's because i have no self-control. read two of the plays over thanksgiving, just read the last two on the flight home for winter break. the plays are all weird and great and not just because of the anne carson translations, i think (also tbh i think her prefaces for each play might be better than the executions of the plays themselves—it's okay anne carson you are still the love of my life—). i keep on thinking about how weird it is, what an accident of history, that these works are foundational to the western tradition but also only some of them, really. lesser-known tragedies by famous tragedians are at this weird intersection between The Canon and the plays laid bare as they really are: work specific to the culture it was born from. literary works that are both The Story, The Essence of Story, and also just, like, story. this weird balance in classical literature is something i've been obsessed with lately but whatever. and how even back then that weirdness was felt, and so you would just play in strange clashing ways with certain details of this huge megatext—compare what Euripides is doing with Heracles in Heracles and in Alcestis—but whatever. also i am obsessed with Alcestis, what a weird weird play, so weird that even anne carson patron saint of classical weirdness barely knows what do with it!! she writes a noticeably shorter-than-usual preface, acknowledges it, says not much can be said about this play. wild. the weird production of a new allegorical figure/goddess for necessity that a fate can't do the work of. the guest-host relationship has never been used as strangely as it was here.

okay a day or two later i am ~still~ thinking about alcestis//some stuff i think i forgot to mention that i'd intended to, but another thing that makes alcestis so weird and cool is how integral the more comedic elements are to the plot, to the tragedy. it is Well-Documented that alcestis is weird as hell because it was in the performance place of/was perhaps supposed to be but is very clearly not a satyr play (why? "no satyrs," as anne carson v succinctly puts it) but you can't quite call it a tragedy either. i'm thinking about how the end of the play is in a way entirely rooted in that intended-to-be-comedic, punny scene where admetos tells heracles that alcestis is both dead and alive. how could heracles have decided he was able to rescue alcestis from death if not because linguistically he originated his idea of her as a human who was inhabiting both spheres? because he doesn't quite rescue her from death untouched, she has to stay silent three days because she is already polluted by death. i'm pretty sure that's not normal! that the comedy in a tragedy wields considerable influence on the direction and action of the whole play, i mean. i could be wrong. i'm admittedly and shamefully ignorant about greek tragedy. but even just within euripides' oeuvre, i'm thinking of how, you know, that one comedic scene in medea, with aegeus—it has no real effect on what happens in the play. even if medea had never talked to aegeus, had no assurance of a place to go after leaving corinth, what happens at the end of medea can pretty much still happen. if you really wanted to, you could cut aegeus from your unrelentingly Dark And Edgy Cut-To-The-Quick version of medea, you know? it would be painful and unbearable—that play is already, even with the occasional comedy relief, painful and unbearable—but it would work. which makes sense, for a tragedy! but you couldn't do that with alcestis. that play cannot be sliced up, and the comedy and tragedy are inseparable. the divided house ultimately comes together again, heracles can carouse for only so long, heracles must end up doing what he does best, being a hero of some kind, whatever the cost, being heracles. (if i were less lazy i would read euripides' *heracles* in

conversation with *alcestis*.) there's a lot of classic ancient greek screaming in *alcestis* but even more than euripides' other modern-feeling plays, a lot about *alcestis* doesn't feel ancient.

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### **Nicole says**

Anne Carson and Euripides keep things moving at a brisk pace here through all four plays even when the plot is at its most absurd. Herakles is on point, Hekabe is perfectly drawn, Hippolytus stumbles a bit, and Alkestis (the only one I was unfamiliar with) was the strangest mix of comedy about tragedy I've ever encountered, in it, Euripides really lets it rip, making everybody, even Apollo, look like fools. Alkestis herself stands out as bad-ass but by the end I was just rooting for her to ascend to the throne of heaven and smite everyone, most of all her husband, the biggest prat in all of classics. The book hit its zenith right in the last three pages, I could read Anne Carson wax poetic as Euripides for days.

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### **brian says**

very accessible translations. the jokes really come through.

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### **Rebecca says**

"Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief."

Carson begins her preface to this collection with a seemingly naive question. But Euripides begs the question; I mean, my god! Upon returning from HELL, Herakles, a man who might be immortal, he's not sure, murders his city's usurper and then, struck stark raving mad by a jealous Hera, murders his wife and children. Immediately after committing this carnage, he snaps back to sanity, forced to come to terms with what he has wrought, which is an entirely new kind of hell. Death is not tragic enough for Herakles--after all, he might be immortal, and hey, he's already been dead! Instead, he's doomed in a much more complicated way. He renounces the gods--at this point, why not?--which is slightly weird since Zeus is his dad, sort of. The only recompense is friendship--his friendship with Theseus, in fact, saves Herakles from murdering himself.

And it continues from there. Hekabe, the fallen queen of Troy, watches her last child get slaughtered in the still-smoking ruins of Troy. Instead of entering a life of slavery and gang-rape by the Greeks, she gets turned into a dog. Which was apparently really awful, but, frankly, sounds like the better option to me.

I recommend these plays--there's nothing quite like them. And, frankly, I'm filled with rage, and a release occurs when you witness people acting out rage. You don't have to act it out, because they are doing it for you. This might explain why I'm filled with extra rage after watching a banal "we're okay, you're okay, la la la" American movie. These plays spit in the eye of anyone who claims, "It all worked out for the best," or "There's a reason for everything."

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## Jim says

I've been reading the four Euripides plays in this gem of a collection over the last few weeks. In her brief introduction, poet Anne Carson writes, "Why does tragedy exist? Because you are full of rage. Why are you full of rage? Because you are full of grief."

**Herakles** is about the Greek hero going mad and massacring his entire family. **Hekabe** shows the gross injustice done to the remaining survivors of Priam's family after the fall of Troy. In **Hippolytos**, the priggish Hippolytos is desired by his mother Phaidra, but Aphrodite wreaks a terrible vengeance on him for ignoring love. Finally, in **Alkestis**, the King of Thessaly, Admetos, is told he must die unless he can find someone to die for him. His young wife Alkestis is the only one to agree to do this. (This last one *seems* to have a happy ending, but you never know with Euripides!)

Anne Carson is not a well-known Greek scholar, but her translations are approachable and moving. To quote her once again, "Myths are stories about people who become too big for their lives temporarily, so that they crash into other lives or brush against gods. In crisis their souls are visible." The souls in **Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides** are not only visible, but raw. Carson translates this rawness into Greek exclamations like OIMOI, PHEU, EA, IO MOI TYCHAS, and others. Their strangeness, interspersed with the lines of the players.

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