

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Literature

Euripides

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GENDER Euripides was born into a patriarchal society, in which men (and women) established the rules, created and governed the polis, and lived by norms from which deviation was punished, often by mockery and contempt—as when the comic playwright Aristophanes mocked politicians known for homosexual behavior, or when Socrates drew laughs for mocking his shrewish wife, Xanthippe. That the system of norms for sexual behavior was flexible we know from the leniency with which homosexuality was both practiced and enshrined in middle class male interrelations. If one wanted to mock an enemy or political opponent, the charge of homosexuality was forceful; if one wanted to praise a handsome young guy at the *palaestra*, the statement of homosexual desire wouldn't raise an eyebrow. Biology, as we know, establishes the working outlines of male-female relationships, while all the fine print of male-female relationships lies in their gender applications. The practices that constitute the working society, men and women sharing life on a planet, are the base line on which the world of dramatic fictions is built.

BACCHAE Homosexuality was acceptable and routine among male citizens of the polis, typically between an adult citizen and teenage learner, who would be a pleasure giver in the relationship. In the case of Pentheus, we meet the ruler of Thebes, a pragmatic bureaucrat (in the style of Creon) who lives over the intersection of his male duty nexus with his subjects, many of whom acknowledge and live in terms of his male role work. (The biological presence of Pentheus, as he interacts with his female subjects, lives the roles his job and its responsibilities require, and form, as it were, the public side of the ruler who is fascinated by sexuality in general, who has great interest in the nocturnal passions unleashed by Bacchant revelers, and whom those revelers taunt, implying in him a wimpy fear of sexuality, and great unsureness about his own maleness. Pentheus' inquisitive journey into the night rituals of the Bacchae only confirms the ladies' suspicion of his shaky sexuality. Under what remains of his regal role there lurks a cross dresser with a fascination for the private sexual ambience of the female world. Nothing satisfies Pentheus more than rendering himself the victim of the carnivorous voracity of the Bacchae. With his death, Pentheus sacrifices the dignity and authority of the whole male structure of society.

ORESTES. Orestes and Pylades exist as organizations of intention and planning, missionaries in history with justice to enact and affections to express. They were traditionally paired, in Greek mythology, whose narrative interweaves them from the start, as mutually connected cousins from the House of Atreus. They were co-conspirators in the plan to avenge Agamemnon's death at the hands of Clytemnestra and her lover; in fact, in the *Libation Bearers*, the second play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, it is Pylades who provides the impulse for action, so appalled is Orestes at the murder he is about to commit. Pylades also appears persuasively in *Iphigenia at Tauris*, where he enters inseparably from his cousin, and from where he returns to Greece to report on both Orestes and Iphigenia. In the *Electra* of Euripides Pylades shares equally, with his cousin, the burden of slaying Clytemnestra. It is as though Pylades and Orestes were virtually a single person, a notion sufficient to support the strong ancient suspicion that the two men were homosexually united. What they in fact allow to represent them, of course, is our experience of them, through language, as tangible flesh and blood presences, real men transformed by the dicta of imagination into those missionaries described above.

HIPPOLYTOS. Gender as a construct displays itself under the social acting out of the dramatic figures of Orestes and Pylades. If one takes the sexual norm to be heterosexual, then the gender dispositions of Orestes-Pylades and Pentheus are far from that norm. The same off-norm inclination seems to be the lifestyle definer for Hippolytus, who is as it were the passive hero of the play of his name. Like Pentheus Hippolytus is troubled by the female principle. For Pentheus the female is exotic, fascinating, and frightening. For Hippolytus, on the other hand, the female is the dangerously other. The captioning principle of conflict, in *Hippolytus*, is the struggle between Artemis and Aphrodite, those frequent antagonists among the Olympians. The two goddesses revile one another, as portals into the drama, while Hippolytus and Phaedra enact the rites and desires of their patron goddesses. Hippolytus himself is anti-female, as afraid of the female principle as is Pentheus, though in his fear developing a passion to flee, and to share the purity of nature with his fellow male cultists. Orestes and Pylades are twins in their programs, and if lovers, lovers because there is no distance between them. As for 'normal' male female gender relations, those so naturally male-female that they slip without notice into the structuring of society, these relations play little or no part in the social world Euripides creates. Women there are in abundance, but suppliant, wailing, or cursing, rather than working toward the regeneration of the species. The Euripidean drama is itself a transformed replica of ordinary life as men and women live it, real as their bodies and movements, imagined as the genders they become in our fascination

REVENGE The darker emotions—fear, isolation, the social anxiety of war, the sense of the dissolution of family—all these darkneses are plentiful in the threatening world Euripides addresses us with. The relational intimacy required to promote the desire for revenge is not foremost in the public value breakdown Euripides typically stresses, but his interest in (female) psychology can on occasion take him to those intimate and deadly places.

MEDEA Medea brings to her new life in Greece a passionate and untamed spirit. For a while (in Colchis) love conquers all, though from arrival in Greece we see Medea's spouse, Jason, as a conventional self-interested womanizer. When political allegiances and Jason's roving eye subvert the new marriage, Medea is crazed with fury and despair, and determines to take a terrible revenge; at the end appearing above the stage in a device normally reserved for gods who appear *ex machina* to resolve a plot. In her arms she clutches her two children she has murdered; as she flies away, she taunts Jason, reveling in his horror at the sight of his murdered children.

PHAEDRA. Like Medea, Phaedra is an exotic import to mainland Greece; this time from Crete, the home of the Minotaur, father to Phaedra. To the Greeks Crete is the region—like the Caucasus where Medea came from—connoting passion and lust. Married to Theseus, King of Athens, and the slayer of the Minotaur, Phaedra falls in love with her stepson, Hippolytus. For a long time, goes one version of the story, she conceals her love, until the intensity of it grows intolerable. She confides in her nurse, who subsequently passes the message on to Hippolytus himself—who is horrified. Phaedra, finding her secret exposed to the light, and Hippolytus appalled by her confidence, takes the only recourse she can find. She tells her husband that Hippolytus has made shocking advances toward her. This is her revenge against the object of her love. And it works! The young man dies!

ORESTES. Orestes is six days past the murder of Clytemnestra, and he is being attacked by the Furies, agents of eventual purgation but which, at the moment, are literally driving him crazy. The elders of Argos, where Orestes is currently resting under the care of his sister, Electra, are deliberating whether Orestes should be stoned to death. Bad moment, which comes together, in Orestes himself, as a huge desire for revenge on Helen—the progenitor, as it were, of the whole Trojan War catastrophe—who is awaiting the arrival of her husband Menelaus, just back from the war. This desire, which seems to rival that of the universal mad killer, extends from Helen to the entire palace in which she is living, and it is only thanks to Apollo, the calming force in this instance, that a holocaust is averted. Apollo converts Helen into a star, who will shine brightly alongside her brothers Castor and Pollux. The vengeful Orestes is sent quietly off to marry Hermione.

HECUBA In the first half of this play, about the fortunes of Priam's wife, as a prisoner of the Greeks at the end of the Trojan War, we endure the sacrifice of Polyxena, Hecuba's daughter; the price the lady must pay in order to unleash the winds which will free the Greek fleet to sail home. Hecuba, who thus loses one precious child—to Achilles, who has demanded that Polyxena die on his tomb—decides to take

revenge for another lost child, her son Polydorus, who has been left to die by Polymestor, the King of Thrace. With the help of the Greek commander, Agamemnon, Hecuba arranges to deceive Polymestor into entering a tent full of Greek refugee ladies, who tear him apart. Revenge accomplished!

LEADERSHIP In the formal, 'political' sense leadership in Greek antiquity passes through many stages, from that of clan ruler or king, in Homer, to the polis-policy maker and organization center, like Solon, in the sixth century B.C.E. to the democratic ruler, like Pericles, whose benign image as a leader of free people dominates that fifth century 'pure democracy' toward which Euripides turns, for example, in his frequent bows toward 'Theseus' as the benevolent and wide guardian of such troubled groups as the 'children of Herakles' or 'the Seven against Thebes.' Leadership on a more informal level, however, the natural self distribution of power in groups or communities, reflects itself, through all these centuries, in those people, small or great, who help with the management of goods and powers in social settings. The following profiles include both 'political leaders' and 'real life' leaders—the mothers, the Bacchae, or Alcestis—all female leadership centers.

SUPPLIANTS. The tale here is a version of the familiar Seven against Thebes, a plot which pits the mothers of the fallen seven against the refusal of the ruler of Thebes, Creon, to permit the fallen to be properly buried. The mothers of the fallen insist on and gain their rights to retrieve their sons, and thus, as we noted in discussing 'family,' thwart the claims of orthodox political power. They, the mothers, in this case become the leaders within the city of Thebes. They override appointed power. Rarely does the *tyrannos*, the force wielding leader, prevail in ancient Greece, when his foe is traditional opinion.

BACCHAE. Euripides' *Bacchae* celebrates the explosion of settled community life and values at the advent of a Dionysus led cult of overdriven women. The community leader whose world the women's incursion shakes up, and ultimately destroys, is Pentheus; he is a law and order type, eager to keep the women from tearing apart communal values with their insistence on nocturnal rites, intoxications, and the senses. This incursion of the nocturnal feminine is too powerful for the smug middle class leadership efforts of Pentheus, who is, not surprisingly, torn apart in the futile effort to exercise his leadership. Power to the people!

AGAMEMNON. (in *HECUBA*). From Homer on, Agamemnon serves as the prototype of the slightly tongue tied, but honorable and goal-directed commander; the sphere of his leadership gifts is largely military. Hecuba, exiled to Thrace as the prisoner of Neoptolemos, turns to Agamemnon for help with revenge against Polymestor, the barbarian king of Thrace. Agamemnon supplies the strategy and assistance required by the prisoner. He acts out of an understanding of leadership as management. He is the 'power at the top.'

ALCESTIS. Alcestis assumes the leadership role within the family she shares with her husband Admetus, and she makes clear, as did Pentheus in the *Bacchae*, that women as well as men were appropriate leaders in the Greek social world. It is Alcestis who has the leaderly courage to offer herself up, for the sake of her husband, to give lessons in humility to Herakles, who bumbles in, and to see to it that her family is not disassembled by the momentous issue of Admetus' near death.

ODYSSEUS (in *CYCLOPS*). Odysseus is, in his way, a leader in every situation, clever at devising escape routes, tough when a fight is required, and just hard bitten enough to endure any crisis. In the satyr play, *Cyclops*, Odysseus displays his leadership abilities by sneaking his men into the Cyclops' cave unnoticed, then by working with them to blind the monster until he rushes toward the exit, and the whole crew is able to escape. Leaderly Odysseus always is, a superior planner, a risk taker, and a gifted NAVY SEAL when the situation requires one.

WAR Euripides himself lived in the aftermaths of the Persian Wars, which deeply influenced the mood of confidence and pride in Athens. His writing is almost entirely produced during the timespan of the Peloponnesian War, which pitted Athens and Sparta against each other, and which preoccupied the hopes and fears of the city-state culture for the entire second half of the fifth century. War, as a consequence, becomes the most determining theme in Euripides' body of works

THE CHILDREN OF HERAKLES Herakles is beset by in the vengeance of his long time foe, Eurystheus, and returns from his labors In the underworld to find his enemy threatening to kill his

(Herakles') children, where they are begging for mercy at the altar of Athena in Marathon. The son of Theseus, King of Athens, is Demophon; he offers the arm of Athenian protection to the children, and prepares to go to war on their behalf. The Athenian sense of entitlement, as victors during important Peloponnesian War engagements, underlies their readiness to take arms for 'suppliants' from around the Eastern Mediterranean.

THE TROJAN WOMEN. War is the background of this play, which might also be called *Lamentations*, for it revolves entirely around the fates of selected Trojan War victims—Cassandra, Andromache, and Hecuba; these victims of war—as the Greek herald, Talthybius, announces the destinies of the women. The chorus of Trojan Women, in their ritual steps, emphasizes the dooming tragedy of the situation. It is important to realize that, from the spectators' view point, the characters in this drama are depictions of Trojan War victims, that is denizens of a far mythic past which is being converted into a current everyday language of rite.

IPHIGENIA IN AULIS. The momentous tale of the Trojan War balloons out over and around the small but crucial event of the trip of Iphigenia to Aulis. Divine will has stalled the Greek fleet, en route to Troy, and, as the oracle tells Agamemnon, only a sacrifice of his own daughter will suffice to free up the winds, to move the ships. A mysterious snatching away of the girl is the shocking point at which the War is authorized and a human life is saved. Huge amorphous war killing is enabled by the miraculous bloodless sacrifice of Iphigenia.

ANDROMACHE. Wife of Hector, who was killed by Achilles toward the end of the Trojan War, and mother of Astyanax, who was hurled to his death at the end of the war, Andromache is seized as war booty by Neoptolemus. The aftermath of this capture exemplifies the kind of plight commonly descending upon the female losers in this war. The two sides in the war, Greek and Trojan, sustain their mutual hostility into the postwar period. Andromache manipulates Peleus, the grandfather of Neoptolemus, into murdering his grandson. Thus the stain of war spreads out in small circles, on the level of mutual hatred spawned by Troy.

RHESOS. This anomalous brief play gives a sense of the quiet (and deadly) sense of war. From the Trojan camp midnight stirrings are heard, and lights are seen, which suggest to Hector, the Trojan commander, that perhaps the Greeks are getting ready to sail away. Hector decides to send a spy to inspect the Greek camp; as he penetrates the lines, Odysseus and an ally have come forward into the Trojan camp, spying on the Trojans and planning who knows what mayhem. From the other direction, by deadly coincidence, an army allied to the Trojans arrives, to support them, and takes up its bivouac inside the Trojan lines. Killings on both sides follow, but what matters, here, is that we have seen war camps from the inside, penetrated the atmosphere of armies creeping toward one another, and experienced the imminence of death on both sides of a war.

FAMILY The family is central in both ancient Greek experience and on the ancient Greek stage; the family centered dynamics of Greek mythology, the very medium of dramatic thought in Greece, coalesces with the picture of lived life presented by a realistic dramatist like Euripides. We find, in Euripides, a wide variety of intense intra family dramatic scenes which generate dramatic action. Hardly a play of Euripides does not display the passions, sufferings, and tensions of the family under pressure.

ELECTRA. Electra has since childhood been separated from her brother, Orestes; it comes as a startling surprise to them, to discover one another outside the simple shack where Electra is living with her former husband, in the shadow of the palace where Clytemnestra and Aegisthus reign. In a short time they have formulated and fine tuned a plan to kill mother and her adulterous husband. This is the moment brother and sister have planned for, and when it arrives their blood bond puts them hotly into action.

CHILDREN OF HERAKLES. While Herakles has been performing forced labor in the underworld, his children have been under constant threat from King Eurystheus of Mycenae, long time enemy of Herakles, whom the benevolent ruler of Athens, Theseus, will save. The children cluster around the temple of Marathon, a hive of brotherly need, protected only by the son of Theseus, Demophon. Herakles's daughter, Makaria, offers to sacrifice herself to save her father, while Alcmene, the mother of Herakles, enters to rail against the foul enemy of her son, Eurystheus. The family gathering proves too much for the foes of Herakles.

ION. The magnetizing power of family—in this instance God, mortal woman, and mixed divine-mortal (Ion)—is tight and compelling, so much an exclusionary force that even Xuthus, both husband (of Kreousa) and father (of Ion) is excluded from the circuit of family energies. One thinks of other divine-mortal family triads—like Zeus-Thetis-Achilles, or Peleus-Thetis—Achilles—as reminders of the fierce family closeness generated by the mortal-immortal blending. Ion belongs to Apollo and Kreousa, though he becomes part of the family of Xuthus.

THE PHOENICIAN WOMEN. Jocasta, whose marriage to Oedipus (marriage? Incestuous power) produces Eteocles and Polyneices, counsels her two sons in their ardent struggle over the possession of Thebes. With her daughter Antigone, she surveys the battle between her two sons, a cameo foursome of unabandoned family closeness. (Oedipus, humiliated off, locked in the palace, still pulses as the strained progenitor, the guarantor of that stain of fall which in its way seals in the closeness of the family.)

THE SUPPLIANTS. Euripides' *Suppliants* builds squarely onto the tensions that morally electrify Sophocles' *Antigone*, the tale of a young girl faced with the inner mandate to bury her one unburied brother, against the commands of the ruler of Thebes, Creon. Euripides builds the *Suppliants* around this same conflict, by which Creon attempts to 'politicize' the sacred moral issue of body burial. In the *Suppliants* Antigone herself provides the pivot around which the tight lock of family closes, making inviolable the obligation to provide honorable burial for any member of the *family*.

HECUBA. The post war victims of Troy are largely women and children; their usual fate is to be taken back to Greece by one of the Greek commanders, and then used as domestic or slave labor. This was the fate of the noblest of the Trojan ladies, Hecuba, who was taken to Greece as the prize of Neoptolemus, and whose greatest suffering was to see her family torn apart: her daughter Polyxena is sacrificed so that the Greek fleet can be released; her son Polydorus is washed up on the shore of Thrace—murdered by Polymestor, king of Thrace; while her husband, Priam, had been killed by Neoptolemus during the sack of Troy. Hecuba's priceless family has been butchered by the war, and only in that light can we understand the violence of the murder of Polymestor, by Hecuba and her women associates, who gouge out his eyes.

LOVE Romantic love is less a cultural driver in Greek antiquity than it will prove to be in the cultures of the west during the last two millennia. Even when we find romantic love in Hellenism—Odysseus-Penelope; Hector-Andromache; Achilles-Patroclus; Sappho and her lover—we are rarely treated to those glimpses of intimacy, between two individuals, which for 'moderns' prove to be the true cachet of the romantic.

ALCESTIS. Alcestis, in the play of her name, is faced with a challenge: she is in a position to sacrifice her life so that her husband Admetus, who is about to die, can live. She accepts the challenge willingly, and is rewarded for her loving virtue: Herakles, who has stopped by to visit, goes into the underworld to vanquish death, and to restore Alcestis to life. She has proven her love for Admetus, and deserves her salvation

MEDEA. Medea, a passionate sorceress from the Caucasus, falls in love with Jason, helps him recover the Golden Fleece, and then returns to Corinth as his trophy wife. Back in Jason's world Jason's love fades, the exotic is no longer interesting, and the lover in Medea changes into the true vengeful sorceress.

HELEN. Traditionally viewed as a vamp, whose sexual availability made her a target of Paris' desire, the Helen of Euripides (and of the historian Herodotus before him) proves to be a stunning departure from pattern. Jealous of the beauty of Helen, Hera the wife of Zeus has arranged for Helen to be replaced, as 'the face which launched a thousand ships,' by a phantasm of herself, while the real Helen is sent to Egypt, an alien in a strange land, cut off from all she knows and loves, especially from her husband Menelaus. Helen remains loving and true to this man, refuses the advances of the local King, and in the end escapes with her true love, to return to Sparta.

PHAEDRA. The wife of Theseus, King of Athens, Phaedra falls in love with her stepson, Hippolytus, who is a devotee of the hunt and the male companionship that accompanies it. Unfortunately for Phaedra, she discloses her love to her stepson, and presents this news to him on an occasion when Theseus is off on a

trip. Hippolytus is horrified by her proposal, and totally victimized by what she does next, tell her husband, upon his return, that his son had tried to rape her. A passionate woman, Phaedra slowly developed, then tragically acted upon, her love for Hippolytus. As a lover she manages to destroy both her stepson and her husband.

INTROSPECTION The introspective element of western culture is only lightly developed in the Greco Roman classical period. Religious belief, in the Abrahamic traditions, becomes a matrix of self-inspection, prayer, and reflection, but such practices are much less constituent in the kind of religion centrally practiced in Greece and Rome. The belief systems of the Hellenic world were most at home when embedded in mythical projections, which were on the whole governed by actions and events and not by inward turning reflection. It is no wonder, accordingly, that the Greek genius in the writing arts promoted event-heavy texts, such as we find in Homer, the tragedians, and the historians. And yet for all that bold general perspective, we have to insist that the Greeks and (to a lesser degree) the Romans, were anything but shallow in their ability to open out whole genres—history, philosophy, drama—into a mature platform on which the foundations of western society have long been based. What was the creative depth reached in such ancient Greek dramas as still form thought models for us today?

HELEN. Taking his prompts from Herodotus, who highlighted the anti-myth of Helen, claiming that (in the myth world) Helen did not go to Troy, but was snatched away to Egypt, Euripides offers us an isolated and abandoned woman, trying to orient herself in an unfamiliar setting. The Helen Euripides provides us is placed in the awkward position of not knowing (at first) where she is, how she got there, or what she should do about it. (The gods, and especially Hera, have constructed her fate, and deflated her brand, by sending a phantasm Helen to Troy in her place. Placed in Egypt, at the mercy of the local King who wants nothing more than to sleep with her, Helen discovers that she is devoted to Menelaus—whom she never abandoned at all—and realizes that she has only one recourse, to throw herself on an altar of the gods, and to cling there for dear life. This she does, until she finds another recourse, turning to the sister of her local pursuer, Theoclymenus. In all these actions, and in the persistence of her self-identity search, Helen is ‘introspecting,’ thinking about her situation, and ‘sizing things up.’ She reaches a clear perspective, and survives.

ALCESTIS Alcestis, like Helen, faces a dilemma—what to do about saving the life of her husband, whom no one else (his parents included) seems prepared to sacrifice for. Although by play’s end the god Heracles has gone down to the underworld, to bring her back to life, Alcestis is faced, in her moment of dilemma, with the stark choice of whether or not to sacrifice herself. We can call this a moment of interiority or introspection, in which the character’s life is on the line, as was that of the isolated Helen in Egypt. Faced with this decision, Alcestis puts her own life on the line, and like her sister Helen goes into a secret place, within, from which she can decide. Interiority of character is constructed in these moments of decision, which Euripides, living and thinking at a dynamic cultural moment, fraught with national and personal decisions, proves his modernity by embracing.

ANDROMACHE. A victim of war, enslaved by Neoptolemus, and taken as his wife, Andromache is above all concerned with saving her son, Molossus. She finds herself, however, in a typical post war bind. Her son, fathered by Neoptolemus, arouses the jealousy of Hermione, the first wife of Neoptolemus. Hermione accuses Andromache of trying to poison her, Hermione. At that point Menelaus, the father of Hermione, arrives to capture and kill Molossus, a threat which is too much for Andromache to bear. The conglomeration of her woes, centering on the threat to her son, drives her to review her possibilities. She is doing so from the steps leading to the Temple of Thetis, wife of Peleus, and mother of Achilles. She is, in other words, choosing holy ground to reach peace, be safe, and reflect on her next move. This is an introspective movement. The outcome is to ask Peleus, the husband of Thetis, to protect her and her son. It works.

SUFFERING Suffering inevitably abounds in a world, like that of Euripides, in which war, political ambition, and the plague—in the second year of the war—use up the energies and resources of a small city state like Athens. We have seen among the thematic stresses in Euripides’ plays, that war, loss, and isolation play significant roles in the remaining plays of Euripides. We have heard the background sound of wailing at many points, especially when we approached the expressive tones of the female Trojan War

victims, whose wretched post war misfortunes were of continual interest to our playwright. Suffering, though, seems to acquire a different sense in Euripides, from loss, pain, isolation. Unlike his in many ways more powerful predecessors—Aeschylus and Sophocles—Euripides is psycho-analytical, ‘modern,’ and in touch with the whole person.

ORESTES. Orestes, having survived the harrowing aftermath of the Furies’ attack, which ultimately exonerated him for matricide, wakes six days after that attack, guarded by his sister Electra, in the family palace in Argos. It is a day to suffer. Among the intermittent assaults of insanity, raving disorder, and the news events when Orestes learns that the synod of Argos is considering putting him to death by stoning, Orestes twists and turns and cries out in one of the deepest ancient expressions of suffering; an agony repeated often enough in Euripides, by the women of Troy, who are being transported to Greece as slaves to the Greeks.

MEDEA. Brought back from Caucasus by Jason, and deposited in a to her unknown culture, Medea must suffer the double shock of being sidelined in favor of another woman, and left unattended. For any woman Jason’s transcendent oafishness would be intolerable, for a fiery temper like Medea, it was incitement to the extremes. She suffers brutally, but turns the fire into vengeance, killing her children and disappearing in a fiery chariot. We cannot disassociate her from Phaedra, another of Euripides’ fiery women, driven by her (self-imposed) suffering to bring another (Hippolytus) down to destruction.

BACCHAE. Pentheus suffers from prurience; then, having been lured into the open, up a tree where he can peep on the women’s ceremonies, he suffers by being torn apart, dismembered by the wild Bacchantes who are out to teach him a lesson. Pentheus’ suffering is self-induced; he has from the beginning, on the grapevine, heard about the nightly orgies of the Bacchantes; as a tight lipped bureaucrat—think of his fellow ruler Creon, in Thebes, and *his* ineptitude in dealing with Antigone—he is fascinated to have a look, and to complete his own narrow personality. You might say that he reaches out toward his own suffering, which has a sexual component to it. The pain of unrealized sexuality is a fatal delight to Pentheus. Wonderful!

CYCLOPS The present playlet, a satyr entertainment intended to amuse the drama audience, in the gap among the tragedies composing a trilogy, concerns the suffering of a one-eyed monster who has trapped Odysseus and crew in a cave. This ruthless monster is stupid as well as cruel, so allows Odysseus and his men into the cave with him. While the group is enclosed in the cave, Cyclops’ hunger gets the better of him, and he makes as if to start eating Odysseus’ men. It is then that the wily Odysseus conceives the idea—he had done this before, in Homer’s *Odyssey*—of alleviating his men’s suffering by imposing suffering on the Cyclops. Odysseus heats a pole in the embers of a fire, on the floor of Cyclops’ cave, drunks the monster with a sack of wine, and then screws the fiery point of the pole in Cyclops’ eye, causing the monster to howl with pain, and stumble toward his exit. The monster’s suffering is extravagant, and in his way of melodramatizing it, Euripides proves his own ‘modernity.’ We feel Cyclops’ suffering from the inside, while the suffering of Philoctetes, in Sophocles’ play of that name, is dreadful but apart from us, as though (which is the case) it is being heard by a third party.

LOSS The sociopolitical world in which Euripides writes is full of trouble. War forms the background of at least half of Euripides’ remaining plays, and the other half are embedded in death, flight, supplication, exile, lost identity. In the ‘real world’ around these plays there were indeed moments of glory, of statesmanship (like that of Pericles), of wonderful art and architecture (the Parthenon, red figured pottery; Phidian sculptures), of the discovery of organized history (as in Herodotus and Thucydides). These glorious moments, of the second half of the fifth century B.C.E., were packed in tightly to the texture of daily struggle against the Spartans, a current drama which Euripides plays on stage, in the language of Trojan War era myth. It is as though today’s finest dramatists, setting out to chronicle the woes of our moment, were to make their point on stage by using myth stories from an era a half millennium in the past.

THE SUPPLIANTS. The suppliants themselves, mothers of Argive fighters begging for the return of the corpses of their sons, can only be understood as victims of the ancient theme of life-loss around the walls of Thebes. In Euripides’ version of the loss that overhangs Thebes, the blinded Oedipus has not died but has remained with his daughter Antigone in the family house—Jocasta is still there too. The house is saturated in the guilt and loss poured over it by the terrible revelations concerning Oedipus. As the

widows of Argos, whose sons the Thebans have killed, beg for the restoration of the corpses of their sons, the Thebans (under Creon) take every opportunity to thwart the pleas of the suppliants. Loss and supplication fit together in many Euripidean plays. In the end of the play, thanks to the generous intervention of Theseus, in Athens, the widows retrieve the bodies of their sons. Supplication has proven effective, and death has been countered by proper burial. Loss has been mitigated, but nothing can erase the world of loss.

THE PHOENICIAN WOMEN. Euripides, like Aeschylus in *The Seven Against Thebes*, is fascinated by the aftermath of the tale of Oedipus. He takes up once again the struggles of post-Oedipus Thebes, under Creon, to recover from the split between Polyneices and Eteocles: these two sons of Oedipus are struggling to inherit the power of Thebes in their father's exile. Like *The Suppliants*, which is about the loss of the Argive warriors, and Thebes' loss of the banished Oedipus and Antigone, *The Phoenician Women* concerns a nexus of loyalty, loss, and supplication which dominate all the post-Oedipal dramas of Thebes. Loss and supplication thrive on one another.

THE CHILDREN OF HERAKLES. We have just rung two changes on the theme of loss (and supplication) drawn from the events of the Theban cycle. However, Euripides picked up similar tales of loss, in at least two other narrative cycles drawn from Olympian mythology. In one of his remaining plays, *The Children of Herakles*, we track the final stage of flight, of the children of Herakles, from the wrath of their father's fierce enemy, Eurystheus. The children and their escorts gather at the altar of Zeus in Marathon, to plead for mercy and shelter, for they have lost their homes while crossing the desert. The wails of the mothers of the Argive warriors at Thebes, the wails that usher from the royal and doomed house of Thebes, the wails of the children of Herakles: the plays that convey these howls of loss drown out much of the more societal loquaciousness typically associated with drama.

THE TROJAN WOMEN. A kind of post apocalyptic play, in which we find ourselves on the Trojan coast, visit the chorus of captive Trojan women, and essentially lament, alongside Hecuba, Helen, and Andromache, the loss of freedom, dignity and family which have been taken from them by the fall of Troy. Beside us is the corpse of Hector, for whom the women wail and mourn. All is lost, discourse shrinks to the silence of what will be no more.

ISOLATION Greek literature (and probably ancient Greek life) is relatively little concerned with the problem of isolation. Earlier Greek culture appears to have been strongly communal, regularly concerned with family, clan, or organization, and although strong literary characters, like Achilles, Odysseus, Andromache, suggest a life world in which models of independent strength are favored, a play like the *Philoctetes* of Sophocles illustrates brutally enough the unreadiness of the culture for a life alone in nature, as was the setting for *Philoctetes* on his island.

ALCESTIS *Alcestis* is an intimate play, in that unusual for the Greek stage, and one of the only Euripidean plays to look existentially at the approach and meaning of death. Death is embodied in this play and comes to take *Alcestis* away from the familiar setting of husband and children. In the extreme of isolation she is conducted by death to the underworld, where she will be queried on the reasons for her visit. She will take that same lonely journey that *Eurydice* takes in myth, as she flees the slipping grasp of *Orpheus*.

HELEN Much of Euripides' remaining drama concerns group suffering, group experience, group supplication, and the vast amorphous chaos of war. *Helen*, in the play of her name, is a rare individual portrayed finding herself isolated in a strange land, provincial Egypt. She not only does not know where she is, at first, but even when she begins to orient herself, and to know how to deal with her situation, she hugs the protection afforded by the altar of the local gods. *Helen* is isolated, until conversation with the chorus, and a good talk with *Theonoe*, the sister of the local ruler who wants to make out with her, talks her back into her true history, helps her to realize that her husband is alive, and that she has not gone to Troy.

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS When we come on *Iphigenia in Tauris* she is at her duties as priestess of the Temple of Artemis, the temple of the very goddess who snatched her away from Aulis, at the moment when she was about to be sacrificed. Her mind is on her brother, *Orestes*, who she thinks is probably dead. She is at the peak of her isolation, lusted after by the Taurian king, without friends or support in

Tauria. Euripides is a master of tracking the moments of isolation—think Ion sweeping the floor of the Temple of Apollo, at the start of Ion, before he meets Xuthus exiting the temple; think Medea shuddering with horror as she grows aware of what she has done, by incriminating Hippolytus. Euripides moves into areas of what we today would consider ‘realistic psychology,’ in identifying the zones in which the individual is at the nadir of self-orientation.

IPHIGENIA IN AULIS Iphigenia is summoned to Aulis, purportedly to meet her fiancé, Achilles. She does not realize that in fact she has been invited to serve as the living sacrifice demanded of Agamemnon by the prophet Calchas; without this living sacrifice of his daughter, Agamemnon will not be able to sail to Troy, for there will be no favoring winds for his ships. When Iphigenia realizes why she has been deceived, into traveling to Aulis, she recognizes her isolation. She is a victim both of deception and of bad luck, for the last minute message sent by Agamemnon, to warn his wife not to bring Iphigenia, has gotten intercepted and never reached its goal. She is isolated, her father rendered dysfunctional, her fiancé incapable of saving her, her mother rendered helpless by the powerful presence of the Greek fleet, whose sailors are demanding an immediate disembarkation for Troy.

OTHERNESS Examples of the weird, the odd, even the anomalous do not abound in ancient Greek culture. Fake fear, emotions tickled by the digital arts, simulated eros—those niceties of our era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution—were no part of the ancient optics, which in fact favored the familiar in behavior, sight, and scenery. Was it not Aristotle, with his stress on the mean—on walking not too fast, not too slowly—who put the Hellenic stamp of approval on behaviors and thinkings which highlighted the normal, the daily, the expected. Euripides himself, of the great playwrights, most leans toward making otherness a matter of thematic interest in his work. The examples are rare, but telling.

IPHIGENIA IN TAURIS Everything about the Taurians, to whom Iphigenia is miraculously transported after having escaped sacrifice at Aulis, is ‘strange’ in feeling. King Thoas of the Taurians—like King Theoclymenus (Egypt) or King Polymestor (Thrace)—is a shadowy figure of whom we know little, except that his kingdom promotes the blood sacrifice of Hellenes who stumble upon it. The environment of his kingdom reeks of archaic practices. Governance in Athens, by contrast and as exemplified by Theseus in several Euripides plays, is markedly humane, orderly, and open.

BACCHAE. The Bacchae, orgiastic followers of the Eastern god Dionysus, bring nocturnal passion, gender issues, and reckless indifference to social norms. They play pruriently with the straight laced leader of Thebes, whose curiosity about their rites leads to his death. The very notion of a god who unleashes primal emotions, as does Dionysus, is the antipodes of the gods of ‘classical Olympian mythology,’ of whom one would hardly say that they display idiosyncrasies, let alone promote among the people emotions which should hardly be outed at all. The Olympian Gods, the Athenians’ go to icons for belief, confidence and trust, mirrored back, at their worshippers, their worshippers’ own most cherished norms of public, event focused action.

MEDEA. *The Medea* stresses both the mysterious oddness of ‘foreigners’—in this case a prophetess and seer from realms (Caucasus) exotic to mainland Greece—and the unpredictable fury of a wild woman from that particular culture. One need only contrast the jealous fury of Medea, with what we assume to be the ‘norm centered withdrawal’ of the typical Athenian housewife, to surmise how shocking an otherness like that of Medea, perhaps even of Phaedra, will have to have appeared to the typical Athenian playgoer.

CYCLOPS. The Cyclops is a satyr play, shorter than the usual drama, intended to provide entertainment in the course of a trilogy competing in the annual Dionysia festival. Thus, this little play was a natural outlet for the evocation of unconventional scenes, behaviors, and inner discoveries. The present play, like the forerunner episode in Homer (*Odyssey*, Book 9), takes Odysseus as our guide into the cave of this patriarchal one-eye, whose name, Polyphemus, means (grotesquely) ‘renowned for his song.’ In the cave of this beast we perceive, through the always normative eyes of the cool Odysseus, the obscene voracity of this wild and virtually dysfunctional monster.

PRIDE Ancient Hellenic social value, from Homer through the advent of Roman culture, is strongly centered around pride, which is itself a byproduct of others’ appreciation of one’s self. What one is proud of is rendered prideworthy by others’ attitudes. The figures of ancient tragedy and epic are characteristically sensitive, and dangerously ready to act back or act out if they are not treated with

proper respect. That is why revenge is such a common and powerful driver in the literature we reference here, which is of course in part a mirror of the society that generates it. Wound the pride of Ajax (in the play of that name by Sophocles) and he may (as he does) kill himself. Wound the pride of Achilles, by killing his lover Patroclus, and look out for yourself!

HIPPOLYTOS. The cult of nature, woodlands and the hunt is part of a mythic youth culture in which the Greeks embedded one of their distinctive forms of pride: the pride of the perfect body. (It's the pride of the contemporary body builder, but it's a young man's group pride, and it, the Hellenic version, has much to do with perfect body camaraderie, and with a more or less covert devaluing of women. One might think forward to Leonardo's ideal male figure, or, in Shakespeare's writing, to the guy culture shaping by the end of Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*). For Hippolytus to be charged—as he was by Phaedra—with attempting to rape his step mother was not only a grotesque offense to his pride, but a ridiculous charge to bring against this handsome young guy. Only a high mythical death by stallions could erase the traces of Phaedra's wild slander.

MEDEA. The Greeks were famously slow to understand the mindset of foreigners, and in particular of foreigners from what seemed exotic regions and cultures. Medea, a seer and prophet from the Caucasus, returned from such regions as the trophy bride of Jason, whom she had helped on his quest to find the Golden Fleece. A culture clash was inevitably cooking, as Jason returned with Medea to her new home, Thebes—where his father was ruler. What had seemed exotic to Jason, and his conservative court circle, soon came to seem an impediment to a profitable role in society, and when Jason found a prettier lady, who was less exotic, and more orthodox, he dismissed Medea as a wild woman and abandoned her—wounding a pride which was the raw sensitivity of the misunderstood, who had been uprooted by a Hellene whom she herself considered beneath scorn. Medea's destroyed pride, as we know, generated fury which was fatal to all the participants in her family circle.

PHAEDRA. Phaedra too was an exotic bride, the daughter of King Minos of Crete and of Pasiphae, whose lust drove her to copulate with the great bull of Cnossos. In other words, Phaedra, like Medea, came from regions famed for their power, strangeness and savagery. Her pride was that of an habituee of dark mysteries of the sexual night, and it was not to be wondered that she, like Medea, brought the ferocity of her pride into direct conflict with the very different moderate pride of restrained and orthodox mates like Jason and Hippolytus. Phaedra's pride, and her sense of her sexual power, grew more intense as her lust for Hippolytus grew. It was foredestined that the more vigorously Phaedra made her move toward her stepson, the more violent was going to be the anti-reaction of the proud young man. One culture's pride, slamming into another culture's very differently oriented pride, cannot fail to detonate resentments, fury, and a terrible showdown.