

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Euripides

Isolation

Background 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 in 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.