

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Themes in Euripides
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.