

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Themes in Euripides
OTHERNESS

Introduction

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.