

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Characters in **Euripides's** Plays

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Open

ODYSSEUS Odysseus is the main character, as always in Greek literature cunning, resourceful, and adventurous. Storm driven, he and his men, in Euripides as in Homer, intrepidly set out up the slopes of Mt. Aetna, looking for food and water, exhausted and wary. Odysseus and Silenus, the servant of the Cyclops, enter into conversation, in which Odysseus is both orienting himself, with an eye to winning grub from Cyclops, and satisfying his curiosity about the folkways of these unfamiliar Cyclops folk. When Cyclops returns from hunting, Odysseus and his men make their ways into the cave, hoping to feed on cheeses and milk and game, but get trapped, and find themselves witnessing a dreadful scene in which the Cyclops consumes a couple of fleshy sailors. Desperate to stop their host, Odysseus undertakes to fill him with the wine they have brought with them; Odysseus drunks the monster by stages, until he is no longer capable of orientation, and then the intruders take the same step they take in the *Odyssey*, sharpening a branch, heating it to red fire, then collaboratively twisting it in the single huge eye of Cyclops, and blinding the monster with pain and desire to open the cave and to escape. That is just what happens; as Odysseus and his men also escape.

Closed

HIPPOLYTUS Hippolytus is a handsome young man whose passion is for wild nature, the hunt, and manly pleasures; he seems to the goddess Aphrodite to scorn sexual love, and thus to be worthy of her hatred. Artemis, the goddess of hunting and the wild, favors Hippolytus and bemoans the sufferings he has to go through at the hands of the spirit of sexual love, Aphrodite. Hippolytus himself is somewhat one-dimensional in the play, for his presence is required as an indicator: of the power and tragedy that can come from sexual lust such as that which his stepmother Phaedra feels for him; and of the error of becoming a partisan either of the hunt or of sexuality.

Conscientious

ALCESTIS Alcestis herself is a noble character in a hard situation. Her husband, Admetus, has won from the Fates and Apollo the privilege of avoiding death, if he can find someone to die in his place. Alcestis, his wife, is the only person who can be found to substitute for Admetus in death, and most of what we know of Alcestis springs from her willingness to take over her husband's death. She is eventually dispensed from her own death, but the fall out from that resurrection (by Heracles) is largely understood through the responses of Admetus. Alcestis herself is known chiefly for her selflessness.

HECUBA The main character is Hecuba, the queen of Troy—now a captive of the Greek leader, Agamemnon—and the widow of Priam, the stately father figure whose death marked the downfall of Troy. Hecuba's very life is now wrapped up in her two children (she had fifty originally), Polyxena and Polydorus, both of whom will be dead by the end of the play. Hecuba is staunch enough to deal with the torrent of humiliations and losses, which strike her as a captive of the Greeks. In the end she is vengeful to the max, masterminding the destruction of Polymestor, his eyes gouged out, his life ruined.

Helen Helen is the main character, a counter character to the traditional vision of Helen in Greek tales, a vision of a vamp, an extraordinary beauty, quite delighted to be the face that launched a thousand ships, that moved an army from Greece to Troy, and that looked down on her fellow Hellenes, from the

Walls of Troy, as though to taunt them. Euripides' Helen, by contrast—and in concord with the view of Herodotus, in his *History*—is a real woman Helen, who was whisked away to Egypt before she could go to Troy, and who—thanks to machinations of the god Hera—was replaced in Troy by a simulacrum of herself, who incorporated all the 'evil woman' traits formerly attributed to the Helen now in Egypt. The Egyptian Helen is true to her husband, careful to stay far from the bed of her captor/host Theoclymenos, and perseverant till the end of the war, when she is able to escape from Egypt with Menelaos.

Rational

ANDROMACHE The main character is Andromache, who addresses us from the start of the play, from the steps leading to the temple of Thetis, the wife of Peleus, and mother of Achilles, and thus the key figure for the stage managing of the whole play. Andromache is at that point begging for refuge for herself and her son, and fearing that her father-in-law, Menelaus, will destroy both of them. The remainder of the play is a search for a way out, for Andromache, from her dreadful enslaved captivity at the hands of Neoptolemos, son of Achilles. The threat to her son compels her to the action of calling on the intervention of Peleus, who frees her from immediate threat, helps to expel Menelaus, and protects his grandson, Molossus. The murder of Neoptolemos leads to the last barrier to Andromache's freedom, and the intervention of Thetis, again at the end, gives Andromache a roadmap to a quiet and peaceful future.

Emotional

DIONYSUS Dionysus is from first appearance cool and superior, a pretty boy to the man on the street, perhaps, but an exotic charmer—golden hair, curly locks—to the women of the traditional city-states he visits, periodically inciting outbreaks of nocturnal frenzy, and **deep emotional release**. In his relationship with Pentheus, a man of order, control and tradition, Dionysus is quick spoken, sardonic, and (often hiddenly) jeering, a set of traits he embodies in the facile way he destroys the prison Pentheus has attempted to confine him in. In the larger picture, Dionysus may 'represent' the whole passionate, irrational need of the human spirit, while Pentheus, his counter, is all about order and control.

MEDEA As the overview suggests, Medea is a vengeful character, about whom various opinions are possible. Symbolically embedded in the bewitched land of Asia Minor/Colchis, which to the Athenians seemed remote and mysterious, 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 machinato* 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.