

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Themes in Euripides

## 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.