

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

The Themes in Euripides

## WAR

Euripides himself lived in the aftermaths of the Persian Wars, which deeply influenced the mood of confidence and pride in Athens. His writing is almost entirely produced during the timespan of the Peloponnesian War, which pitted Athens and Sparta against each other, and which preoccupied the hopes and fears of the city-state culture for the entire second half of the fifth century. War, as a consequence, becomes the most determining theme in Euripides' body of works

**THE CHILDREN OF HERAKLES** Herakles is beset by in the vengeance of his long time foe, Eurystheus, and returns from his labors In the underworld to find his enemy threatening to kill his (Herakles') children, where they are begging for mercy at the altar of Athena in Marathon. The son of Theseus, King of Athens, is Demophon; he offers the arm of Athenian protection to the children, and prepares to go to war on their behalf. The Athenian sense of entitlement, as victors during important Peloponnesian War engagements, underlies their readiness to take arms for 'suppliants' from around the Eastern Mediterranean.

**THE TROJAN WOMEN.** War is the background of this play, which might also be called *Lamentations*, for it revolves entirely around the fates of selected Trojan War victims—Cassandra, Andromache, and Hecuba; these victims of war—as the Greek herald, Talthybius, announces the destinies of the women. The chorus of Trojan Women, in their ritual steps, emphasizes the dooming tragedy of the situation. It is important to realize that, from the spectators' view point, the characters in this drama are depictions of Trojan War victims, that is denizens of a far mythic past which is being converted into a current everyday language of rite.

**IPHIGENIA IN AULIS.** The momentous tale of the Trojan War balloons out over and around the small but crucial event of the trip of Iphigenia to Aulis. Divine will has stalled the Greek fleet, en route to Troy, and, as the oracle tells Agamemnon, only a sacrifice of his own daughter will suffice to free up the winds, to move the ships. A mysterious snatching away of the girl is the shocking point at which the War is authorized and a human life is saved. Huge amorphous war killing is enabled by the miraculous bloodless sacrifice of Iphigenia.

**ANDROMACHE.** Wife of Hector, who was killed by Achilles toward the end of the Trojan War, and mother of Astyanax, who was hurled to his death at the end of the war, Andromache is seized as war booty by Neoptolemus. The aftermath of this capture exemplifies the kind of plight commonly descending upon the female losers in this war. The two sides in the war, Greek and Trojan, sustain their mutual hostility into the postwar period. Andromache manipulates Peleus, the grandfather of Neoptolemus, into murdering his grandson. Thus the stain of war spreads out in small circles, on the level of mutual hatred spawned by Troy.

**RHESOS.** This anomalous brief play gives a sense of the quiet (and deadly) sense of war. From the Trojan camp midnight stirrings are heard, and lights are seen, which suggest to Hector, the Trojan commander, that perhaps the Greeks are getting ready to sail away. Hector decides to send a spy to inspect the Greek camp; as he penetrates the lines, Odysseus and an ally have come forward into the Trojan camp, spying on the Trojans and planning who knows what mayhem. From the other direction, by deadly coincidence, an army allied to the Trojans arrives, to support them, and takes up its bivouac inside the Trojan lines. Killings on both sides follow, but what matters, here, is that we have seen war camps from the inside, penetrated the atmosphere of armies creeping toward one another, and experienced the imminence of death on both sides of a war.