

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Themes in Euripides

LOSS

PREFACE The sociopolitical world in which Euripides writes is full of trouble. War forms the background of at least half of Euripides' remaining plays, and the other half are embedded in death, flight, supplication, exile, lost identity. In the 'real world' around these plays there were indeed moments of glory, of statesmanship (like that of Pericles), of wonderful art and architecture (the Parthenon, red figured pottery; Phidian sculptures), of the discovery of organized history (as in Herodotus and Thucydides). These glorious moments, of the second half of the fifth century B.C.E., were packed in tightly to the texture of daily struggle against the Spartans, a current drama which Euripides plays on stage, in the language of Trojan War era myth. It is as though today's finest dramatists, setting out to chronicle the woes of our moment, were to make their point on stage by using myth stories from an era a half millennium in the past.

THE SUPPLIANTS. The suppliants themselves, mothers of Argive fighters begging for the return of the corpses of their sons, can only be understood as victims of the ancient theme of life-loss around the walls of Thebes. In Euripides' version of the loss that overhangs Thebes, the blinded Oedipus has not died but has remained with his daughter Antigone in the family house—Jocasta is still there too. The house is saturated in the guilt and loss poured over it by the terrible revelations concerning Oedipus. As the widows of Argos, whose sons the Thebans have killed, beg for the restoration of the corpses of their sons, the Thebans (under Creon) take every opportunity to thwart the pleas of the suppliants. Loss and supplication fit together in many Euripidean plays. In the end of the play, thanks to the generous intervention of Theseus, in Athens, the widows retrieve the bodies of their sons. Supplication has proven effective, and death has been countered by proper burial. Loss has been mitigated, but nothing can erase the world of loss.

THE PHOENICIAN WOMEN. Euripides, like Aeschylus in *The Seven Against Thebes*, is fascinated by the aftermath of the tale of Oedipus. He takes up once again the struggles of post-Oedipus Thebes, under Creon, to recover from the split between Polyneices and Eteocles: these two sons of Oedipus are struggling to inherit the power of Thebes in their father's exile. Like *The Suppliants*, which is about the loss of the Argive warriors, and Thebes' loss of the banished Oedipus and Antigone, *The Phoenician Women* concerns a nexus of loyalty, loss, and supplication which dominate all the post-Oedipal dramas of Thebes. Loss and supplication thrive on one another.

THE CHILDREN OF HERAKLES. We have just rung two changes on the theme of loss (and supplication) drawn from the events of the Theban cycle. However, Euripides picked up similar tales of loss, in at least two other narrative cycles drawn from Olympian mythology. In one of his remaining plays, *The Children of Herakles*, we track the final stage of flight, of the children of Herakles, from the wrath of their father's fierce enemy, Eurystheus. The children and their escorts gather at the altar of Zeus in Marathon, to plead for mercy and shelter, for they have lost their homes while crossing the desert. The wails of the mothers of the Argive warriors at Thebes, the wails that usher from the royal and doomed house of Thebes, the wails of the children of Herakles: the plays that convey these howls of loss drown out much of the more societal loquaciousness typically associated with drama.

THE TROJAN WOMEN. A kind of post apocalyptic play, in which we find ourselves on the Trojan coast, visit the chorus of captive Trojan women, and essentially lament, alongside Hecuba, Helen, and Andromache, the loss of freedom, dignity and family which have been taken from them by the fall of Troy. Beside us is the corpse of Hector, for whom the women wail and mourn. All is lost, discourse shrinks to the silence of what will be no more.