

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Themes in Euripides

Suffering

Preface Suffering inevitably abounds in a world, like that of Euripides, in which war, political ambition, and the plague—in the second year of the war—use up the energies and resources of a small city state like Athens. We have seen among the thematic stresses in Euripides' plays, that war, loss, and isolation play significant roles in the remaining plays of Euripides. We have heard the background sound of wailing at many points, especially when we approached the expressive tones of the female Trojan War victims, whose wretched post war misfortunes were of continual interest to our playwright. Suffering, though, seems to acquire a different sense in Euripides, from loss, pain, isolation. Unlike his in many ways more powerful predecessors—Aeschylus and Sophocles—Euripides is psycho-analytical, 'modern,' and in touch with the whole person.

ORESTES. Orestes, having survived the harrowing aftermath of the Furies' attack, which ultimately exonerated him for matricide, wakes six days after that attack, guarded by his sister Electra, in the family palace in Argos. It is a day to suffer. Among the intermittent assaults of insanity, raving disorder, and the news events when Orestes learns that the synod of Argos is considering putting him to death by stoning, Orestes twists and turns and cries out in one of the deepest ancient expressions of suffering; an agony repeated often enough in Euripides, by the women of Troy, who are being transported to Greece as slaves to the Greeks.

MEDEA. Brought back from Caucasus by Jason, and deposited in a to her unknown culture, Medea must suffer the double shock of being sidelined in favor of another woman, and left unattended. For any woman Jason's transcendent oafishness would be intolerable, for a fiery temper like Medea, it was incitement to the extremes. She suffers brutally, but turns the fire into vengeance, killing her children and disappearing in a fiery chariot. We cannot disassociate her from Phaedra, another of Euripides' fiery women, driven by her (self-imposed) suffering to bring another (Hippolytus) down to destruction.

BACCHAE. Pentheus suffers from prurience; then, having been lured into the open, up a tree where he can peep on the women's ceremonies, he suffers by being torn apart, dismembered by the wild Bacchants who are out to teach him a lesson. Pentheus' suffering is self-induced; he has from the beginning, on the grapevine, heard about the nightly orgies of the Bacchants; as a tight lipped bureaucrat—think of his fellow ruler Creon, in Thebes, and *his* ineptitude in dealing with Antigone—he is fascinated to have a look, and to complete his own narrow personality. You might say that he reaches out toward his own suffering, which has a sexual component to it. The pain of unrealized sexuality is a fatal delight to Pentheus. Wonderful!

CYCLOPS The present playlet, a satyr entertainment intended to amuse the drama audience, in the gap among the tragedies composing a trilogy, concerns the suffering of a one-eyed monster who has trapped Odysseus and crew in a cave. This ruthless monster is stupid as well as cruel, so allows Odysseus and his men into the cave with him. While the group is enclosed in the cave, Cyclops' hunger gets the better of him, and he makes as if to start eating Odysseus' men. It is then that the wily Odysseus conceives the idea—he had done this before, in Homer's *Odyssey*—of alleviating his men's suffering by imposing suffering on the Cyclops. Odysseus heats a pole in the embers of a fire, on the floor of Cyclops' cave, drunks the monster with a sack of wine, and then screws the fiery point of the pole in Cyclops' eye, causing the monster to howl with pain, and stumble toward his exit. The monster's suffering is extravagant, and in his way of melodramatizing it, Euripides proves his own 'modernity.' We feel Cyclops' suffering from the inside, while the suffering of Philoctetes, in Sophocles' play of that name, is dreadful but apart from us, as though (which is the case) it is being heard by a third party.