

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Euripides **LEADERSHIP**

In the formal, 'political' sense leadership in Greek antiquity passes through many stages, from that of clan ruler or king, in Homer, to the polis-policy maker and organization center, like Solon, in the sixth century B.C.E. to the democratic ruler, like Pericles, whose benign image as a leader of free people dominates that fifth century 'pure democracy' toward which Euripides turns, for example, in his frequent bows toward 'Theseus' as the benevolent and wide guardian of such troubled groups as the 'children of Herakles' or 'the Seven against Thebes.' Leadership on a more informal level, however, the natural self distribution of power in groups or communities, reflects itself, through all these centuries, in those people, small or great, who help with the management of goods and powers in social settings. The following profiles include both 'political leaders' and 'real life' leaders—the mothers, the Bacchae, or Alcestis—all female leadership centers.

SUPPLIANTS. The tale here is a version of the familiar Seven against Thebes, a plot which pits the mothers of the fallen seven against the refusal of the ruler of Thebes, Creon, to permit the fallen to be properly buried. The mothers of the fallen insist on and gain their rights to retrieve their sons, and thus, as we noted in discussing 'family,' thwart the claims of orthodox political power. They, the mothers, in this case become the leaders within the city of Thebes. They override appointed power. Rarely does the *tyrannos*, the force wielding leader, prevail in ancient Greece, when his foe is traditional opinion.

BACCHAE. Euripides' *Bacchae* celebrates the explosion of settled community life and values at the advent of a Dionysus led cult of overdriven women. The community leader whose world the women's incursion shakes up, and ultimately destroys, is Pentheus; he is a law and order type, eager to keep the women from tearing apart communal values with their insistence on nocturnal rites, intoxications, and the senses. This incursion of the nocturnal feminine is too powerful for the smug middle class leadership efforts of Pentheus, who is, not surprisingly, torn apart in the futile effort to exercise his leadership. Power to the people!

AGAMEMNON. (in HECUBA). From Homer on, Agamemnon serves as the prototype of the slightly tongue tied, but honorable and goal-directed commander; the sphere of his leadership gifts is largely military, Hecuba, exiled to Thrace as the prisoner of Neoptolemos, turns to Agamemnon for help with revenge against Polymestor, the barbarian king of Thrace. Agamemnon supplies the strategy and assistance required by the prisoner. He acts out of an understanding of leadership as management. He is the 'power at the top.'

ALCESTIS. Alcestis assumes the leadership role within the family she shares with her husband Admetus, and she makes clear, as did Pentheus in the *Bacchae*, that women as well as men were appropriate leaders in the Greek social world. It is Alcestis who has the leaderly courage to offer herself up, for the sake of her husband, to give lessons in humility to Herakles, who bumbles in, and to see to it that her family is not disassembled by the momentous issue of Admetus' near death.

ODYSSEUS (in CYCLOPS). Odysseus is, in his way, a leader in every situation, clever at devising escape routes, tough when a fight is required, and just hard bitten enough to endure any crisis. In the satyr play, *Cyclops*, Odysseus displays his leadership abilities by sneaking his men into the Cyclops' cave unnoticed, then by working with them to blind the monster until he rushes toward the exit, and the whole crew is able to escape. Leaderly Odysseus always is, a superior planner, a risk taker, and a gifted NAVY SEAL when the situation requires one.