

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Themes in Euripides

GENDER

Overview Euripides was born into a patriarchal society, in which men (and women) established the rules, created and governed the polis, and lived by norms from which deviation was punished, often by mockery and contempt—as when the comic playwright Aristophanes mocked politicians known for homosexual behavior, or when Socrates drew laughs for mocking his shrewish wife, Xanthippe. That the system of norms for sexual behavior was flexible we know from the leniency with which homosexuality was both practiced and enshrined in middle class male interrelations. If one wanted to mock an enemy or political opponent, the charge of homosexuality was forceful; if one wanted to praise a handsome young guy at the *palaestra*, the statement of homosexual desire wouldn't raise an eyebrow. Biology, as we know, establishes the working outlines of male-female relationships, while all the fine print of male-female relationships lies in their gender applications. The practices that constitute the working society, men and women sharing life on a planet, are the base line on which the world of dramatic fictions is built.

BACCHAE Homosexuality was acceptable and routine among male citizens of the polis, typically between an adult citizen and teen age learner, who would be a pleasure giver in the relationship. In the case of Pentheus, we meet the ruler of Thebes, a pragmatic bureaucrat (in the style of Creon) who lives over the intersection of his male duty nexus with his subjects, many of whom acknowledge and live in terms of his male role work. (The biological presence of Pentheus, as he interacts with his female subjects, lives the roles his job and its responsibilities require, and form, as it were, the public side of the ruler who is fascinated by sexuality in general, who has great interest in the nocturnal passions unleashed by Bacchant revelers, and whom those revelers taunt, implying in him a wimpy fear of sexuality, and great unsureness about his own maleness. Pentheus' inquisitive journey into the night rituals of the Bacchae only confirms the ladies' suspicion of his shaky sexuality. Under what remains of his regal role there lurks a cross dresser with a fascination for the private sexual ambience of the female world. Nothing satisfies Pentheus more than rendering himself the victim of the carnivorous voracity of the Bacchae. With his death, Pentheus sacrifices the dignity and authority of the whole male structure of society.

ORESTES. Orestes and Pylades exist as organizations of intention and planning, missionaries in history with justice to enact and affections to express. They were traditionally paired, in Greek mythology, whose narrative interweaves them from the start, as mutually connected cousins from the House of Atreus. They were co-conspirators in the plan to avenge Agamemnon's death at the hands of Clytemnestra and her lover; in fact, in the *Libation Bearers*, the second play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, it is Pylades who provides the impulse for action, so appalled is Orestes at the murder he is about to commit. Pylades also appears persuasively in *Iphigenia at Tauris*, where he enters inseparably from his cousin, and from where he returns to Greece to report on both Orestes and Iphigenia. In the *Electra* of Euripides Pylades shares equally, with his cousin, the burden of slaying Clytemnestra. It is as though Pylades and Orestes were virtually a single person, a notion sufficient to support the strong ancient suspicion that the two men were homosexually united. What they in fact allow to represent them, of course, is our experience of them, through language, as tangible flesh and blood presences, real men transformed by the dicta of imagination into those missionaries described above.

HIPPOLYTOS. Gender as a construct displays itself under the social acting out of the dramatic figures of Orestes and Pylades. If one takes the sexual norm to be heterosexual, then the gender dispositions of Orestes-Pylades and Pentheus are far from that norm. The same off-norm inclination seems to be the lifestyle definer for Hippolytus, who is as it were the passive hero of the play of his name. Like Pentheus Hippolytus is troubled by the female principle. For Pentheus the female is exotic, fascinating, and frightening. For Hippolytus, on the other hand, the female is the dangerously other. The captioning principle of conflict, in *Hippolytus*, is the struggle between Artemis and Aphrodite, those frequent antagonists among the Olympians. The two goddesses revile one another, as portals into the drama,

while Hippolytus and Phaedra enact the rites and desires of their patron goddesses. Hippolytus himself is anti-female, as afraid of the female principle as Is Pentheus, though in his fear developing a passion to flee, and to share the purity of nature with his fellow male cultists. Orestes and Pylades are twins in their programs, and if lovers, lovers because there is no distance between them. As for 'normal' male female gender relations, those so naturally male-female that they slip without notice into the structuring of society, these relations play little or no part in the social world Euripides creates. Women there are in abundance, but suppliant, wailing, or cursing, rather than working toward the regeneration of the species. The Euripidean drama is itself a transformed replica of ordinary life as men and women live it, real as their bodies and movements, imagined as the genders they become in our fascination.