

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Themes in Euripides

## INTROSPECTION

The introspective element of western culture is only lightly developed in the Greco Roman classical period. Religious belief, in the Abrahamic traditions, becomes a matrix of self-inspection, prayer, and reflection, but such practices are much less constituent in the kind of religion centrally practiced in Greece and Rome. The belief systems of the Hellenic world were most at home when embedded in mythical projections, which were on the whole governed by actions and events and not by inward turning reflection. It is no wonder, accordingly, that the Greek genius in the writing arts promoted event-heavy texts, such as we find in Homer, the tragedians, and the historians. And yet for all that bold general perspective, we have to insist that the Greeks and (to a lesser degree) the Romans, were anything but shallow in their ability to open out whole genres—history, philosophy, drama—into a mature platform on which the foundations of western society have long been based. What was the creative depth reached in such ancient Greek dramas as still form thought models for us today?

**HELEN.** Taking his prompts from Herodotus, who highlighted the anti-myth of Helen, claiming that (in the myth world) Helen did not go to Troy, but was snatched away to Egypt, Euripides offers us an isolated and abandoned woman, trying to orient herself in an unfamiliar setting. The Helen Euripides provides us is placed in the awkward position of not knowing (at first) where she is, how she got there, or what she should do about it. (The gods, and especially Hera, have constructed her fate, and deflated her brand, by sending a phantasm Helen to Troy in her place. Placed in Egypt, at the mercy of the local King who wants nothing more than to sleep with her, Helen discovers that she is devoted to Menelaus—whom she never abandoned at all—and realizes that she has only one recourse, to throw herself on an altar of the gods, and to cling there for dear life. This she does, until she finds another recourse, turning to the sister of her local pursuer, Theoclymenus. In all these actions, and in the persistence of her self-identity search, Helen is ‘introspecting,’ thinking about her situation, and ‘sizing things up.’ She reaches a clear perspective, and survives.

**ALCESTIS** Alcestis, like Helen, faces a dilemma—what to do about saving the life of her husband, whom no one else (his parents included) seems prepared to sacrifice for. Although by play’s end the god Heracles has gone down to the underworld, to bring her back to life, Alcestis is faced, in her moment of dilemma, with the stark choice of whether or not to sacrifice herself. We can call this a moment of interiority or introspection, in which the character’s life is on the line, as was that of the isolated Helen in Egypt. Faced with this decision, Alcestis puts her own life on the line, and like her sister Helen goes into a secret place, within, from which she can decide. Interiority of character is constructed in these moments of decision, which Euripides, living and thinking at a dynamic cultural moment, fraught with national and personal decisions, proves his modernity by embracing.

**ANDROMACHE.** A victim of war, enslaved by Neoptolemus, and taken as his wife, Andromache is above all concerned with saving her son, Molossus. She finds herself, however, in a typical post war bind. Her son, fathered by Neoptolemus, arouses the jealousy of Hermione, the first wife of Neoptolemus. Hermione accuses Andromache of trying to poison her, Hermione. At that point Menelaus, the father of Hermione, arrives to capture and kill Molossus, a threat which is too much for Andromache to bear. The conglomeration of her woes, centering on the threat to her son, drives her to review her possibilities. She is doing so from the steps leading to the Temple of Thetis, wife of Peleus, and mother of Achilles. She is, in other words, choosing holy ground to reach peace, be safe, and reflect on her next move. This is an introspective movement. The outcome is to ask Peleus, the husband of Thetis, to protect her and her son. It works.