

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Euripides

REVENGE

PREFACE. The darker emotions—fear, isolation, the social anxiety of war, the sense of the dissolution of family—all these darkneses are plentiful in the threatening world Euripides addresses us with. The relational intimacy required to promote the desire for revenge is not foremost in the public value breakdown Euripides typically stresses, but his interest in (female) psychology can on occasion take him to those intimate and deadly places.

MEDEA Medea brings to her new life in Greece a passionate and untamed spirit. For a while (in Colchis) love conquers all, though from arrival in Greece we see Medea's spouse, Jason, as a conventional self-interested womanizer. When political allegiances and Jason's roving eye subvert the new marriage, Medea is crazed with fury and despair, and determines to take a terrible revenge; at the end appearing above the stage in a device normally reserved for gods who appear *ex machina* to resolve a plot. In her arms she clutches her two children she has murdered; as she flies away, she taunts Jason, reveling in his horror at the sight of his murdered children.

PHAEDRA. Like Medea, Phaedra is an exotic import to mainland Greece; this time from Crete, the home of the Minotaur, father to Phaedra. To the Greeks Crete is the region—like the Caucasus where Medea came from—connoting passion and lust. Married to Theseus, King of Athens, and the slayer of the Minotaur, Phaedra falls in love with her stepson, Hippolytus. For a long time, goes one version of the story, she conceals her love, until the intensity of it grows intolerable. She confides in her nurse, who subsequently passes the message on to Hippolytus himself—who is horrified. Phaedra, finding her secret exposed to the light, and Hippolytus appalled by her confidence, takes the only recourse she can find. She tells her husband that Hippolytus has made shocking advances toward her. This is her revenge against the object of her love. And it works! The young man dies!

ORESTES. Orestes is six days past the murder of Clytemnestra, and he is being attacked by the Furies, agents of eventual purgation but which, at the moment, are literally driving him crazy. The elders of Argos, where Orestes is currently resting under the care of his sister, Electra, are deliberating whether Orestes should be stoned to death. Bad moment, which comes together, in Orestes himself, as a huge desire for revenge on Helen—the progenitor, as it were, of the whole Trojan War catastrophe—who is awaiting the arrival of her husband Menelaus, just back from the war. This desire, which seems to rival that of the universal mad killer, extends from Helen to the entire palace in which she is living, and it is only thanks to Apollo, the calming force in this instance, that a holocaust is averted. Apollo converts Helen into a star, who will shine brightly alongside her brothers Castor and Pollux. The vengeful Orestes is sent quietly off to marry Hermione.

HECUBA In the first half of this play, about the fortunes of Priam's wife, as a prisoner of the Greeks at the end of the Trojan War, we endure the sacrifice of Polyxena, Hecuba's daughter; the price the lady must pay in order to unleash the winds which will free the Greek fleet to sail home. Hecuba, who thus loses one precious child—to Achilles, who has demanded that Polyxena die on his tomb—decides to take revenge for another lost child, her son Polydorus, who has been left to die by Polymestor, the King of Thrace. With the help of the Greek commander, Agamemnon, Hecuba arranges to deceive Polymestor into entering a tent full of Greek refugee ladies, who tear him apart. Revenge accomplished!