

10 Plays Study Guide

10 Plays by Euripides

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Plot Summary

This book is composed of ten plays by the poet Euripides in English translation. Although the plays deal with different issues, there are several common themes that run through many of the plays and Euripides consistently presents interesting characters out of the material of Greek myth.

In the *Alcestis*, Euripides presents a drama that deals with issues of hospitality, the treatment of friends and the proper relation of the wife to the husband. Euripides suggests that the common view is flawed and that it would be unreasonable to ask a wife to die for her husband. In *Medea*, Euripides continues investigating the role of husband and wife by showing a wife, Medea, supplanted by a new love. Medea decides it is better to make the husband who has wronged her pay for his crimes and kills her children and Jason's new wife. We are asked to consider the propriety of treating foreigners in a way that forces them into desperate situations. *Hippolytus* is the story of Hippolytus the virginal son of Theseus who has offended the goddess Aphrodite by remaining chaste. Aphrodite gives Phaedra, Hippolytus's stepmother, an unquenchable lust for her stepson, who refusing to satisfy her incestuous lust, she kills herself and Theseus, believing Hippolytus has raped his wife, kills Hippolytus. Part of the reason for the tragedy is the refusal of the main characters to break a promise. Euripides asks us to consider what price is too high for propriety.

Andromache shows the conflicts that arise when a man has two wives or lovers and simultaneously attacks the Spartans. *Ion* is a case of mistaken identity and questionable evidence leading to an uncommonly happy ending. *The Trojan Women* shows the human cost of war, especially for non-combatant women and children. *Electra* is a new take on a traditional story of Greek tragedy. Instead of portraying Orestes and Electra as noble avengers, Euripides shows the matricide as what it is, a horrible act that is the product of corrupt characters. *Iphigenia among The Taurians* shows Orestes and Iphigenia attempting to outsmart one god, Artemis, to fulfill the wishes of another god, Apollo. Human sacrifice is presented and we are asked to consider whether or not the gods themselves are unjust and corrupt. *The Bacchantes* is a masterful work showing the power and mystery of the god Dionysus. Greek tragedies were performed at a festival held for Dionysus and this play aptly shows the power of the god in tones of fear and reverence. Euripides is also commenting here on the birth and practice of tragedy. Written directly after *The Bacchantes* and just before Euripides's death, *Iphigenia at Aulis* shows the family of Agamemnon in a bad light; this time, though, not to attack or ridicule them, but to show the possibility of character development in drama.

In all of his plays, Euripides shows an interest and a kind of sympathy with the underdog, especially women and slaves. His use of character development and his reliance on shades of character motivation influence western drama up until the current day.



Alcestis

Alcestis Summary

Alcestis tells the story of the family of Admetus, king of Pherae. Admetus, before the beginning of the play, has cheated the Fates with the help of Apollo to prolong his life beyond the appointed hour of his death. Eventually, though, death does eventually come and Admetus must find someone to step in for him and die in his place or death will take Admetus. Admetus asks his older father Pheres to die for him, but Pheres, who loves life, will not do it. Eventually it is Admetus' wife, Alcestis, who agrees to die in Admetus's place. The play begins with this pact having been made and with an argument between Apollo and Death. Death is gloating that he will finally have his prize, while Apollo claims that he will find a way to rob death once again.

After this initial encounter, the chorus speaks of the upcoming death of Alcestis and likens her death to a sacrifice. The leader of the chorus questions a handmaiden who tells of the lamentations of her mistress, Alcestis. She tells the leader of how Alcestis kissed her children goodbye and how noble she is to die for her husband. The handmaiden leaves and the scene shifts to the bedroom of Admetus and Alcestis. Admetus is sad and angry that his wife has to die. She claims she is doing it as her natural duty and because she does not want her children to go fatherless. She asks Admetus to not marry another after her death so that the children will not have a stepmother. Admetus agrees and Alcestis goes off to die. After her death Admetus's son Eumelus discusses his sorrow with his father.

After Admetus and his family carry Alcestis through the house, Heracles enters the home looking for Admetus. Heracles is on the way to perform one of his many labors, in this case, the taming of the horses of Diomedes of Thrace. On his way to the task he seeks the hospitality of Admetus, not knowing the sorrow that hangs over the house. When Admetus tells Heracles about his wife, Heracles wants to leave and go to another house, but Admetus, feeling the pull of hospitality and the duty not to turn away guests, insists that Heracles stay. Both Heracles and the Chorus are confused and surprised by Admetus's behavior. Admetus leaves Heracles to attend the funeral of his wife. At the funeral, Admetus accuses his father of letting Alcestis die. Admetus had asked Pheres to die in his place but his father had refused. Now Admetus resents Pheres for not taking his place and forcing Alcestis to die. Pheres responds in a confused and amused manner. He thinks it obvious that no man would wish to die, regardless how old and claims that it is better that Alcestis, the wife, should die instead. Admetus heaps curses on his father and leaves the funeral.

Meanwhile at home, Heracles, talking to the Butler, finds out the full extent of the events that have just occurred. He gets drunk and claims he will meet death and wrestle death for the life of Alcestis. Admetus tries to stop him, but Heracles runs off anyways. He returns later with a veiled woman that he claims is Alcestis. Admetus thanks him and then Heracles goes off to perform his labors.



Alcestis Analysis

Alcestis is an odd play for several reasons. It seems to combine elements of both tragedy and comedy without either being completely realized. For instance, tragedies tend to end in a death, an inevitable death brought on by some arbitrary act of fate or some unforeseen consequence of action. Comedies tend to end in a marriage of some sort or another. Alcestis has elements of both; there is the death of Alcestis early in the play, as well as a strange reunion and intimations of a connubial reunion—a kind of marriage of the recently dead. This is certainly an odd ending and it should alert us to the fact that Euripides is playing or experimenting with the standard rules of drama in ancient Greece.

This was characteristic of Euripides and we see in Alcestis one of his earliest and, probably least successful plays. The reunion at the end has a kind of ghastly quality and the whole play lacks the pathos of a real tragedy and the mirth and bite of a real comedy. It seems more like a modern black comedy than anything else; death and sacrifice are used as the setting for a semi-comedic relationship between Heracles and Admetus. The eponymous wife is almost an afterthought in the play. Still, there is no doubt that Euripides is commenting on the relative importance of two distinct conventions: one dealing with marriage and the role of women and the other dealing with hospitality and the treatment of guests. Both the comedic and the tragic aspects of the play come from Admetus' misunderstanding and perversion of both conventions. Heracles, through his strength and good sense, puts this mistake right by wrestling with death, a kind of *dues ex machina*.



Medea

Medea Summary

The play begins with Medea's nurse lamenting the problems of her mistress's fate. Her mistress, Medea, is a non-Greek witch whom Jason found in his search for the Golden Fleece. Medea fell in love with Jason and bore him several children. Jason and Medea traveled to Corinth where, to ensure a home and future for his children, Jason made an agreement with the king of Corinth, Creon, to marry Creon's daughter. Naturally, this prospect enrages Medea and the play begins with Medea's nurse recounting these past events. While gossiping with the tutor, the nurse learns that Creon plans to expel Jason's children. The tutor leaves and the nurse goes to talk with Medea.

Medea curses her husband and his new wife as well as the Kingdom of Corinth and regrets that she has made marriage vows to Jason. The chorus, seeing Medea's rage, counsels the nurse to calm her down lest she unleash her fury on the house of Creon. Instead, Medea makes a speech to the women of Corinth defending herself. She claims that women are the unhappiest of creatures on earth because they are slave to their husbands and must bear the terror of childbirth. She also claims that women, mostly timid by nature, will become deadly if they are harmed in love. Creon comes at the end of this talk and tells Medea that she is to be exiled with her two sons immediately. Creon is afraid of her witchcraft and her anger. He fears that Medea will attempt to kill his daughter. Medea begs to be allowed to stay, but Creon will not budge. She asks Creon to let her stay one more day so that she can put her affairs in order and Creon begrudgingly agrees. On his way out, Creon remarks that mercy has been his undoing before and it may undo him again here.

Medea desires to kill Jason and his wife, but realizes that she will also be killed or, even if she escapes, will not be able to find a home for herself. She decides that if she can find a safe haven for her flight, she will commit the murder. After she has thought this through, Jason walks in to see her. Jason apologizes for some of the treatment she has received and tells her that she will not want for money or a home, as he will provide one. Medea, in a rage, accuses Jason of trickery and deceit and reminds him how she saved his life and allowed him to find the Fleece. She asks him if he believes the gods do not still rule in heaven as he has clearly offended them and will be forced to pay up eventually. Jason responds that despite what he may have done to her, she is still better off now than she would have been. She is in Greece rather than a wild barbarian land and she has learned the value of justice. He also tells her that he decided to marry to make sure that his children will have a future. Medea retorts that she is getting older and Jason only wanted a younger bride. Jason cuts off the conversation, again wishing her and her sons well and telling her that he will provide any money they need.

After Jason leaves, a traveler and prince of a foreign land arrives to talk to Medea. He has been consulting the oracle to find out how he can get children. Medea tells the man, Aegeus, about her treatment by Jason. He is appalled by Jason's behavior and Medea



asks the man to allow her to find safe haven in his kingdom and never to extradite her. He agrees and swears to protect Medea. She decides, now that she has a place to escape to, that she will kill her children and Jason's new wife to anger her ex-husband. She goes to Jason, pretending to have changed her mind and give him a gift to give to his new wife. She presents Jason with a crown, which she has poisoned, for the new wife. Before she goes, she also tearfully says goodbye to her children. She asks the children to take the wedding presents that she has poisoned to the new wife. She leaves and waits news of the deaths of her children and the new wife. It finally comes from a messenger who tells her to leave before she can be found out. Creon also died from the poison. She goes and kills the rest of her children. Jason comes to the house to see if Medea is still there only to learn of the death of his children. She tells Jason that she will take their bodies with her and bury them and that he will live out the rest of his life in sorrow. The play ends with Medea leaving.

Medea Analysis

Medea has several important elements that come together in the themes in the play. The first is the distinction between Greek and barbarian. To the Greeks, who were neither homogeneous ethically nor politically, Greekness was possessed in virtue of the language a person spoke. The term barbarian literally means someone who speaks a language we do not understand as Greek. Medea is a barbarian and Jason has married her because she was useful to him in his quest for the Fleece and, presumably, because he fell in love with her. Another distinction is between man and woman. Medea is a woman and she artfully tells the audience why this is a handicap. So, Medea is doubly disadvantaged in that she is both a woman and a barbarian.

The Greek audience of the play would have understood this, but what would have been surprising is Euripides's attempt to make Medea's justifications of offense seem reasonable. We feel that Medea has some right to be upset at Jason's actions and another Greek, Aegeus, agrees with us, giving her reasons credence. Of course she overreacts, but the implication at the end of the play seems to be that because women are not given any legitimate power, in their marriages and in society, they have no other alternative than to unleash their fury in horrible ways. If Jason had dealt with her as an equal and if Creon had treated her properly, maybe the tragedy would have played out differently. Again then, Euripides is asking the audience to question again whether the roles assigned to women are a matter of nature, that is unchangeable, or convention. The suggestion is that women by nature deserve better and are as strong as men, at least in some sense, and it is the perversion of these natural facts by our conventions that lead to tragedies such as this.



Hippolytus

Hippolytus Summary

Hippolytus begins with a speech by Aphrodite, goddess of love. She is raging against Hippolytus, son of Theseus and an Amazon who worships and honors the goddess Artemis. Artemis is the goddess of virginity and chastity and Hippolytus, because of his reverence and love for Artemis, refuses to honor Aphrodite. Spurned and angered, Aphrodite has decided to get revenge on Hippolytus for this insult. Theseus, Hippolytus's father is in exile with his family in Troezen to pay penance for a crime he committed in Athens. While they are still in Athens, Aphrodite makes Phaedra, Hippolytus's stepmother and wife to Theseus fall madly in love with her stepson.

After Aphrodite finishes her threat to get revenge on Hippolytus, Hippolytus and his fellow huntsmen appear and give honors to the goddess Artemis. After Hippolytus has spoken about the greatness of Artemis and given garlands to her statue, an attendant comes to Hippolytus and warns him not to anger other gods by paying too much attention to Artemis. Hippolytus does not take this advice and goes on to abuse Aphrodite.

After this, the scene shifts to Phaedra and her nurse. Phaedra is sick and going mad with her desire for Hippolytus. She realizes her desire is bad and knows that she cannot act on it but is upset nonetheless. Phaedra is not eating and is starving herself to death. The nurse implores her mistress to think of her children and her own life and to give in to her desire in order to quench it. Phaedra resists and cannot bear to think of giving into her desire for Hippolytus. The nurse explains that it is the will of the gods who falls in love with whom, a will that mortals cannot control; it is better to give in than to perish. Phaedra gives a reply that to act against morality; even because of great strain, is still wrong, giving reasons why it is better that she commit suicide rather than do wrong. The nurse replies that Phaedra should have courage to love and to give into her desires to save her life, that it is better to do some wrong to avert a greater evil. The nurse decides that she will tell Hippolytus what has happened.

Before she tells Hippolytus of Phaedra's affliction, she makes Hippolytus swear not to repeat the fact to anyone. He agrees and she tells a shocked Hippolytus all about his stepmother's consuming love and her desire for suicide. Hippolytus goes on a rant against women and love claiming that he will never break his vow of chastity or commit incest. He leaves and Phaedra sees no other way out than death. Phaedra writes a note about her affliction and hangs herself. The nurse cuts her hanging body down just as her husband Theseus walks in to the house. Theseus is told the news of his wife's death and finds the note she has written. Misunderstanding it, he believes that Hippolytus has raped his wife and she has killed herself in shame. Outraged, Theseus uses a wish he has been given by Poseidon to call down a curse of death on his son. The nurse and the others are sworn not to tell Theseus the truth so they cannot correct his mistaken impression. He calls for Hippolytus.



Theseus accuses Hippolytus of the crime and though he knows it is not true he cannot tell his father the truth. He leaves with his horses. After Hippolytus leaves, a messenger comes in and brings word that shortly after his exit Hippolytus was nearly killed. A bull rose up out of the sea and attacked him on his horses, causing him to be very badly injured. Some of his huntsmen bring the body into the palace. Before they return his body though, Artemis appears to Theseus and tells him the truth of what has happened chastening him for calling a curse down on his son. Hippolytus is brought in and in his dying throes, his father attempts to apologize before his son dies. After the death of Hippolytus, Theseus tells the chorus how noble his son was.

Hippolytus Analysis

Hippolytus has many interesting elements that are common in many of Euripides's plays, namely the attacks on women and the unjust dealings of the gods. Aphrodite is clearly unjust and vindictive when she makes Phaedra fall in love with her stepson. She is so angered by what she perceives as an insult that she is willing to wreck the lives of several characters. Artemis is equally unjust, however, when despite her knowledge and power, she decides not to help her most devoted follower, instead allowing Aphrodite and Poseidon have their ways with him. There is no way to justify the absence and silence of Artemis in this play. We are left, in the end, with another depiction of the gods as unjust, capricious, and unconcerned with the suffering of mere mortals below them.

Related in some ways is another, more subtle thread in Hippolytus. This is the distinction between what is right and wrong and what is good and bad, or rather the distinction between following the rules and averting tragedy. This is tied up with the distinction between nature and convention. The rules against incest and adultery that Phaedra, Theseus, and especially Hippolytus hold so dear are incredibly strong and forceful. These characters take the rules to be a part of nature, that is, unchangeable. The nurse on the other hand sees the rules as breakable in certain cases to avert tragedy; she advises both Hippolytus and Phaedra to consider breaking the rules to prevent their deaths. They do not listen to her and instead die. Euripides seems to be saying here, as he has elsewhere, that tragedy is born in the confusion of natural rules with conventional rules.



Andromache

Andromache Summary

Andromache begins with Andromache, widow of Hector and now slave and lover of Neoptolemos the son of Achilles, giving a speech that outlines her fears and tribulations. She is taking refuge in the shrine of the goddess Thetis, clinging to the statue to prevent Neoptolemos' new wife Hermione the Spartan from killing her. Andromache has born a son to Neoptolemos and Hermione, who has been unable to bear children, believes that Neoptolemos loves Andromache and will cast the Spartan princess aside. Andromache bemoans her fate and curses Apollo, whom she blames for Hector's death and her current troubles. She talks to her Handmaid and asks her to go and find Neoptolemos's grandfather, Peleus to try to intercede against the scheming of Hermione. The Handmaid agrees to go and leaves Andromache at the shrine of Thetis.

After the Handmaid leaves, Hermione enters the shrine and accuses Andromache of using some kind of Trojan trick to make Hermione barren. She threatens to kill Andromache and says she would have killed her already if it were not for the fact that she had taken refuge in the shrine of the goddess. She also argues that a man should only have one woman and it is because Andromache is from a barbarian race that she has brought trouble on them all. She also accuses Andromache, partly because she is a barbarian, of seducing her husband and conniving to have Hermione killed. Andromache responds that her claims are ridiculous. In the first case, she is hardly a barbarian hailing as she does from Troy. In the second case, Neoptolemos took her from her home as a slave, a prize of war, and she would never want to be here otherwise. Realizing it was unwise to resist her new master, she bore him a son, but it was certainly not her desire that led her to his bed. Even more angered by her rival's reply, Hermione says that she will not wait until Neoptolemos returns but will kill her immediately. The problem is that she cannot kill Andromache in the shrine. Hermione says that she will kill Andromache's son unless she leaves the shrine, though Andromache says this will still not make her leave.

Later Hermione's father Menelaus, king of Sparta, comes with Hermione outside the shrine with Andromache's son in tow. He claims he will kill her son on the spot if she does not come out. Eventually she gives in and goes out to Menelaus to spare her son. She is seized once she exits the sanctuary of the shrine and Menelaus claims that he will kill her soon but that her son will be given over his daughter and she may decide what to do with him. Andromache, enraged by his treachery gives a speech chronicling the treachery of the Spartans.

Peleus shows up on the scene and confronts Menelaus telling him that he has no right to kill his grandson's servant. Menelaus refuses to give Andromache up and Peleus goes on a tirade arguing that Neoptolemos is the only one who has the right to deal with Andromache. He also accuses Hermione of idiocy and immorality and threatens that his grandson will kill her when he returns. He also, somewhat comically because he is an



old man, threatens to beat Menelaus to death with his cane if he does not give in to his demands. Menelaus gives Andromache back to Peleus and the Spartan king returns home.

Realizing her error, Hermione, alone with her nurse, is crazed in her fear that Neoptolemos will divorce her when he returns. She tries to kill herself, but the nurse snatches the sword from her in time. Just then, a stranger, Orestes from Mycenae, arrives. He is, by royal blood, somewhat related to Hermione and desires to talk to her on his stop. Hermione tells her woes to Orestes and he recounts how it was he, not Neoptolemos, who was originally promised to marry Hermione. He tells her that they can go off together, kill Neoptolemos and Orestes will make Hermione his wife. Orestes plans to ambush Neoptolemos at the Delphic oracle where he has allies and to murder him there. They both leave together.

Peleus, learning of Hermione's departure, senses trouble and sends a messenger to Delphi to warn his grandson. It is too late, however, and messengers arrive from Delphi with news of the murder of Neoptolemos. Peleus, enraged and saddened, curses his fate and the fact that he ever had his son Achilles with Thetis. Just then, Thetis appears and tells Peleus not to curse his fate. She tells Peleus to take Neoptolemos and bury him at Delphi, then she will make Peleus immortal so he can look down at their son Achilles. Peleus does as she says and the play ends.

Andromache Analysis

There are at least two different levels of analysis for this play, as there are for many of Euripides' works. On the first level, the play is a thinly veiled attack on Sparta and the culture of the Spartans. Andromache was written during the time of the great Peloponnesian war between Sparta and Athens. Sparta was very different than Athens and Euripides portrays Menelaus, king of the Spartans, as well as his daughter, as cruel, bloodthirsty brutes. There is another element in the satire, in that Hermione constantly accuses Andromache of being a foreigner and, hence, not acquainted with the laws and customs of civilized Greece.

This is intended, from the point of view of the Euripides, to be ironic. It is Andromache, not Hermione, who seems to be more civilized. Hermione is bent on murder and rage in a way that seems to fit her description of the Barbarians. This is also another anti-Spartan theme in the form of an attack on the Spartan dual monarchy. There is constant reference to how one master, wife, or ruler is best in all things, an obvious jab at the Spartans who have two, rather than one, king at any given time.

Andromache is not just anti-Spartan propaganda, however. The play is also a reminder that with defeat in war comes humiliation and loss of freedom. There is no doubt that the Athenian audience of the time would have understood that if Athens did not win their war against the Spartans, they too might suffer the fate of Andromache at the hands of a cruel Spartan master. This is, in fact, what did happen after Athens' ultimate defeat. Still, as in many of his plays, Euripides sides, to some extent, with the underdog and the



mistreated. Andromache is a slave, but it does not mean that she can be killed unjustly at the hands of a vengeful Spartan. This sympathy for the plight of the oppressed is still tragic though. In the end, the wicked still kill Neoptolemos. Justice it seems only goes so far.



Ion

Ion Summary

The Ion has a rather straightforward story that involves some not so straightforward background material. All of the characters have intricate relationships, mostly unknown to themselves, that occur before the play begins. The play begins with the god Hermes describing some of these events. He describes the rape of Creusa by the god Apollo near a part of Athens known as the Tall Cliffs. Creusa gives birth to a boy and takes him to the same cave where she was raped to expose the baby. Creusa places some of her possessions with the baby and puts him in an ark. Apollo, learning that his son is to be allowed to die by Creusa, orders Hermes to go to Athens and bring the baby to his temple in Delphi.

Hermes places the baby at the steps of the temple and a priestess, walking by, discovers him, assumes he is an offspring of Apollo and raises him in the temple to be a priest of Apollo. Meanwhile, Creusa marries a non-Athenian named Xuthus. Xuthus, though an outsider, is related to the Athenian people in a distant way and is the son of Aeolus, son of Zeus. Xuthus is instrumental in helping the Athenian people during a time of war. Creusa, despite her earlier fecundity with the god, has been unable to conceive with Xuthus, thus both travel to the oracle at Delphi in the hope that they can cure their condition. Apollo, learning that they will be visiting Delphi, concocts a plan to convince Xuthus that Ion, the boy left in the temple, is really his son and, hence have Ion adopted by a powerful Athenian family, one member of which happens to be his mother.

After this lengthy introduction by Hermes, we meet Ion in the temple discussing his love for Apollo and going through his priestly duties. He meets at the steps of the temple a stranger who turns out to be, unbeknownst to either party, his mother Creusa. Creusa, in the temple of the god who raped her, is ambivalent about Apollo to say the least. She is also upset because she has not been able to have a child with her husband. Ion also tells her that he wishes he could know his mother and wonders what has befallen her. Creusa, mentions that Ion's mother is not the only mother that has been wronged. Ion goes on to tell the story of how he was raised at the temple. Hinting that the god may be to blame for their problems, Ion brushes this suggestion aside by claiming that it is not for mortals to judge the gods.

Xuthus shows up and makes the necessary sacrifice to see the oracle. On his return from the oracle and seeing Ion, Xuthus proclaims that Ion is his son. The oracle tells Xuthus that whomever he should see after leaving the oracle is his son. They both discuss the plausibility of this idea and decide that Xuthus must have impregnated a local girl during a bacchanal rite years before. Ion argues that if he goes to Athens he will be taken as a stranger and Xuthus dispels this fear. They decide to go together.

Meanwhile, Creusa with an old retainer of her dead father, approaches the chorus to discover Xuthus's fortune. The chorus tells her it is bad news and that she shall never



have a child. As if this is not bad enough, they also tell her that her husband shall never have children, but only Ion whom he has been reunited with. The retainer realizes that this is a threat and argues that Xuthus has impregnated a girl a long while ago and put the child here to move up in Athenian society once the father married an Athenian wife. Now that he has the child, he will surely kill Creusa. He implores Creusa to kill Xuthus and Ion immediately to protect herself and for revenge. She agrees reluctantly after telling him about her rape and the exposure of her child. He gives her some poison to use at the upcoming banquet.

A servant arrives at her room later to tell her that Apollo has discovered her plot. Creusa flees to find sanctuary in the temple to avoid the Delphians. In the temple Ion comes on her and he is about to kill her when the prophetess comes out and tells him to stop. The prophetess says she has information about Ion's mother and shows him the ark, which Creusa immediately recognizes. She tells Ion that she is his mother, which he does not believe until she describes all of the goods in the basket. Eventually she also tells him that Apollo is his father. They leave the temple and the goddess Athena appears to tell how Ion will span the races of Ionians, Dorians, and Achaeans.

Ion Analysis

Ion has several elements that are familiar in Euripides, though the combination here is unique and particularly masterful. Ion has elements of tragedy and even suspense, but it resolves itself into a happy ending in a way more similar to a comedy. We believe that, following tragic conventions, Creusa will murder her son and then find out, too late, that she is the man's mother. If Sophocles had written Ion, the plot would have resolved itself that way, no doubt. Of course, the play, like many others, is based on a myth that has a well-known ending. Euripides can no more kill Ion in the play than Shakespeare could have let Caesar live. Still, the choice of material is telling.

Euripides is telling a more complex story here that deals with the injustice of the gods and their manipulations of those on earth as well as a story about reconciliation and acceptance. In many ways, this story is about making people who were once strangers into non-strangers. This concept of a stranger is very important in Greek society. We see that Xuthus is a stranger before he marries Creusa. Similarly, Ion is worried that he will be a stranger if he follows Xuthus to Athens. In the end, very complicated maneuvers by the gods are necessary to bring the stranger Ion into the fold. Is Euripides saying that such subterfuge and manipulation is necessary in everyday social life to integrate strangers?

Remember, strangers and the definition of what it means to be a stranger is a matter of convention, not nature. The questionable details about Ion's own lineage may indicate that what makes a stranger is, in many ways, no different from what makes a non-stranger. The fact that Ion goes on to found the many different tribes that made up the Greek world only further this notion that foreigners and strangers are defined by conventions and this would, no doubt, have given his audience pause.



Trojan Women

Trojan Women Summary

The Trojan Women begins after the fall of Troy near the ships of the Greeks as they prepare to return to their homes. Troy is burning in the background and the scene is one of death and wailing. The play begins with a speech by Poseidon discussing the events of the war and the unhappy fate of Hecuba. Athena joins the scene and tells Poseidon that she has decided to attack her former allies the Greeks because they have done violence to some of her servants like Cassandra. She asks Poseidon to turn up the seas on their trip home and he agrees.

The scene next turns to Hecuba who laments her fate at the hands of the Greeks. She discusses the fate of her family, the death of her husbands and sons and the unhappy end to her country. Realizing that the Greeks have assembled her and the other Trojan women whom they have spared death to be allotted to the Greek generals as slaves or concubines. She wonders which Greek scoundrel will get her and the other women of note.

A messenger arrives with the news of the allotment. He tells Hecuba that Agamemnon has taken her daughter, Cassandra, as his concubine. This upsets her, as Cassandra is a virgin and a servant of the gods. Of another daughter he makes a cryptic remark and of Andromache, he tells her that she is to be Neoptolemos's slave. Hecuba will be the slave of Odysseus. This enrages her as she considers Odysseus to be the vilest of all the Greeks. Later, Cassandra comes by, being led to Agamemnon. Cassandra tells her mother that she will watch the house of Agamemnon fall and her master be murdered along with his wife. Then she herself will be killed and thrown to the beasts. She laments this, but realizes it is all the workings of fate. She also claims that the Trojans have the much nobler fate because they died for their country whereas the Greeks only murdered for gold and to retrieve a wife.

Cassandra then tells Hecuba the sorrows that Odysseus will endure in his ten-year journey home. After Cassandra leaves, Andromache comes by on a wagon with her young son Astyanax. Andromache tells Hecuba that the dead are better off than the living. In death there is no more sorrow and this is to be preferred to life in slavery. The messenger again comes and tells Andromache that Odysseus and the Greeks have ordered that her son Astyanax must be killed. Eventually she gives her son to the Greeks who throw him from the battlements of what is left of Troy.

In the next scene Menelaus enters and Hecuba tells him that he must kill his recently recovered wife Helen. Helen is presented and she gives several arguments why the Trojans are to blame for the war, not her. Hecuba rebuts her argument and then tells Menelaus that he must kill her. The king responds that he will kill her when he returns to Greece and the King and Helen leave. The messenger returns with the body of Astyanax and Hecuba buries his body with Hector's shield, burying the last part of Troy



with it. She bemoans the fate of Troy and curses the Greeks. After she is done burying the body, the citadel of Troy collapses and the play ends.

Trojan Women Analysis

Trojan Women is a play short on plot and long on speeches. The play was apparently performed after news of the Melos massacre came to the Athenians and there is no doubt that Euripides is casting his anger, at least partially, at his own city in this play. In Melos, the Athenians ended up slaughtering everyone in the city including women and children basically as a show of power. In presenting the Greeks as cruel men who do not follow any kind of law, Euripides is surely comparing the Athenians of the Melos massacre with the Greeks that sacked Troy.

The message from Athena at the beginning of the play and from Cassandra is that though a group may think they are getting the advantage in a war when they act unjustly, eventually justice will come. The gods may be capricious and work in strange ways, but some offenses to their honor and to justice are so grave that even they cannot let them stand. Euripides may be saying the same thing to his countrymen. He is also, by showing the effects of war, both attempting to arouse sympathy for the conquered and to scare the Athenians by showing them what their fate will look like if they are on the other end of victory.



Electra

Electra Summary

Electra begins with the speech of a Mycenaean peasant. Aegisthus has married his stepdaughter, Electra, to this man so that he need not kill her but also so she cannot have any noble children that might usurp his throne. Out of general decency and also fear of Electra's brother Orestes, the peasant has not slept with Electra since they have been married and has treated her honorably. Still, Electra is distraught. She bemoans her situation as regards the peasant man and resents her mother for helping to kill her father and marry the man who has now exiled her. After her speech of woe, she leaves the scene and Orestes and his friend Pylades enter. Orestes and Pylades fled from Aegisthus long ago and many people would not recognize them. Orestes has just secretly made a sacrifice on the grave of his father Agamemnon and he now seeks his sister so she can help him carry out the murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.

Orestes and Pylades come upon Electra on the road and, not recognizing her brother, she believes him to be a thief and is afraid of him. Electra demands to know who the man is and he says that he is a messenger from her brother. She tells him about her situation and says good things about the man who has married her. He asks her if she would be willing to kill her mother if it came down to that. She replies that there is nothing she would like more than to kill her mother. The peasant husband comes down the road and after being introduced he invites the men into his house. Orestes, remembering an old tutor of his, asks the peasant to go and see if he can find the man.

The tutor comes and tells Electra that someone has recently sacrificed on the grave of her father Agamemnon. When he is introduced to Orestes he recognizes him immediately and is full of joy. After some introductions, the tutor tells Orestes what he already knows, namely that he must kill his mother and Aegisthus. The tutor and Orestes concoct a plan to ambush the king outside of his castle and Electra decides she will lure her mother to her house by claiming to have had a baby. Orestes, Pylades, and the tutor leave to implement their plan.

Some time later a messenger comes to Electra to announce the successful murder of Aegisthus. Outside the city gates the king, on his way to make a sacrifice of a bull, meets Orestes and Pylades who claim to be Thessalian travelers. Having heard of the reputation that Thessalians are master butchers of bulls, the king asks Orestes to kill the bull and to disembowel it so that the king can read the fortune in the entrails. Orestes does this but as the king is bending over to look at the entrails, Orestes drops the axe on the king's head and kills him. He then tells the servants who he is and gets them on his side. After the messenger has told her this, Orestes shows up to tell her himself and to ask if they really need to murder their mother.

Electra gives a passionate speech in favor of killing her mother and prepares to do the deed. Orestes hides as Clytemnestra shows up in her carriage. Electra argues with her



mother, who defends her actions with Aegisthus before Electra murders her mother in her house. After the murders, soaked in blood, Orestes joins Electra in lamenting their fate and wondering where they will go once their crimes are known. Just then Castor and Pollux appear above them and tell them the future in store for both of them, culminating in the trial in Athens where Orestes will be acquitted by the gods.

Electra Analysis

Electra is not only, like almost all of Greek tragedy, a retelling of a familiar myth, it is also a retelling of a myth that the great tragedian Aeschylus had already told so masterfully. In many ways then, Euripides is setting up his version of the story in opposition to the great tale as told by Aeschylus. Aeschylus, the older and more traditional poet, wrote his cycle to show necessity of law to prevent the blood feud. His Orestes is a noble son, unjustly exiled who has returned piously to avenge his father. Electra is his willing accomplice who acts for equally noble purposes. Euripides, however, makes the murders appear wholly gratuitous and unnecessary. Orestes is motivated by anger and envy more than a desire to avenge his father.

Electra is motivated by a wounded pride and a hatred for the mother who has disinherited her. The murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are made to seem as necessary and as obscene as the murder of their younger sister Iphigenia, the murder that sparked the whole blood feud. Even this original crime is made to seem less important than it is in Aeschylus. Clytemnestra is angered by the murder of her daughter, but it seems to be the fact that Agamemnon brought Cassandra home with him as a concubine that really angers her. Whereas the characters from Aeschylus are noble types, the characters from Euripides are all too human examples of characters acting out of the familiar motives of anger, greed, and resentment.



Iphigenia Among Taurians

Iphigenia Among Taurians Summary

Iphigenia, the sister of Orestes whom Agamemnon sacrificed before his expedition to Troy, did not die, but was spirited away to the Taurians home of Artemis by the goddess. She has served Artemis ever since as the head priestess of her rite. The play begins with Iphigenia recounting some of the details of her past and telling of a dream she has recently had in which Orestes was dead. The scene shifts to Orestes and Pylades making their way into the new country. They are in Taurus to take the idol of Artemis from the temple and take it to Athens. They do not really know the purpose of this act of theft other than that Apollo commanded them to do it to stop the Erinyes.

The scene shifts back to the temple where Iphigenia is performing her ritual. Some herdsmen come in and tell her the news of two strangers in their land. The men saw Orestes and Pylades when they took their cattle to the sea. The Taurians perform human sacrifices for Artemis and they saw in these strangers potential sacrificial victims, so they assaulted the strangers, one of who, Orestes, seemed mad with visions, and bound their hands. Iphigenia tells the herdsmen to bring the men to her that she might sacrifice them. After the herdsmen leave she discusses the practice of human sacrifice saying that she believes it must be due to the wickedness of the men in Taurus because the goddess could never be so evil.

The men are brought into Iphigenia and, taking no pleasure in their fate, she prepares to perform the sacrifice. She asks the men where they are from and they say that they are Greeks from Argos. She asks of her family and hears the news about the death of her mother and father by her sister and brother. She also asks of several of the other Greeks, including the priest that performed her sacrifice and Achilles, the man she was deceitfully told by her father she was going to marry. Orestes will not tell her his name for fear that the Taurians will triumph all the more in his death if they know who he is. Nevertheless, Iphigenia decides that she will release one of them with a message to take to her brother in Argos. After some discussion, she discovers that the bound man is her brother and Orestes tells her why they are in Taurus. Realizing that they can help her escape and she can help them to fulfill the orders of Apollo, she concocts a plan to help them steal the idol.

Iphigenia will tell the other priests and the king that the two men are ritually unclean and polluted because of their matricide and she will say that they need to be cleaned by the ocean. Once there, they will make their escape. On the way out, she is confronted by Thoas, the king of Thrace who asks why she is taking the idol out of the temple. She tells him of the stranger's pollution and claims that the idol is also polluted because they touched it and she needs to clean both down by the ocean. The king agrees that this is the pious and prudent thing to do to prevent the pollution from spreading. She leaves with the idol. Later, the king gets word from a messenger that tells of Iphigenia's deceit and how she tried to flee with her brother.



Once in the ship, though in calm water, the sea opens up and swallows the ship, presumably the work of Poseidon. Iphigenia and her brother are captured and have been brought back. The king, outraged, gets his sword to kill them both. Just then, Athena appears and tells Thoas to let Iphigenia and Orestes go to Athens where they may fulfill the work of Apollo and also establish a temple to Artemis in Athens. The king accedes to the goddess and they leave.

Iphigenia Among Taurians Analysis

Iphigenia Among the Taurians is notable for its extreme use of a *Deus ex Machina* at the end of the story. A practice that was somewhat common in Greek tragedy, but perfected by Euripides, the god out of the machine is a dramatic device whereby the author of the play introduces an element (in Euripides, literally a god) that prevents or causes some unlikely plot element. In this play, it is clear that Thoas will kill Iphigenia and Orestes until Athena comes and saves them. It is a strange device because it introduces an alien element into the plot, but it is a way to preserve dramatic tension and create the potential for tragedy without having to end the play with a tragedy.

This play is also notable because it shows a slightly different side of Orestes than the one portrayed in *Electra*. Here Orestes is more brave and does not seem to be quite as consumed by base elements as he was in *Electra*. Euripides is also commenting here on the justice of the gods and the practice of human sacrifice. The playwright is calling to the audience's attention to an unjust, though somewhat common religious practice. Is the implication that the gods are unjust and capricious? Even Iphigenia suggests this, though she shifts the blame to men, not the gods, though her argument is not persuasive. This is a theme that is common in Euripides.



The Bacchants

The Bacchants Summary

The play begins with Dionysus, immortal son of Semele and Zeus, discussing how the Thebans under the rule of his grandfather Cadmus have not respected his Bacchic rites. He decides that it is time that the Thebans respect the power of Dionysus and to that end he has hatched his plot.

In Thebes, Tiresias the blind prophet is calling out for Cadmus. Both men are very old and are dressed in the clothing of followers of Dionysus, that is, in deerskins, ivy wreaths, and a thyrsus. He meets with Cadmus and both men say that despite their age, they are ready to dance again in the bacchanal celebration. They discuss the importance of believing in the gods and not trying to rationalize too much the working of the gods. After awhile, Pentheus, Cadmus' son and king of Thebes, joins the scene, telling the two men about the bands of Maenads dancing in the countryside. He disapproves of their immoral behavior, their drinking, sex, and dancing. He has jailed several of them and he wants to find their leader. He blasphemes the god Dionysus and attacks his rites. The two old men caution him to let the Bacchants be and to avoid blaspheming the god further. This only angers Pentheus more, who launches into a tirade against Dionysus. The two old men leave, but not before Tiresias comments that only sorrow are in store for Pentheus.

Back at the jail, Pentheus meets his servant who describes how he and his men captured the Maenads. The women, however, have escaped and in their place is a stranger who is also a follower of the god. Pentheus questions the man who is a manifestation of Dionysus. The stranger does not tell Pentheus who he is, he only hints at it and defends Dionysus. Pentheus, enraged, imprisons the stranger. The women have gone back to the hills where they see a thunderbolt that tells them to burn down the house of Pentheus, which they do. Meanwhile, the stranger has escaped and he confronts Pentheus, though a herdsman comes in first with a message. The herdsman says a group of maenads, including Pentheus's mother and sister, fell upon him and his herd, ripping the cattle apart with their bare hands before washing the blood off of their skin with wine. The herdsman, realizing the power of the god, proclaims that there is no god greater than Dionysus. Pentheus, enraged by this story, decides it is time, once and for all to stamp out the Dionysus cult.

The stranger suggests that Pentheus should go watch the rites on the hill. Pentheus is disgusted by them, but also drawn to see what they are doing. The stranger convinces Pentheus to dress like a woman so he will not be recognized. The stranger leads Pentheus up the hill of the Maenads and climbs up into a tree to watch. Suddenly the voice of Dionysus calls out that the Maenads, especially Pentheus's mother Agave, should kill the person in the tree who has not honored their god. They attack Pentheus, with Agave leading the way and tear him apart with their bare hands. Agave takes the head of her son and puts it on top of her thyrsus, convinced it is the head of a lion that



they have killed. She goes down into town to show off her prize. She shows Pentheus' head to Cadmus who recoils, seeing the head for what it is. Eventually she sees that it is the head of her son and collapses into sadness and regret. Dionysus has had his cousin Pentheus killed by his sister, Pentheus' mother. Dionysus appears and tells the city that they have sinned against him and this is the price they must pay. Cadmus placates the god and Agave goes off into exile.

The Bacchants Analysis

The Bacchants is one of the last plays Euripides writes and it is one of his best. The play deals with the god Dionysus who is the muse of the theater. In many ways, this play can be seen as a comment on theater itself and on the poet's relationship with reason and theater in general. The stranger, who is Dionysus, dresses Pentheus up as a woman. Only dressed as a woman can Pentheus witness the Bacchanal rites. Euripides seems to be saying that we must give ourselves up to the god entirely, leave our rational faculties at home when we enter the theater. What happens there is not rational and is governed by the same god that brought mankind wine.

Pentheus tries to control and ban the irrational side of the religious rite and suffers for it mightily. It is rather Tiresias and Cadmus who seem to have the proper response to the god and the religion. They do not want to rationalize the irrational and they think it best to follow the practices of their time. Still, the god is clearly cruel and the slight made to him by Pentheus seem totally out of proportion to the harm he inflicts on Pentheus and his family. Euripides wrestles with this question of the justice of the gods in almost all of his plays and he never seems to find an explanation that satisfies him. Whatever else he may think, Euripides is, in his role as playwright, a follower of Dionysus and this play shows the mysterious power and cruelty of that god.



Iphigenia at Aulis

Iphigenia at Aulis Summary

Iphigenia at Aulis begins with a speech that has been lost, though the play that is extant begins with Agamemnon discussing the history of his family and the events that have led up to the need to sacrifice his daughter. Agamemnon becomes the leader of the Greeks after Paris stole his brother's wife, Helen. He assembles all the Greek troops at Aulis, but now they are left sitting in the port waiting for wind. The prophet Calchas has said that the lack of wind is the work of Artemis and that Artemis demands the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon tells his wife and daughter that he arranged the marriage of Iphigenia and Achilles at Aulis and they should come immediately.

Agamemnon calls a servant over to his desk and gives the servant a letter. The king has been having second thoughts about the sacrifice and is sending a letter to his wife and daughter telling them not to come to Aulis. On the way to deliver the letter, however, Agamemnon's brother, Menelaus, intercepts the servant and the letter. Menelaus confronts Agamemnon with the letter demanding to know why he is telling his daughter not to come to Aulis. Agamemnon tells Menelaus that it is not right that his daughter should die to help them bring back Helen, who has left Menelaus with another man. Menelaus replies that Agamemnon really craves power and that he cannot disperse the Greek troops without losing power and, in any case, if he calls off the sacrifice, Odysseus will just do it anyway. There is no way that Agamemnon can stop the sacrifice now. Agamemnon grudgingly agrees.

Later Iphigenia and Clytemnestra arrive at Aulis. Excited by the prospect of her marriage with Achilles, Iphigenia and Clytemnestra decided to travel to Aulis early. Agamemnon, who has not told anyone else about the marriage ruse, fears that if Clytemnestra or Iphigenia learns of his plans they will flee so he tells them to stay in his camp. Achilles, looking for Agamemnon, runs into Clytemnestra and Clytemnestra mentions the wedding. Achilles, who knows nothing of the wedding is surprised and rushes to find Agamemnon.

Finding a servant, Achilles and Clytemnestra learn the truth. Achilles is angered because his name has been used without his permission and he vows to defend Iphigenia. Later, Clytemnestra confronts Agamemnon and tells him that he has no right to proceed with his horrible plan. Agamemnon claims that it is impossible for him to stop what is already in motion because the Greeks will rise up against him if he does. Achilles comes back and says that he will not defend the girl. His troops are rising up against him and Odysseus claims that he will sacrifice the girl if Agamemnon does not.

Clytemnestra tells Iphigenia what her father has planned for her and weeping, she pleads with her father not to kill her. After seeing the situation, though, she changes her mind and decides that it is noble to die so that the Greeks may triumph over Troy; she



goes willingly to the altar. Returning from the sacrifice, though, Agamemnon tells Clytemnestra that right when the priest was about to slit Iphigenia's throat, she disappeared and a fawn appeared in her place. The goddess Artemis spirited her away and accepted the sacrifice of a fawn in her stead. After this, the rest of the play is missing though many suspect that it would have included a speech by Artemis.

Iphigenia at Aulis Analysis

Iphigenia at Aulis is the last play Euripides wrote and it suffers from a missing introduction and conclusion. There is also some evidence that the extant ending may have been added later. The story depicts the classical Greek heroes as humans rather than as semi-divine characters. This mirrors Euripides's technique in *Electra* where he takes another classic story from Greek religion and brings the characters down to earth, exploring their base motivations and highlighting their flaws.

One should not get too wrapped up in the "warts" that Euripides is putting on display, though. The important narrative and dramatic element that Euripides is making room for by making his characters more human is the possibility of character development. In the early tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, characters do not change over the course of the play. The plots are semi-deterministic in that once the action starts rolling, no one can stop the inevitable conclusions from occurring. In Euripides we start to see the beginnings of what will be masterfully exploited and developed in the tragedies of Shakespeare. Characters grow, regress, and are indecisive. The beginnings of these techniques are on display in this play.



Characters

Dionysus

Dionysus is the Greek god of wine, revelry, and theater. His followers drink wine and engage in all sorts of sordid activity. He carries a Thyrsus, a stick with a kind of pinecone on the end and wears furs. Some of his women followers, known as Maenads, can become mad with spirit of the god and tear animals and people apart. They will also often eat raw flesh and drink wine, believing that they are thereby eating the body and drinking the blood of the reborn god, Dionysus. Dionysus is the son of the god Zeus and Semele, daughter of Cadmus of Thebes. Hera, after finding out that Zeus has impregnated another mortal, has Semele burnt. In many stories, Dionysus dies and is reborn. This story is related to many Greek mystery cults that worshipped Dionysus.

Dionysus is also the god of theater and the Greek tragedies were originally performed in a ceremony honoring the god. He represents the dark irrational side of human nature symbolized by the maenads and wine. He is an odd character in Greek mythology and it is presumed, both by the myths themselves and by later scholars, that the cult of Dionysus originally came from Asia. The cult of Dionysus was popular, continuing into Roman times and some scholars believe that many of its ideas and symbolism were later adopted by other religions, most notably Christianity. He is always represented as a dark god that must be placated and sometimes indulged, but never underestimated. He is often contrasted with Apollo.

Apollo

Apollo is one of the most important Olympian deities in Greek religion and also in art. He is the god of the sun, prophecy, archery, and certain kinds of arts, namely music and poetry. He is the son of Zeus and Leto and thus half brother to Dionysus. He is the god of the oracle at Delphi and seems to take pleasure in giving intentionally cryptic messages. His myth involves the Olympian defeat of the Titans and his cult seems to be related to later Greek practices, suggesting that he is a later addition to group of Olympians. Euripides portrays him as petty and full of spite towards many of the characters in these plays.

Sometimes called Phoebus, he is also used as a symbol for rationality. He often represents the rational side of man's nature in opposition to his half brother, Dionysus. This is not surprising as he is also the god of light and the sun; rationality enlightens us, as do the rays of the sun. He also symbolizes harmony and order in opposition to the frenzy of Dionysus. Harmony and order are also key principles in music, one of the arts related to Apollo. He is said to have originally defeated a serpent at Delphi before he established his oracle there. His defeat of the underground serpent is similar to the story of his defeat of the Titans. In both cases, Apollo defeats older gods to establish himself



and other Olympians. This might suggest either the triumph of rationality over superstition or the displacement of older religions by Greek invaders.

Agamemnon

The king of Mycenae and brother to Menelaus, he is chosen to lead the Greek troops in the Trojan War. The goddess Artemis has stopped the winds at Aulis where his armada is located and he is told that she will not give him wind for his journey unless he sacrifices his daughter to her. He kills his daughter Iphigenia and goes to Troy. After the fall of Troy, he brings the Trojan woman Cassandra back with him as his concubine. Clytemnestra his wife has meanwhile married Aegisthus and they kill Agamemnon when he returns home.

Menelaus

Menelaus is the king of Sparta and the father of Hermione. He is brother to Agamemnon and is married to Helen. After his wife Helen leaves with Paris for Troy, he gathers up the Greek troops to wage war on the Trojans.

Achilles

Achilles is the son of the goddess Thetis and Peleus. Invincible everywhere except his heel, he is raised by the centaur Chiron. He is the Greek champion in the Trojan War and is eventually killed by the Trojan Hector.

Neoptolemos

Neoptolemos is the son of Achilles and owner of Andromache and husband to Hermione the Spartan.

Iphigenia

Iphigenia is the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. She is sacrificed to the goddess Artemis at Aulis by her father.

Orestes

Orestes is the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. After his father's murder by Aegisthus, he is exiled, though he returns and, with the help of his sister, murders his mother and Aegisthus. He is chased by the furies after his matricide until he goes to Athens and is acquitted by the gods in a trial.



Electra

Electra is the brother of Orestes. In these plays, she helps her brother by killing her mother Clytemnestra.

Aegisthus

Aegisthus is the product of a complicated succession crisis in the kingdom of Mycenae. He eventually marries Clytemnestra and murders his rival, Agamemnon, before being murdered himself by Agamemnon's son, Orestes.

Clytemnestra

Clytemnestra is the sister of Helen and the wife of Agamemnon. She helps her lover Aegisthus kill her husband and is then killed in turn by her daughter Electra.

Artemis

Artemis is the goddess of the hunt and virginity. Her cult was of a more eastern origin and often involved human sacrifice.

Poseidon

Poseidon is the brother of Zeus and the god of the sea.

Athena

Athena is the daughter of Zeus and the goddess of wisdom and certain kinds of warfare. The patron goddess of Athens, she sides with Orestes in his trial.

Hecuba

Hecuba is the wife of the king of Troy, Priam, and the mother of the killed hero Hector.

Andromache

Andromache was the wife of Hector and after the fall of Troy was taken by Neoptolemos as a slave.



Ion

Ion is the son of Creusa and Apollo. He eventually goes on to father the Greek race.

Jason

Hero who sought and found, with Medea's help the Golden Fleece, before leaving Medea and marrying another.

Medea

Medea is a sorceress from a barbarian land who helps Jason and then bears him two children. He later leaves her for Creon's daughter and she kills his wife and their children.

Hippolytus

Hippolytus is the son of Theseus and is the horse master of Artemis. He is killed by Poseidon after rejecting the love of his stepmother, Phaedra.

Alcestis

Alcestis is the wife of Admetus who agrees to die in his place.

Admetus

A king of Thessaly who, in offending Artemis, is condemned to die until he asks his wife to take his place. He is also known for his hospitality.

Heracles

Heracles is a Greek demigod who is forced to perform several superhuman tasks.

Pentheus

Pentheus is the son of Agave and the cousin of Dionysus. He is the king of Thebes and is eventually killed by his mother.



Objects/Places

Athens

Athens was the home of Euripides and a major Greek city state during this period.

Sparta

Sparta was another major city-state in the time of Euripides. In his plays, Sparta is the home of Menelaus and Helen as well as Hermione. Sparta was the enemy of Athens and Euripides often portrays the Spartans as cruel and unthinking.

Mycenae

At the time of the Trojan War, Mycenae, led by king Agamemnon, was the most powerful city-state in the Greek world. Located near Sparta, both cities have traditionally had strong ties.

Troy

Troy was an important trading center in Asia Minor. At the time of the Trojan War, Troy was peopled by non-Greeks.

Thebes

Thebes was another important city-state in ancient Greece and the site of many tragedies.

Delphi

Located in northeastern Greece, Delphi was the home of the oracle of Apollo.

Thyrsus

A staff with a kind of Pinecone on the end. Carried by Dionysus and followers of Dionysus.



Maenads

Crazed women followers of Dionysus who participate in orgies and sometimes tear animals and people apart with their bare hands.

Libations

Libations are wine poured in ceremonial settings, often also used to placate the spirits of the dead by pouring libations on their graves.

Chorus

The Chorus was an important part of Greek Tragedy, acting as a kind of impartial spectator that comments on the action of the play.



Themes

Nature and Convention

The distinction between nature and convention and the importance of this distinction are on display in almost all of Euripides' plays. We find this distinction in many Greek works of literature and philosophy, including in Plato and Aristotle, but most prominently in the work of the sophists. Nature includes any rule, practice, or fact that is the product of blind, inhuman forces. People can neither change nor ignore nature. Death is a fact of nature; there is nothing that anyone can do to prevent the natural fact that everyone will die. Conventions, however, are the product of human decisions or the remnants of human history. Laws are conventions in this sense, as are less important things like the dramatic rules that tragedians followed.

Part of the genius of Euripides is to constantly show, over and over again, that many of the things that we take to be natural are, in fact, conventional. Oftentimes, the reason that tragedies occur is that people mistake what is conventional for what is natural. So, for instance, the rules about the interactions of men and women are very deeply held in Greece at this time, but Euripides suggests that even these are the products of conventions. Which is not to say that just because something is conventional it is also not binding. A convention, like a law, can be binding, though not natural. Sometimes, though, as in the case of Hippolytus when he promises not to speak to anyone about Phaedra's secret, a convention probably should be ignored to prevent a greater tragedy.

Apollo and Dionysus

Apollo and Dionysus, and more importantly what they symbolize, are two of the most important gods in the works of Euripides. Apollo figures as a character in many of the plays directly and it is clear that Euripides is making some comment about the role of reason and rationality in human conduct. Dionysus does not directly figure into many of these plays, though, as the god of theater, he is always lurking in the background.

Euripides's already mentioned focus on rationalism as regards conventions would suggest sympathy for the god Apollo, however, in these plays Apollo is portrayed as fickle and capricious. Maybe Euripides is commenting on the fact that reason, like Apollo's oracle at Delphi, is often untrustworthy. Like Oedipus in Sophocles or Theseus in Hippolytus, we sometimes believe that we know certain things when, in fact, we do not know them. This mistaken knowledge can lead to tragedy in the right circumstances. Dionysus, however, is the god of irrational revelry, the god of the night and of passion.

Many, most notably Nietzsche, have commented that much of Greek culture and civilization seems to result from the interplay and the struggle for dominance between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements. Euripides seems to struggle with both forces in his plays as well, culminating in *The Bacchantes* where he portrays Dionysus as more



powerful than any attempt to silence him. Euripides, by noting the power of the irrational, seems to be commenting that Apollo neither can, nor should completely vanquish Dionysus. Both elements are in us and both are needed for great art.

Justice and the Gods

Ancient Greek religion is very different from modern religions. In Greece, the gods were not conceived of as perfectly moral or good beings, rather they were immortal beings with powers who were just as bad, if not worse, morally as the people who worshiped them. It is also important to remember that much of Greek worship is specifically meant to placate the gods, that is, to prevent the gods from causing some horrible misfortune.

The gods can often do favors, but they will just as easily destroy any mortal who deals with them. Gods are constantly raping mortal women, men, and sometimes even animals. They pick sides in human conflicts based on the flattery of mortals or because someone on the other side has offended them. In short, they are capricious, unjust beings who possess a large amount of power over the world. They are considered natural, that is unchangeable, so the best approach seems to be to placate them as best as possible and to avoid them otherwise.

Euripides has the injustice of the gods on display in many of his plays and even gets dangerously close to the charge of Atheism when he has one of his characters argue that it is not the gods who are unjust, but rather men. This seems to suggest that we have created our religious practices in unjust ways based on our ignorance, or that there are, in fact, no gods. Either of these views would have been dangerous to openly hold in ancient Athens and Socrates was killed for a similar crime. Still, it would have been hard to sit in the theater in Greece and watch these plays without questioning the role of the gods and their justice.



Style

Point of View

Since these works are plays, the point of view is that of a spectator. We are watching the action from the viewpoint of someone who can see many things that the characters themselves cannot see, though we are not presented an omniscient viewpoint. The reader or theatergoer's point of view mirrors the point of view of the Chorus. The Chorus is a group of usually twelve people that comment on the action of the play; oftentimes, the leader of the chorus will also engage with some of the characters in the play. They can act as a kind of ideal spectator in that they often reveal underlying motivations and background that the audience may not have access to through the action of the play. They are also convenient because during their interludes, the playwright can change scenes or locations. Much of the dramatic effect in Greek tragedies comes from different reversals or surprises that the characters will encounter.

Typically, the audience will be aware that the main character is mistaken about some important detail or confused on some matter, but the character themselves will not realize it until it is too late. By giving the audience information that the characters lack, the playwright is able to ratchet up the dramatic tension because the audience is waiting for the axe to fall. We can sometimes see the action of tragedy moving ineluctably and determinately from some antecedent cause or mistake to some other tragic effect. As everyone of the time knew these stories and so, knew the ending, the point of watching the drama was take see how the poet would lead us into the inevitable tragic end.

Setting

According to the conventions of Athenian Tragedy at the time of Euripides, later formalized and written down by Aristotle in his Poetics, the length of time portrayed in the drama is not supposed to be longer than the time it takes to actually complete the play. This naturally limits the diversity of settings that the poet can use. The characters need to realistically be able to move between the different settings in the time portrayed in the play. Furthermore, it was also customary to show murders off screen and since these are often recounted, a messenger of some kind often gives the description of the place. Most of the plays take place, in part or in whole, outside in some kind of public setting.

This makes it easy for the poet to introduce many different characters without having to change the setting. The sets for these plays were often not very elaborate although, in some of the plays, the sets could become quite ingenious and elaborate, especially scenes that portrayed the Deus ex Machina. Interestingly, almost none of the plays take place in Athens. Thebes is a common setting, as are locations from the Trojan War. It is not clear why many of the tragedies did not take place in Athens; maybe it just happens to be that not many myths use Athens as a setting. Since messengers tell the story, or



at least important parts of it, it is important that the setting be a plausible location that messengers and guests would access. It is not surprising then that many of the plays take place outside.

Language and Meaning

The language of Attic tragedies is intentionally non-colloquial and poetic. In the older tragedies of Sophocles and Aeschylus, the characters are often semi-divine heroes and so it is natural that they might speak in a more elevated manner. In Euripides, this changes a little. The language of the characters is poetic but straightforward. It is hard to tell exactly the nature of the use of language because we are reading these works in translation and, no doubt, they would be very different in the original. The chorus would mostly sing their parts and as a result, the chorus has more poetic language.

Their language is also less direct. They will often call gods and characters by strange names indicating the god or heroes patrimony of other facts about the person's life instead of saying their name. It is not clear how much of this is due to reasons of poetry and how much reflects Greek customs at the time of the plays. Euripides, better than any of the other Greek tragedians, makes deft use of symbolism in his work. The gods and the natural forces become tools of cloaking symbolic and thematic elements. As the poet develops in skill, his later plays involve more and more direct dialogue and slightly fewer long speeches. Since, as we have already mentioned, violence, an important part of any tragedy, cannot appear onstage, sometimes large portions of the play involve a messenger describing the details of a murder or some other heinous act.

Structure

There was a well-defined structure to Greek tragedies and Euripides follows those conventions in his plays. It is important to remember that all tragic performances would be composed of a trilogy of tragedies and a Saytr play. These plays would typically last all day and after several plays the audience would vote for the best playwright. These were also religious festivals to the god Dionysus, so the stage was considered a holy site; this is partially why all killings occurred offstage.

The plays begin with a prologue where background necessary to understanding the play is given in the form of a speech. Oftentimes it is one of the relevant gods who gives the speech, but sometimes it is a character in the play.

Then there is a Parados or song sung by the Chorus as they enter the stage; this would often play some relevant part in setting the scene for the action to come. Next there will be what is called an Episode where characters will discuss something.

After an Episode there will be a Stasimon or song sung by the Chorus commenting on or explaining action in the Episode. It is possible for there to be several Episodes. After the climax, there will be an Exodus, that is, a song sung by the Chorus commenting on the play as a whole or imparting some wisdom. Sometimes the Exodus will also include

a speech by one of the gods that will make some kind of important plot change. This is called a "Deus ex Machina" or god out of the machine because in Greece, there would literally be a kind of machine that would either suspend or present the god onstage.



Quotes

"But such is the gentleman; even his errors are honorable. In nobility is all wisdom."
(Alcestis, 17).

"Are you only now learning that everyman loves himself more than his neighbor?"
(Medea, 35).

"Though my secret heart hopes in an intelligent providence, yet I look at the fortunes of men and their actions, the hope fails me." (Hippolytus, 91).

"Call no man happy until he is dead, till you have seen how he has passed the last hour of his life on earth." (Andromache, 103).

"Death is a debt all must pay." (Andromache, 129).

"One can no longer blame men for imitating the splendid conduct of the gods; blame those who set us the example. (Ion, 143).

"The dead, I say, are as if they had not been born. It is better to die than to live in pain..." (The Trojan Women, 189).

"It is the men of this land, I believe, being themselves murderers, who lay their own guilt on the gods." (Iphigenia Among the Taurians, 251).

"Dionysus has undone us. Too late I see it." (The Bacchantes, 310).

"It is natural for Hellenes to rule barbarians, and not, for barbarians to rule Hellenes. They are a slave race, Hellenes are free." (Iphigenia at Aulis, 348).

"Of all creatures that feel and think, we women are the unhappiest species." (Medea, 37).

"Woman in most respects is a timid creature, with no heart for strife and aghast at the sight of steel; but wronged in love, there is no heart more murderous than hers."
(Medea, 38).



Topics for Discussion

What role does the Chorus play in these tragedies?

How does Euripides use a Deus ex Machina in some of these plays? Give an example. What dramatic purpose does it serve?

Are the gods just in these plays? How do we determine the justice of the gods?

What role do reversals and discoveries play in these tragedies? Give examples.

Euripides depicts women characters in several different ways. Describe some of the different ways he portrays women characters.

Describe the different portrayals of the same family in Iphigenia at Aulis and Iphigenia among the Taurians.

Is the murder of Clytemnestra just? What about the murder of Agamemnon? What about the murder of Iphigenia?