

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

# The Phoenician Women 408 B.C.E.

Euripides

## Overview.

One sees clusters of imaginative preoccupation, in the work of Euripides, and can draw from the observation some notion of how this competitive genius distributed his attentions. (Arguing this way we must of course remember that we possess only about a quarter of this dramatist's work.) From what remains to us, we can see thematic concentrations circling around benchmark events—*The Trojan War* (focus of at least five dramas), *the travails and homecoming of Herakles* (three plays), *events from the recent History of Thebes and Athens* (three plays). The analysis of Euripides' thematic distribution—which play set mattered to him most at which time, and especially the tie-ins of play groups with contemporary events in the turbulent history of Athens—will involve extension of perspective over the length of the fifth century, which will include two major wars, and of course especially the Peloponnesian War (431-405 B.C.E.), during the course of which all of Euripides' extant plays, except *Medea* (438) were composed. One might say that the events generated in and around The Trojan War facilitated the treatment of themes like post war displacement, especially as it coincided with the woes of female victims. The events generated around the return of Herakles from his trials segued into a bevy of treatments of loss, lamentation, homelessness. The multiple stories of Thebes—tales of Oedipus, Jocasta, Laius, Polyneices, Eteocles—and Athens—cf. especially Theseus—opened a channel for the elaboration of patriotism, democracy, and strident culture building. The play before us immerses us in the drama of a post-Oedipal Thebes in which Oedipus himself is still very much alive.

## Characters

Jocasta. Wife of Oedipus  
Tutor  
Antigone. Daughter of Oedipus  
Polyneices. Exiled son of Oedipus  
Eteocles Son of Oedipus; now King of Thebes  
Creon. Brother of Jocasta  
Teiresias. A blind prophet  
Menoceus Son of Creon  
First Messenger  
Second Messenger  
Oedipus. Formerly King of Thebes  
Chorus of Phoenician Women

## Story

**Setting.** The title of the play refers to a chorus of Phoenician women on their way to the oracle at Delphi, and trapped en route in Thebes, the setting of the drama of Oedipus and Jocasta. (The refugee or migratory status repeatedly strikes through the surface of Euripides' dramas, which are, after all, built into an historical moment when the eastern Mediterranean is boiling with regional conflicts and the travails of postwar seafarers). The drama then opens to permit Jocasta, the mother and lover of Oedipus, to recount at length the story of Oedipus, a narrative version of the events Sophocles traced to Oedipus' death (in *Oedipus at Colonus*), but which, as Jocasta states history, led to the deaths neither of Oedipus nor herself, and veered, as it turned out, into a tussle in which Eteocles and Polyneices, the sons of Oedipus, compete for control of their mother city, Thebes.

**Transition.** By the end of the dreadful events leading up to Oedipus' self-discovery, and the horror of the ruling house of Thebes, Oedipus has been locked away by his sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, who are competing for control of Thebes. Putting a terrible curse on them—yes, Oedipus is still a wrathful and intemperate man—the former ruler declares that neither of his sons will rule Thebes, without first killing the other. The sons agree to divide the rule, taking the power turn by turn, but when Eteocles' year is up he refuses to yield the power to his brother, whereupon the furious Polyneices moves to Argos, marries the daughter of King Adrastus, and returns with an army to take Thebes by force. Jocasta enters at this point to declare a cease-fire, and to negotiate between her two sons.

**Conflict.** As it is, Jocasta's two sons refuse to compromise. After much argument they prepare to fight it out, and Eteocles visits with Creon, who is now the ruler of Thebes, to prepare for a defense of the city. The Argives have brought seven companies of men, one for assaulting each of the seven gates of Thebes, and Eteocles readies the Theban army for this assault, meanwhile proclaiming to the city that anyone found guilty of burying Polyneices in Theban soil will be put to death. One more demand from Eteocles; Creon should consult with the blind prophet Teiresias, to determine the next best move for the city. After plans have been laid, to smuggle Menoecus out of the city, to a safe place near the oracular grove of Dodona, the young man decides to take his city's fate into his own hands, and of his own free will kills himself.

**Combat.** Jocasta receives a message that her two sons are fighting it out to the death, and have agreed to leave the throne for the winner. Jocasta and her daughter, Antigone, go to observe the mortal combat. In the end the brothers slay one another, and Jocasta immediately kills herself, having lost everything. (The divergence from Sophocles' *Antigone* is startling; that idealistic young lady becomes the hero of her eponymous drama, as she sacrifices herself to assure the burial of one of her brothers, Polyneices, who is left unburied, outside the walls.

**Conclusion.** Antigone returns from the calamitous battle, and reports the results to Oedipus and Creon. Creon banishes Oedipus, after having declared that Eteocles should be properly buried, while Polyneices is left unburied. This prejudicial and unreligious denouement is intolerable for Antigone, who follows her father into exile, heading toward Athens.

## Themes

**Fidelity.** Antigone's fidelity to her two brothers remains intact in the present play. She rejects Creon's decision to leave Polyneices unburied, and follows her father into exile.

**Curse.** Oedipus, who passes quietly into the next world in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, does no such thing in *The Phoenician Women*. Prior to leaving Thebes with Antigone, he curses both of his conflicting sons, saying that neither will rule without having first killed the other.

**Conflict.** Among several conflicts in the play the starkest is between the two sons of Oedipus, Eteocles and Polyneices. They damn one another with their killer instincts, and their father double damns them by declaring that either would have to kill the other, before he could rule.

**Sacrifice.** Creon learns that he can only hold Thebes if he sacrifices his son, Menoecus. He is prepared to smuggle the boy out of town, but before this can happen, Menoecus kills himself.

**Adaptation.** Euripides' *Phoenician Women* is an adaptation of traditional material used by both Aeschylus and Sophocles. There is no clearer turning point, than the present play, from the age of the heroic in drama into the age of the psychological, even sociological, turn of myth.

## Character Analysis

**Creon** Euripides goes, in this play, for a kind of interpretive pastiche, rather than a set of character studies. Nonetheless, Creon, a successor to Oedipus the King, is a pivot in the narrative. It is he who governs the city, Thebes, which Oedipus' sons long to possess. It is he who gives the priority to Eteocles,

in the balance of power within the city. It is he who must struggle with the challenge of sacrificing (or not) his own son. Finally it is he who banishes Oedipus and makes the decision that Eteocles, not Polyneices, can be buried in the city of Thebes.

*Seeking.* Creon tilts toward Eteocles from the start, for this son of Oedipus has taken a strong stand of support for the city of Thebes. Creon has played favorites from the start.

*Proactive.* As soon as he is aware of the multiple attacks approaching Thebes, Creon hurries to fortify the seven gates of the city. He is ruthless in preparing for the forces of Polyneices

*Peremptory.* Creon reacts quickly, to the request he should get advice from Teiresias. He summons the seer immediately, but afterwards wishes he hadn't.

*Horrified.* Creon has strong human emotions. He is shocked and horrified, by Teiresias' insistence that he should see to the sacrifice of his son.

*Belligerent.* As the war of Polyneices reaches Thebes, Creon is aggressive and harsh in hurrying to defeat the enemy, and to carry out his own burial edicts.

**Parallels.** Homer's Agamemnon comes to mind, especially in his role as commander in chief of the Greek forces heading for, and landing in, Troy. He shares many personality traits with Creon: officiousness, a tin ear for other people's feelings, a readiness to go into action at the least threat to his own personal world setting. One might also think of Shakespeare's King John, as a limited but ambitious ruler, who knew what he wanted but was not diplomatic enough for find imaginative solutions to his problems. In 'real life': Dwight D. Eisenhower.

### **Discussion questions**

What twists does Euripides give to the tale of Thebes, and of its main characters. How does Euripides reshape the personalities—if he does—of Creon, Antigone, Oedipus?

What is the role of the Phoenician Women in the present play? Do they make a substantive contribution to the narrative?

How would you compare this play to Sophocles' *Antigone*, in which Antigone herself is the central figure? Does Euripides also, like Sophocles, find Antigone a morally inspiring figure? Is her relationship to her father, in Euripides, like that of Antigone to Polyneices in Sophocles' *Antigone*?

,

re