

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Themes in Euripides

FAMILY

The family is central in both ancient Greek experience and on the ancient Greek stage; the family centered dynamics of Greek mythology, the very medium of dramatic thought in Greece, coalesces with the picture of lived life presented by a realistic dramatist like Euripides. We find, in Euripides, a wide variety of intense intra family dramatic scenes which generate dramatic action. Hardly a play of Euripides does not display the passions, sufferings, and tensions of the family under pressure.

ELECTRA. Electra has since childhood been separated from her brother, Orestes; it comes as a startling surprise to them, to discover one another outside the simple shack where Electra is living with her farmer husband, in the shadow of the palace where Clytemnestra and Aegisthus reign. In a short time they have formulated and fine tuned a plan to kill mother and her adulterous husband. This is the moment brother and sister have planned for, and when it arrives their blood bond puts them hotly into action.

CHILDREN OF HERAKLES. While Herakles has been performing forced labor in the underworld, his children have been under constant threat from King Eurystheus of Mycenae, long time enemy of Herakles, whom the benevolent ruler of Athens, Theseus, will save. The children cluster around the temple of Marathon, a hive of brotherly need, protected only by the son of Theseus, Demophon. Herakles's daughter, Makaria, offers to sacrifice herself to save her father, while Alcmene, the mother of Herakles, enters to rail against the foul enemy of her son, Eurystheus. The family gathering proves too much for the foes of Herakles.

ION. The magnetizing power of family—in this instance God, mortal woman, and mixed divine-mortal (Ion)—is tight and compelling, so much an exclusionary force that even Xuthus, both husband (of Kreousa) and father (of Ion) is excluded from the circuit of family energies. One thinks of other divine-mortal family triads—like Zeus-Thetis-Achilles, or Peleus-Thetis—Achilles—as reminders of the fierce family closeness generated by the mortal-immortal blending. Ion belongs to Apollo and Kreousa, though he becomes part of the family of Xuthus.

THE PHOENICIAN WOMEN. Jocasta, whose marriage to Oedipus (marriage? Incestuous power) produces Eteocles and Polyneices, counsels her two sons in their ardent struggle over the possession of Thebes. With her daughter Antigone, she surveys the battle between her two sons, a cameo foursome of unabandoned family closeness. (Oedipus, humiliated off, locked in the palace, still pulses as the strained progenitor, the guarantor of that stain of fall which in its way seals in the closeness of the family.)

THE SUPPLIANTS. Euripides' *Suppliants* builds squarely onto the tensions that morally electrify Sophocles' *Antigone*, the tale of a young girl faced with the inner mandate to bury her one unburied brother, against the commands of the ruler of Thebes, Creon. Euripides builds the *Suppliants* around this same conflict, by which Creon attempts to 'politicize' the sacred moral issue of body burial. In the *Suppliants* Antigone herself provides the pivot around which the tight lock of family closes, making inviolable the obligation to provide honorable burial for any member of the *family*.

HECUBA. The post war victims of Troy are largely women and children; their usual fate is to be taken back to Greece by one of the Greek commanders, and then used as domestic or slave labor. This was the fate of the noblest of the Trojan ladies, Hecuba, who was taken to Greece as the prize of Neoptolemus, and whose greatest suffering was to see her family torn apart: her daughter Polyxena is sacrificed so that the Greek fleet can be released; her son Polydorus is washed up on the shore of Thrace—murdered by Polymestor, king of Thrace; while her husband, Priam, had been killed by Neoptolemus during the sack of Troy. Hecuba's priceless family has been butchered by the war, and only

in that light can we understand the violence of the murder of Polymestor, by Hecuba and her women associates, who gouge out his eyes.