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The Crete and Cretans of Euripides: Perceptions and Representations

Abstract

This thesis focuses on Euripides’ dramatic representations of Crete, famous from myth, geography, art, literature and philosophy. This thesis will attempt to address the following key questions: how is Crete represented in the extant Euripidean plays and fragments? How consistent are such representations between themselves? How are the Cretan mythological characters deployed? How are previous representations of Crete re-stated or adapted? What questions of association and identity appear to be raised? What kinds of multiple identities and their potential for interpretation are to be found in the plays? How do these relate to paradigms found in other sources? And finally, do Euripides’ representations of Crete as an island as constructed in these works contribute to a wider understanding of the relationship between the islands and Athens?

Various themes emerge from detailed textual analyses which stress Crete’s distinct, isolated nature, including the portrayals of Minos, Cretan women, the Minotaur, Cretan gods and spirits and the location of Crete itself. Many of these themes are also deployed paradoxically to stress, instead, Crete’s links with the mainland. Overall, common themes emerge that can be usefully considered in terms of two contemporary, theoretical models -
insularity and interconnectivity—, which offer insights into the complex relationships of difference and similarity between islands and the mainland.

In terms of insularity, Crete is viewed as an ‘island’, distant and distinct from Athens. The model of interconnectivity, conversely, stresses links between Crete and other regions as suggested by the many travels undertaken by protagonists in these works. Insularity and interconnectivity, then, can be used to consider Euripides’ Crete as part of a continuum between complete independence from and complete integration with the outside world. By considering models of insularity and interconnectivity specifically in relation to drama, this thesis departs in new directions from previous studies.

Chapter 1 outlines the research questions raised in the study of Cretanism and explains the structure of the thesis. Chapter 2 entails textual analyses of the references to Crete in Hippolytus. Chapter 3 involves textual analyses of the fragmentary The Cretans, illustrating how Cretans on Crete are represented. Chapter 4 considers emerging themes used to emphasize Cretanism, which, in turn, reinforce Crete’s distinctive, insular nature. Chapter 5 considers the evidence in terms of insularity and interconnectivity. These models highlight difference and separation, as well as similarity and interconnectivity between Crete, Athens and the rest of the Greek world. Chapter 6 reflects on the findings of previous chapters, arguing that certain models of insularity and interconnectivity can be usefully drawn out of Euripides’ representations of Crete to offer insights into the perceptions of islands in drama.