Greek Tragedy
Part I
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Elizabeth Vandiver did her undergraduate work at Shimer College, Mt. Carroll, Illinois, where she matriculated in 1972 as a sixteen-year-old “early entrant.” After receiving her B.A. in 1975, she spent several years working as a librarian before deciding to pursue graduate work in Classics at the University of Texas at Austin. She received her M.A. in 1984 and her Ph.D. in 1990.

At the University of Maryland, Professor Vandiver co-directs the Honors Humanities program and teaches for that program and for the Department of Classics. Before coming to Maryland, she held visiting professorships at Northwestern University, where she taught from 1996 to 1999; the University of Georgia; the Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies in Rome, Italy; Loyola University, New Orleans; and Utah State University. Her course on Classical Mythology has been particularly successful.

In 1998, Dr. Vandiver received the American Philological Association’s Excellence in Teaching Award, the most prestigious teaching award available to American classicists. Other awards include the Northwestern University Department of Classics Excellence in Teaching award for 1998 and the University of Georgia’s Outstanding Honors Professor award in 1993 and 1994.

Dr. Vandiver has published a book, Heroes in Herodotus: The Interaction of Myth and History, and several articles, and has delivered numerous papers at national and international conferences. She is currently working on a second book, examining the influence of the classical tradition on the British poets of World War I. Her previous Teaching Company courses include The Iliad of Homer, The Odyssey of Homer, Virgil’s Aeneid, and Classical Mythology.

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Greek Tragedy

Scope:
This set of twenty-four lectures introduces the student to Greek tragedy by setting the plays in their cultural and historical background and by undertaking detailed discussions of twenty-five of the thirty-two surviving tragedies. The first lecture introduces students to some of the issues involved in studying Greek tragedy and to the overall plan of the course. The lecture considers the definition of the term tragedy and discusses Greek tragedy’s place and time of origin: Athens in the fifth century B.C. After listing the foremost tragedians of the fifth century and discussing tragedy’s subject matter, the lecture closes by explaining the course’s format and approach.

Lectures Two, Three, and Four provide essential background information for our study of tragedy. Lecture Two surveys the cultural background of tragedy, specifically the cultural aspects and developments of fifth-century Athens as they are reflected or mirrored on the tragic stage. The lecture includes discussion of political developments, the importance of rhetoric in Athenian democracy, the festival context of tragedy and its civic aspects, and the position of women in fifth-century Athens. Lecture Three describes the god Dionysus; after a brief synopsis of Dionysus’s myth, the lecture discusses his connection with theatre and surveys various theories about the origin of tragedy and whether it developed out of rituals in Dionysus’s honor, other types of rituals, or from some other source entirely. Lecture Four discusses tragedy’s form and production; it considers the theatre building in the fifth century, the actors and chorus, and music and dance in tragic performance. The lecture defines and discusses the parts of a tragedy and considers issues of production and stagecraft, including acting style, costuming, the question of scenery and props, and the use of such devices as the ekkyklema and the mechane.

Lectures Five through Nine look at the work of the first great tragedian, Aeschylus. Lecture Five briefly recounts what we know of Aeschylus’s life and discusses his contributions to the development of tragedy. The lecture then considers the reasons that only seven out of ninety plays by Aeschylus have survived. Finally, the lecture analyzes Aeschylus’s three earliest surviving plays, Persians, Suppliant Maidens, and Seven against Thebes, both in terms of their literary and dramatic qualities and of what they can tell us about staging and the development of the theatrical tradition. Lecture Six prepares for our discussion of Aeschylus’s greatest work, the trilogy The Oresteia, by giving a brief outline and discussion of the trilogy’s mythic background, the stories of the Trojan War and of the terrible House of Atreus.

Lectures Seven, Eight, and Nine discuss The Oresteia itself. Lecture Seven focuses on the first play of the trilogy, Agamemnon. The lecture examines several crucial themes that are explored in that play, including the themes of hereditary guilt and irreconcilable moral duties. The lecture pays close attention to three characters: Agamemnon, Clytaemestra, and Cassandra. Lecture Eight considers how the major themes set up in Agamemnon—among them issues of justice, blood guilt, and conflicting moral duties—are continued through Libation Bearers and finally resolved in Eumenides. The lecture also discusses the political context of Eumenides. Lecture Nine examines Aeschylus’s stagecraft in The Oresteia. The lecture discusses the use of the skene building, the famous scene in which Agamemnon walks into his palace on purple (or crimson) cloth, and the probable use of the ekkyklema in the trilogy.

Lectures Ten introduces the two other great tragedians, Sophocles and Euripides, by looking at each tragedian’s Electra. The lecture compares the treatment of Electra and Orestes’s vengeance against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus with the treatment in Libation Bearers. It also looks closely at some of the most important elements in each play and discusses how they differ from Aeschylus’s version.

Lectures Eleven through Fourteen concentrate on Sophocles. Lecture Eleven summarizes what we know about his life, examines his possible contributions to stagecraft, and discusses what is probably his earliest surviving play, Ajax. Lecture Twelve looks at Antigone. The lecture begins by discussing the use of Thebes in Greek tragedy and why so many plays are set there. The lecture briefly sketches the background of Antigone’s story, then examines the play itself with particular emphasis on the conflict between Antigone and Creon. Finally, the lecture describes the great intellectual movement Sophism and discusses its implications for our understanding of Antigone.

Lectures Thirteen and Fourteen discuss Sophocles’s most famous play, Oedipus the King. Lecture Thirteen begins our discussion of Oedipus by briefly summarizing the mythic background of the Oedipus story. The lecture looks at several important themes in Oedipus the King, including the metaphors of sight and blindness, the narrative
structure of the play, and whether “realistic” standards of plausibility can be applied to the actions of Oedipus and Jocasta. Lecture Fourteen examines three influential readings of Oedipus. We start with Aristotle’s discussion of tragedy in Poetics and discuss its application to Oedipus. The lecture then looks briefly at Freud’s interpretation of Oedipus the King, at another very common reading that emphasizes the play’s focus on the conflict between fate and free will, and at the implications of Sophism for our understanding of Oedipus the King.

Lecture Fifteen considers the appearance of Heracles in Sophocles’s Women of Trachis and Euripides’s Heracles. The lecture starts by briefly outlining Heracles’s story. We then examine the uses Sophocles and Euripides make of it in their plays and note significant ways in which each tragedian departs from the “usual” version of Heracles’s story. The lecture ends by summarizing what we know about the life and work of the third great tragedian, Euripides.

Lectures Sixteen through Twenty-One concentrate on Euripides. Lecture Sixteen analyzes one of Euripides’s most famous tragedies, Medea. After sketching the mythic background and plot of the tragedy, the lecture looks at various dimensions of Medea’s and Jason’s characters, considers Medea’s foreign origin, and discusses Athenian views of sexuality and reproduction. Lecture Seventeen looks at Hippolytus, in which once again issues of gender, sexuality, and reproduction are in the foreground. The lecture sketches the background story of Theseus, then examines the play’s treatment of the passion of Phaedra, Theseus’s wife, for her stepson, Hippolytus. The lecture also considers the implications of Hippolytus for our understanding of Athenian attitudes toward sexuality.

Lecture Eighteen discusses Hecuba and Trojan Women, plays that paint vivid portraits of the damage caused to civilians and particularly to women by war. The lecture surveys the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, which was in full swing when these plays were performed, then looks at Euripides’s treatment of the conquered women of Troy and the possible implications of his choice of Greece’s mythical enemies, the Trojans, as subjects of these tragedies. In Lecture Nineteen, we look at two of Euripides’s least “tragic” tragedies, Iphigenia in Tauris and Orestes, and discuss how they both reverse many standard aspects of tragedy and what the implications of that reversal may be.

Lecture Twenty examines Euripides’s last two plays, Iphigenia at Aulis and Bacchae. The emphasis of the lecture is on Bacchae, but it begins with a brief look at Iphigenia at Aulis and discusses the modifications Euripides makes in the traditional story. Turning to Bacchae, the only Greek tragedy to feature Dionysus as a main character, the lecture discusses several of the play’s major themes, including the emphasis on Dionysus’s worship as a form of madness; the resistance of the main character, Pentheus, to the god’s power; and the terrible price that Pentheus pays for his lack of belief. Lecture Twenty-One continues our consideration of Bacchae as part of a discussion of Euripides’s attitude toward the traditional gods of Greek culture. The lecture looks at the representation of Dionysus in Bacchae, reviews the presentation of the gods and their actions in Euripidean plays we have already discussed, and looks at Apollo in Ion, introduced in this lecture.

Lecture Twenty-Two returns to Sophocles and examines his two last plays, Philoctetes and Oedipus at Colonus. After a detailed summary of the plot of Philoctetes and the character of Odysseus, the lecture considers the implications of the play’s “happy” ending. Next, the lecture discusses Sophocles’s last play, Oedipus at Colonus, focusing on Oedipus’s role as a guardian hero in Colonus. Finally, the lecture looks at the portrait of Athens painted in Oedipus at Colonus.

Lecture Twenty-Three falls into two parts. First, it discusses two tragedies of disputed origin, Prometheus Bound and Rhesus. Prometheus Bound is usually attributed to Aeschylus, and Rhesus, to Euripides, but many scholars doubt these attributions. The lecture examines possible reasons for thinking that these are not the works of Aeschylus and Euripides. It then looks briefly at Aristophanes’s comedies, Peace, Acharnians, Thesmophoriasuzae, and Frogs, and discusses the picture that each gives us of tragedy and tragic stagecraft.

Finally, Lecture Twenty-Four sketches the later history and continued influence of Greek tragedy. The lecture discusses the revivals of the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in the Hellenistic theatre and Roman playwrights’ adaptations of Greek tragedies. The lecture also covers various later “revivals” of tragedy, from the Renaissance to modern times. Finally, we conclude by looking at selected modern productions and adaptations of Greek tragedy.
Lecture One
Tragedy Defined

Scope: This first lecture introduces students to some of the issues involved in studying Greek tragedy and to the overall plan of the course. The lecture begins by discussing possible definitions of the term tragedy; considers the time and place in which Greek tragedy developed; describes the foremost tragedians of the fifth century; and explains the course’s format and approach.

Outline

I. This introductory lecture has four main objects.
   A. The lecture begins by discussing possible definitions of tragedy.
   B. Next, we consider the time and place in which Greek tragedy developed: Athens in the fifth century B.C.
   C. We then look briefly at the subject matter of Greek tragedy.
   D. Finally, the lecture describes the overall approach of the course.

II. What is tragedy?
   A. As a theatrical term, the modern dictionary definition is: “a drama in verse or prose and of serious and dignified character that typically describes the development of a conflict between the protagonist and a superior force (as destiny, circumstance, society) and reaches a sorrowful or disastrous conclusion” (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged [1961; 1993 revision]).
   B. In everyday speech, tragedy is often used non-theatrically to mean merely “something very sad.” This definition is reflected in two of the other meanings given by Webster’s:
      1. “A disastrous, often fatal, event or series of events.”
      2. “An unfortunate, sad, or discouraging occurrence or situation.”
   C. The link is clearly the idea of disaster and/or sadness.

III. In ancient Athens, tragedy referred to a specific type of dramatic performance. Plays were categorized as tragedies by their form and their time and place of performance, not by the “sadness” of their plots.
   A. These plays were performed at annual festivals in honor of the god Dionysus. The most important of these was the City Dionysia, an annual festival held in late March. Theatrical competitions were among the events of this festival.
      1. Tragedians who wished to compete submitted a request to the eponymous archon, the principal civil magistrate in Athens.
      2. The archon chose three tragedians, who competed against one another for first, second, or third prize.
      3. Each tragedian entered three tragedies (often called a trilogy) plus a fourth short satyr play; the four plays together are called a tetralogy.
      4. The satyr play was a burlesque, often connected thematically to the tragedies that preceded it.
   B. The word tragedy (tragoidia) seems to mean, literally, “goat-song.”
      1. Scholars used to think that this definition referred to the satyrs who make up the chorus of the satyr play; however, in Athenian art, satyrs are shown as men with horses’ tails, not as goat-like.
      2. The most commonly accepted etymology for the word now is that it means “song for a goat,” and that a goat was offered to the winning playwright as a prize.
      3. One recent theory is that the chorus was made up of adolescents, and that the word refers to the sound of adolescent boys’ voices.
   C. The subject matter did not have to be “tragic” in the modern sense.
      1. Aristotle, writing in the 330s B.C., said that the plot of a tragedy had to be serious.
      2. However, “serious” does not necessarily mean “sad.”
      3. In fact, most of them do feature sad or disastrous events; clearly, that is where the modern usage comes from.
IV. Tragedy’s origins lie in the sixth century B.C., but it came into its own only in the fifth century.

A. Choral performances of poetry were widespread in archaic Greece, and tragedy probably developed out of them.
   1. According to tradition, Thespis added an actor to the chorus, thereby inventing drama.
   2. By the end of the sixth century, tragedies were regularly being performed at the City Dionysia.

B. The fifth century was an extraordinarily creative time in the history of Athens.
   1. In politics, democracy developed in this century.
   2. In literature, the fifth century saw the creation of the genres of tragedy and comedy and the genre of history.
   3. Scientific and philosophical thinking both reached a level of sophistication (and articulation from one another) unlike anything seen before in the Greek world.
   4. Under the leader Pericles, many of the most famous buildings of ancient Athens (including the Parthenon) were constructed.

V. The fifth century began with one great war, which Athens was instrumental in winning, and ended with another, which Athens lost. Tragedy reached its zenith between these two wars.

A. The Persian Wars were fought in two episodes, ten years apart.

B. The contribution of Athens to the victory over the Persians led to her position of leadership in Greece.
   1. As a strong naval power, Athens headed a league of maritime states called the Delian League, which soon became a de facto Athenian empire.
   2. Resentment over Athens’s growing power was instrumental in causing the great war that closed the fifth century, the Peloponnesian War.

C. The Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.) pitted Athens and her allies against Sparta and her allies.

D. Clearly, the fifth century was a time of both innovation and turmoil, which seems to have provided the perfect atmosphere for the development of Greek tragedy.

VI. We know of several tragedians who wrote in the fifth century, but three were considered outstanding in their own day. With two possible exceptions, all the tragedies extant today were written by these three tragedians.

A. The first of the three “great tragedians” was Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.).
   1. We know the titles of eighty-two of his plays; some ancient sources say he wrote ninety.
   2. Only seven have survived, and one of those (Prometheus Bound) may not be by Aeschylus.

B. The second great tragedian was Sophocles (496–406).
   1. Our sources say he wrote 123 plays; we know titles of 118.
   2. Again, only seven survive.

C. The third great tragedian was Euripides (480–406).
   1. He wrote around ninety-two plays.
   2. Seventeen or eighteen survive. One tragedy (Rhesus) is almost definitely not by Euripides.
   3. One of Euripides’s satyr plays, Cyclops, is the only complete satyr play we have.

D. We know the names of several other tragedians, from the late sixth and fifth centuries, but only fragments of their works have survived.

E. Over one thousand tragedies were written in the fifth century B.C.; we have only thirty-two.

VII. The subject matter of tragedy was drawn almost exclusively from traditional myth.

A. Very occasionally, tragedians drew on recent history.
   1. Aeschylus’s Persians, the oldest extant tragedy, deals with the Athenian victory at the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C.
   2. Phrynichus wrote a tragedy called The Sack of Miletus, about the defeat of an Athenian ally by the Persians.

B. The tragedian Agathon (none of whose works survive) pioneered the use of invented plots, but this innovation does not seem to have become popular.
C. Taking the plots of tragedy from myth meant that the broad outlines of the story would already be known to most of the audience. The tragedian’s creativity and skill lay not in inventing a new story but in the use he made of the traditional material.

D. Myth provided the basic plots of the tragedies, but the tragedies were “about” much more than their plots.
   1. Tragedy tended to focus on conflict in a family and (often) on the destruction of the family because of that conflict.
   2. These family conflicts involved, or commented on, wider social themes: justice, the tension between public and private duty, the dangers of political power, and the relationship between the sexes.

VIII. I will try to give a rounded view of Greek tragedy, both in its cultural context and as an enduring form of dramatic literature.
   A. First, the course will set tragedy as a genre in its cultural context.
   B. Second, we will consider the performance aspects of tragedy; too frequently, the surviving tragedies are read as literary texts only.
   C. Third, we will consider several tragedies in close detail.
   D. In examining individual tragedies, I will refer to modern critical approaches and theories where I think they help to illuminate the tragedies, but I will not adopt any one of these approaches as an overall framework for the lectures.

Supplementary Reading:
Goldhill, “Modern Critical Approaches.”
Oxford Classical Dictionary, “Tragedy, Greek.”
Winkler, “The Ephebes’ Song.”

Questions to Consider:
1. The fifth century B.C. in Athens was an extraordinarily productive time for the visual arts, architecture, and literature. Can you think of any other such “golden ages” in world culture? What would seem to contribute to such outpourings of creativity?
2. To a fifth-century Athenian, tragedy was defined not by its subject matter but by its form. Do we have any analogous types of entertainment that are categorized primarily by form, regardless of subject matter?
Lecture Two
Democracy, Culture, and Tragedy

Scope: This lecture surveys the cultural background of tragedy, specifically the cultural aspects and developments of fifth-century Athens as they are reflected or mirrored on the tragic stage.

Outline

I. The early fifth century was the time in which Athenian democracy came into its own. The groundwork for this system of government had been laid in the sixth century, when Athens was under a system of one-man rule called tyranny.
   A. Peisistratus was tyrant of Athens from 546–527.
      1. The City Dionysia became important under Peisistratus; tradition dates the first performance of tragedy, which Thespis won, to 534.
      2. After Peisistratus’s death, the tyranny devolved to his son Hippias, who was advised and assisted by his younger brother, Hipparchus.
      3. Hipparchus was assassinated in 514 and, from that point on, Hippias’s rule became much harsher.
   B. From 514 on, Hippias’s reign was marked by instability.
      1. Important aristocratic families attempted to overthrow the tyrant and reinstate an earlier form of government, rule by the nobles (aristocracy).
      2. These aristocrats enlisted the help of the Spartans and, in 510, Hippias went into exile.
      3. Hippias’s reign had underscored many of the flaws of one-man rule, and the time was ripe for reform.
      4. Hippias’s exile had also left a power vacuum, which was soon filled by Cleisthenes.
   C. In 508/7, Cleisthenes inaugurated a system of reforms that, in effect, created an entirely new political system and structure, called isonomy, or “equality before the law.”
      1. The citizens of Attica had previously belonged to one of four “tribes,” based on family descent.
      2. Cleisthenes reorganized the citizen body into ten new tribes, based entirely on place of residence rather than on family, and decided that voting would be done by tribe.
      3. Tribal membership depended on one’s deme of residence (demes were villages, some included in the bounds of Athens and some, rural).
      4. To eliminate the possibility that large blocks of voting power would accumulate around any one area or family, Cleisthenes sorted the 139 demes into thirty groups, or trittyes, arranged by region: city, coast, or inland.
      5. The basic political structure had been changed so that the deme was the most important unit, not the family.
   D. The new tribes became the basis for most government functions; the army, political assemblies, and courts were all organized by tribe.

II. Cleisthenes’s reforms opened the way to a new form of government, demokratia, or rule by the people (demos).
   A. Athenian democracy was direct, not representative.
      1. All free male citizens over the age of twenty had access to the general assembly.
      2. The total population of Attica in the mid-fifth century, including slaves and foreigners, may have been around 315,500; of these, around 43,000 would have been adult male citizens.
      3. All these citizens were eligible to vote in the assembly; a quorum of 6,000 was required for some categories of decisions.
   B. Any citizen could propose a motion, which would then be debated and voted on.
   C. Among other implications, this form of government meant that public assemblies, for discussing issues of importance, gained a significance they had never had before. As a genre, tragedy shares some important characteristics with assemblies featuring public oratory.
      1. The audience was accustomed to meeting in public in great numbers and for long periods.
      2. The audience was also accustomed to listening attentively to the points of view put forward by different speakers.
D. Tragedy and politics both drew on, and probably influenced, the growing interest in rhetoric in the fifth century.

III. The fact that tragedies were performed at the City Dionysia leads modern readers to think of tragedy as a kind of “religious ceremony,” but the festivals were as much civic as religious.

A. Festivals were the only opportunities for gathering large numbers of people together. This availability of an audience may have as much to do with the “festival” association of theatre as any religious connection of the plays themselves.

B. The civic nature of Greek tragedy is indicated by the system through which it was financed; the tragedies were the financial responsibility of wealthy individual citizens.

1. Wealthy citizens were required to undertake works for the public good; these were called *leitourgia*. Funding a tetralogy was one such work.

2. A citizen who funded a tetralogy was called a *choregos*, or “chorus-leader.”

C. Each tragedian whose work had been accepted for entry into competition in a given year would be assigned a *choregos*, who paid for the chorus’s training and costuming.

D. Originally, the playwright himself acted in the tragedies and hired the other actor(s). In 450–449 B.C., the city took over the responsibility for hiring and paying actors.

IV. The civic nature of tragedy is also reflected in the fact that social and political issues of extreme contemporary relevance make up many of the recurrent themes in the extant tragedies.

A. The use of myth means that the tragedies have, in effect, a double timeframe. In the tragedies themselves, the timeframe is the heroic age, but outside the tragedies, for the audience, the timeframe is the fifth century, with democracy as the form of government.

1. The plots are set in the “heroic age,” the time of myth, which the fifth-century Athenians believed to have ended more or less at the time of the Fall of Troy (1184 B.C.).

2. However, the themes the tragedies addressed were matters of concern in the society for which those tragedies were performed.

3. We must keep track of both timeframes.

B. The extant tragedies repeatedly emphasize the dangers inherent in one-man rule, even when the ruler is a good man.

1. In the plotline of the tragedy itself, the right of a king to rule is never questioned.

2. In particular, the comments of the chorus, however, frequently underline the deficiencies of tyranny as a governing system.

C. Another crucial theme that is reiterated over and over in tragedy is the tension between, or conflicting claims of, *oikos* (family and household) and city-state (*polis*).

1. Cleisthenes’s reforms had lessened the political power of the extended family and had, by implication, redirected a citizen’s primary focus of personal loyalty to his *deme* and *polis*.

2. The traditional system of family loyalty first had not simply disappeared, however.

3. In many instances, we see men caught between private and public duties, between the good of their family and the good of their *polis*.

4. In tragedy, the tension between these two areas of loyalty and their potential for direct conflict is often cast in gender terms: the *oikos* is seen as the women’s domain and the *polis*, as the men’s.

V. This distinction between *oikos* and *polis* reflects a rigid division of gender roles in the Athenian mind. Men and women both had duties to the *polis*, but those duties were very different and non-interchangeable. Men had the duty to risk their lives in war; women, to risk their lives in childbirth.

A. Legally speaking, women of all ages were minors who had to be represented by a male “guardian.”

1. This view of women’s essential minority was reinforced by the typical ages at marriage.

2. The purpose of marriage was to produce legitimate children (the area where the interests of *oikos* and *polis* intersect).

B. The ideal seems to have been for women to restrict themselves to the *oikos* quite literally and to stay inside as much as possible.
C. Not only participation in government, but also almost all aspects of public life were restricted to men, except religious festivals.

D. Reconstructing the lives of ancient Athenian women is difficult, because almost all of our sources were written by men.

VI. One of the most striking characteristics of Greek tragedies is the presence of strong, powerful women in many of the surviving plays. Only one extant play, *Philoctetes*, does not include a female character; in the others, women are frequently either protagonists or important secondary characters.

A. Some of these women, such as Clytemnestra and Medea, directly oppose Athenian beliefs about how women should act and think.

B. More intriguing still, perhaps, are the young unmarried girls of tragedy, who at moments of crisis show resolution, courage, and self-determination.

C. All in all, the extant tragedies seem to indicate that women’s roles in Athens, and men’s conceptions of women’s essential personality and social functions, were more complex than has sometimes been thought.

Supplementary Reading:
Cartledge, “Deep Plays.”
Demand, *History of Ancient Greece*, chapters 7 and 11.
Goldhill, “The Audience of Tragedy.”
Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre*, chapter 1.

Questions to Consider:
1. Tragedy seems to have reflected and discussed social and political issues and to have called into question (or at least into close view) some of the Athenians’ assumptions. Do any forms of modern entertainment fulfill a similar social function? If not, how do we as a society discuss such issues?

2. Do you think scholars are justified in using theatrical representations (in both tragedy and comedy) to try to determine the social realities of Athenian life, especially in regard to gender roles and the realities of women’s life?
Lecture Three
Roots of a Genre

Scope: This lecture begins by describing Dionysus, the god at whose festivals tragedies were performed. After a brief synopsis of Dionysus’s myth and characteristics, the lecture discusses his connection with theatre, focusing on theories about the origin of tragedy and whether or not it developed out of rituals in Dionysus’s honor, other types of rituals, or from some other source entirely. The lecture ends by discussing possible reasons, beyond an assumed ritual origin of tragedy, for the connection between Dionysus and theatre.

Outline

I. Greek tragedy developed in a polytheistic society and was closely connected with one god in particular, Dionysus. He is a complex god whose domains include not only theatre but also frenzy and irrationality, nature and plant fertility, and wine.

   A. In his association with madness, frenzy, and irrationality, Dionysus is often contrasted with his elder brother, Apollo, who is (among other things) the god of reason and moderation.
      1. The opposition between Apollo or the Apollonian and Dionysus or the Dionysiac was famously articulated by Friedrich Nietzsche in his 1872 work, *The Birth of Tragedy*.
      2. Nietzsche identified the Apollonian as the spirit of measure, moderation, and reason; he saw the Dionysiac as the spirit of intoxication, loss of self, excess, and union with the “one.” In his view, the Apollonian underlay the plastic arts, and the Dionysiac underlay music.
      3. Nietzsche saw tragedy as a conflict between the Dionysiac chorus and the Apollonian characters and dialogue, in which the Dionysiac was constantly trying to “break through” the Apollonian.

   B. Dionysus’s connection with irrationality and frenzy is represented in myth as the literal possession of his followers; under his influence, they do things completely at odds with their usual personalities.
      1. In myth, Dionysus’s male followers are Satyrs, creatures who blend human and animal characteristics.
      2. His mythic female followers are the Maenads, women constantly under his influence and gifted with exceptional abilities, who rip animals apart and eat their flesh raw.
      3. Note, however, that this sort of Dionysiac frenzy belongs to myth, not to actual cultic practice.

   C. The most common definition of Dionysus is “god of wine.” His association with wine unites his associations with growing plants, with irrationality and frenzy, and with transformative behavior.

II. Many aspects of Dionysus are unusual or unique among the Olympian gods, as Nietzsche noted, including his birth from a human mother. Normally, the offspring of one divine and one human parent is a human.

   A. Dionysus’s mother was Semele, princess of Thebes, who had an affair with Zeus, the king of the gods.
      1. Semele was incinerated when she saw Zeus in his full glory, but Zeus snatched the embryonic Dionysus from her womb and implanted him in his own thigh.
      2. The infant Dionysus was later born from the thigh of Zeus.

   B. Dionysus’s anomalous status as a god whose mother was human may be explained by this incubation in Zeus’s thigh.
      1. This is also the most likely origin of his epithet “twice-born.”
      2. The epithet can also be explained by another version of his story, in which he was torn to pieces by Titans (an older race of gods), then resurrected.
      3. This latter version of Dionysus’s myth was very important in early twentieth-century theories about the nature of Greek tragedy.

III. Dionysus is also the patron god of theatre. The exact reason for his connection with drama is still a matter of scholarly debate.

   A. Tragedy and comedy were both performed at festivals in honor of Dionysus, but the majority of surviving plays (both comic and tragic) do not deal with Dionysus in any direct or obvious manner.
B. Unfortunately, we have very little ancient testimony about the nature of tragedy’s connection with Dionysus, although Aristotle says in *Poetics* that tragedy developed from *dithyrambs*, a type of choral song in honor of Dionysus, when the leader of the *dithyramb* separated himself from the chorus.

C. Various modern scholars have attempted to discover the exact nature of, and reason for, tragedy’s association with Dionysus by examining tragedy’s origins. These theories fall into two main groups.
1. The first group looks for tragedy’s origins in religious ritual.
2. The second group sees the origins in a fusion of epic recitation and choral song that had no direct connection to ritual.

IV. The theory that tragedy originated in religious ritual, which has been enormously influential, can be traced back to Aristotle’s statement that tragedy developed out of *dithyramb*.

A. According to this theory, tragedy, comedy, and *dithyrambs* all developed out of earlier rituals in honor of Dionysus.
   1. The groundwork for this view was laid by Nietzsche’s famous discussion of tragedy as an interplay between the Dionysiac and the Apollonian.
   2. Nietzsche himself was not primarily interested in the origins of tragedy, but rather in the continued interplay of Dionysiac and Apollonian elements in the tragedies themselves.
   3. Nietzsche stated that until Euripides, Dionysus was always the sole protagonist of Greek tragedy; such characters as Oedipus, Prometheus, and so on were simply “masks” of Dionysus.

B. Nietzsche’s views were greatly admired by a group of scholars called the “Cambridge School” or the “Cambridge Ritualists,” whose work was extremely influential in the early twentieth century.
   1. These scholars took as axiomatic the idea that tragedy originated in Dionysiac rituals and that an original ritual pattern could be discovered behind all extant tragedies.
   2. That pattern had to do with the death and rebirth of Dionysus.
   3. Thus, the Cambridge Ritualists thought that proto-tragedy must have been a ritual drama or “passion play” about Dionysus.

C. One of the most influential scholars of this school, Gilbert Murray, reconstructed the presumed pattern of this ritual drama as he perceived it in surviving tragedies.
   1. According to Murray, this pattern began with an *agon*, or contest of the god against his enemy.
   2. The *agon* was followed by the god’s *pathos*, or suffering, in which the god was killed. The *pathos* was then reported in a messenger speech.
   3. The messenger speech led to a lament for the death of the old god.
   4. Finally, the drama contained a recognition of the dead god’s body, followed by his resurrection and epiphany, which Murray called the *theophany*.
   5. Murray claimed that all tragedies reproduced this basic pattern.

D. The Cambridge Ritualists and Murray’s reconstructed “pattern” were influential in literary and dramatic studies in the early twentieth century, but this theory has many problems.
   1. Dionysus was seldom the subject of tragedy. Murray met this objection by claiming (like Nietzsche) that the human heroes were substitutes for Dionysus.
   2. More important, the plays themselves show little or no trace of Murray’s “pattern.”

E. A more basic objection has to do with the conflation of ritual and drama implied by the theory. Although ritual and drama both involve performed actions that are in some way symbolic, profound and significant differences exist between the two forms of performance.
   1. Ritual operates through the repetition of the same actions and the same words, in the same order, at different times.
   2. Tragedy clearly does not involve this kind of repetition. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of Greek tragedy is that the playwrights add unexpected changes or twists to the basic stories.
   3. Thus, the tragedies seem to operate in almost the opposite fashion from ritual; rather than reaffirming a societal truth through precise repetition of set words, actions, or images, they call those societal beliefs into question by presenting new angles on traditional stories.
   4. The tragedies were written to be performed only once, rather than to be repeated exactly over and over again.
V. The theory that tragedy developed out of an earlier form of ritual drama celebrating the death and resurrection of Dionysus is not the only theory of origin to be put forward by twentieth-century scholars.

A. Another theory claimed that tragedy’s origins lay not in Dionysiac ritual, but rather in death rituals performed at the tombs of heroes.

B. Other theorists reject the idea that drama developed out of any form of ritual at all. The most influential alternative theory is that the impulse for theatre came from the recitation of Homer.

VI. Few, if any, modern scholars still accept the Cambridge school’s version of the ritual theory.

A. However, a large and influential group of modern scholars accept the theory that tragedy’s origins did indeed lie in Dionysiac ritual.
   1. They differ from Murray in rejecting the idea that the origins of tragedy must fully determine the form of the extant tragedies.
   2. Modern ritualists tend to see the defining moment in the creation of drama as the moment when tragedy shed its ritual origins.

B. More important, although they do not accept Murray’s “pattern” drama, many modern scholars think that the extant tragedies reflect their Dionysiac origin in more subtle ways. According to some scholars, Dionysus is present as a structuring principle of tragedy even when he is not explicitly present as a character.

VII. Clearly, the questions of tragedy’s origins, its exact connection with its patron god Dionysus, and the degree to which it intersects with ritual are complicated. Nevertheless, these points have important implications for our understanding of the extant tragedies themselves.

Supplementary Reading:


*Easterling, “A Show for Dionysus.”*

*Else, Origin and Early Form.*

*Friedrich, “Everything to Do with Dionysus?”*

*Goldhill, “The Great Dionysia.”*

*Herington, Poetry into Drama.*

*Murray, “Excursus on the Ritual Forms.”*

*Pickard-Cambridge, Dithyramb, Tragedy, and Comedy*, chapter II. See especially section XII, on Murray’s theory.

*Rehm, Greek Tragic Theatre*, chapter 2.

*Schesler, “Mixtures of Masks.”*

*Seafor, Ritual and Reciprocity*, especially chapters 7–8.

*Wise, Dionysus Writes.*

Questions to Consider:

1. The idea that not only Greek drama, but all drama, developed out of religious ritual has inspired many modern practitioners of theatre to add ritual elements to their productions as an intentional attempt to return theatre to its ritual “roots.” Does this make sense to you, or do you think that drama and ritual are two fundamentally different types of performance?

2. Why do you think the ritual theory of tragedy’s origin was (and continues to be) so compelling to many people, both specialists and nonspecialists? Put another way, what is it about tragedy—or theatre in general—that makes so many people want its origin to lie in religious ritual?
Lecture Four
Production and Stagecraft

Scope: This lecture begins by examining the evidence for the shape, size, and nature of the theatre building in the fifth century. Next it turns to describing the actors and chorus of tragedy and the importance of music and dance in tragic performance. The lecture then defines and discusses the parts of a tragedy. Finally, we look at issues of production and stagecraft, including acting style, costuming, the question of scenery and props, and the use of such devices as the *ekkyklema* and the *mechane*.

Outline

I. The tragedies of fifth-century Athens were all performed in the Theatre of Dionysus, under the southern slope of the Acropolis. What do we know about the appearance and conditions of that theatre in the fifth century?
   A. Most people’s image of a Greek theatre is based on such examples as the great fourth-century theatre of Epidauros. That theatre has several characteristic elements:
      1. There is a vast fan-shaped auditorium built into a natural hillside.
      2. The auditorium looks down onto a perfectly circular *orchestra* (which means “dancing-place”).
      3. Remnants of an elaborate stone building, or *skene*, stand at the back of the orchestra.
   B. These three things—auditorium, orchestra, and *skene*—are the basic elements of any Greek theatre. There must be a place for the audience to sit, a place for the action to be performed, and a place for the actors to change masks and costumes out of sight of the audience.
      1. However, the harmonious theatre building of Epidauros is probably a late development.
      2. The earliest theatres that have survived and been excavated are much less regular in shape.
      3. In particular, early theatres do not seem to have had circular orchestras. Their orchestras are generally irregular rectangles.
   C. Nevertheless, many scholarly works say that in the earliest theatres, the orchestra must normally have been circular.
      1. The influence of the ritual theory of tragedy’s origins has been enormous here.
      2. Ritualists assume that the rituals from which tragedy developed must have included circular dances; therefore, the orchestra in which those dances were held must also have been circular.
      3. Ritualists also assumed that an altar must have stood in the center of the orchestra and that the chorus would have danced around it, in circular patterns.
      4. Although altars have been found near or on the periphery of many ancient orchestras, they have not been found in the center of any orchestra.

II. The remains visible today of the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens date almost entirely from Roman remodelings of the first and third centuries A.D.
   A. Little trace exists of the fifth-century Theatre of Dionysus.
   B. Many scholars think that the theatre in which Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides produced their plays probably resembled Thorikos far more closely than it did Epidauros.
      1. The audience probably sat on wooden bleachers and the bare ground, though the front seats may have been stone.
      2. The orchestra was probably roughly rectangular.
      3. In the earliest years, the actors probably changed in a tent (which is the original meaning of the word *skene*). Later, a wooden *skene* building was erected with (probably) one central door.
      4. An entrance ramp led into the orchestra from either side.
      5. Behind the orchestra was a drop-off of several feet to the ground level.
   C. Some scholars think that a low stage stood at the back of the orchestra, in front of the *skene*.

III. The cast of a Greek tragedy consisted of actors and a chorus.
   A. The Greek word for actor, *hypocrites*, probably means “interpreter” or “answerer.” The actor stood apart from the chorus and “interpreted” or “answered” the chorus’s lyrics.
      1. At first, drama had probably only one actor; tradition credits Thespis with this innovation.
2. Aeschylus is credited with adding the second actor, and his earliest surviving plays require only two actors to perform.
3. Sophocles supposedly added the third actor. No more actors were ever added.

**B.** The actors were all male, and the three of them played all the individual roles in any given tragedy.
1. One actor would perform two or three roles in each play.
2. The great female characters of Greek tragedy were acted by males.
3. Both of these aspects of Athenian acting—one actor playing several parts and men playing women—were facilitated by the use of masks.

**IV.** Along with the three actors, tragedy uses a chorus. The chorus was all male and, like the actors, the chorus members wore masks. The chorus members were ordinary citizens, not professional actors.

**A.** The chorus probably consisted of twelve members; later sources say that Sophocles increased the number to fifteen. Some scholars think that the earliest tragedies had fifty-member choruses, but this is uncertain.

**B.** The chorus often represents a “marginal” group, such as old men, women, or slaves.

**C.** The chorus normally takes no direct part in the action; rather, it comments on the action as developed by the actors.

**D.** *Chorus* comes from a Greek word meaning “dance.”
1. The chorus members sang their lines and danced simultaneously; they were accompanied by the *aulos* (a double-reeded wind instrument).
2. Ancient Greek music is almost entirely lost, and we know little about the type of dancing the chorus did.
3. A few vase paintings seem to show choruses in motion, but they are notoriously hard to interpret.

**V.** We cannot recover the music and choreography of tragedy, but we can observe tragedy’s standard structure, which music and dance would have helped to define. Tragedies tend to fall into several main parts.

**A.** The *prologue* is a relatively short introductory speech, before the entrance of the chorus.
1. The prologue “sets the scene”; it tells the audience where the play’s action is taking place (Thebes, Argos, the coast near Troy) and identifies the time in the overall myth.
2. Occasionally, the prologue is omitted and the play begins with the chorus’s entrance.

**B.** The entrance of the chorus is called the *parodos*.
1. The *parodos* (meaning “entrance”) can be anywhere from twenty to two hundred lines long.
2. The *parodos* establishes the chorus’s identity (as, for example, old men or female slaves) and usually provides some background material.

**C.** After the *parodos*, the play’s action develops through several episodes (*epeisodia*).
1. The episodes involve interactions between two or three actors or between an actor or actors and the chorus.
2. The episodes are divided by choral songs.

**D.** The choral songs dividing the episodes are called *stasima* (singular: *stasimon*).
1. The *stasima* are divided into pairs of verses called *strophi* and *antistrophi*. In each pair, the *antistrope* is exactly metrically equivalent to the preceding *strophe*.
2. The meters of the chorus’s songs are varied and complicated. The meter differentiates the sung choral sections from the actors’ spoken lines, which are almost always in simple iambics.

**E.** The final section of a tragedy is the *exodos*, in which the chorus leaves the orchestra. This final choral song can be very short.

**F.** Along with these clearly marked structural elements, tragedies also include several types of interactions between actors or actors and chorus.
1. Tragic scenes can be divided into *rhesis* and *stichomythia*. A *rhesis* is a speech of several lines in length, while *stichomythia* is rapid-fire conversation between two actors, each normally speaking only one line.
2. *Agon* means “contest” or “argument.” It is often used to refer to scenes in which the exchange of speeches breaks down into *stichomythia* debating some vital point.
3. *Monody* refers to a song in lyric meters sung by an individual actor rather than the chorus.
4. Perhaps most important is the messenger speech, in which crucially important events that happen offstage are narrated by someone who saw them and has come to report them to the characters and the chorus.

VI. The remaining element of performance is stagecraft. The manuscripts of tragedy contain no stage directions whatsoever; our only definite information about staging comes from the texts themselves and from the archaeological remains of theatres.

A. The conditions in the outdoor Greek theatre preclude any kind of “naturalistic” acting.
   1. The audience probably consisted of from 12,000 to 17,000 people, most of whom were a significant distance above the actors.
   2. The masks make facial expression impossible; they also make the actors more immediately recognizable as certain types of characters (young man, old woman, and so on).

B. Costuming was undoubtedly important, but we cannot be certain of what it looked like in the fifth century.
   1. Here, our primary evidence is vase painting.
   2. Unfortunately, very few surviving fifth-century vases depict theatrical scenes, and those that do exist are difficult to interpret.

C. Greek theatre had, of course, no artificial lighting and little in the way of sound effects (beyond the aulos).

D. Probably very little, if any, scenery was used.

VII. Two odd mechanical devices existed that should remind us how far removed from modern theatrical conventions Greek tragedy was: the ekkyklema and the mechane.

A. The ekkyklema was a wheeled device used for displaying scenes that were conceived of as happening inside the skene building.

B. The mechane was a crane, used to “fly” actors over the skene building.

Supplementary Reading:
Brockett and Hildy, History of the Theatre, chapter 2, pp. 13–38.
Green and Handley, Images of the Greek Theatre.
Rehm, Greek Tragic Theatre, Chapters 4–5.
Taplin, Greek Tragedy in Action, chapters 1–2.
———, “The Pictorial Record.”
Webster, Greek Theatre Production.
Wiles, Tragedy in Athens, chapter 4 (“The Mimetic Action of the Chorus”).

Questions to Consider:
1. In Shakespeare’s theatre, the female roles were also played by men and boys. Do you think that the absence of masks in Elizabethan theatre made this convention easier or harder to maintain?

2. Athenian tragedy used two very strange mechanical devices, the ekkyklema and mechane. Can you think of any “conventions” in contemporary theatre that would seem equally odd when viewed from the perspective of an entirely different culture?
Lecture Five
Aeschylus: Creator of an Art Form

Scope: We now begin our discussion of Aeschylus, the eldest of the three great tragedians. The lecture begins with a brief sketch of what is known about his life. Next, we look at Aeschylus’s contributions to the development of tragedy as an art form. The lecture then describes the transmission of Aeschylus’s text in antiquity, and how it happens that out of some ninety plays only seven have survived. Next, we turn to discussing Aeschylus’s three earliest surviving plays, Persians, Suppliant Maidens, and Seven against Thebes. We analyze these plays both in terms of their literary and dramatic qualities and in terms of what they can tell us about staging and the development of the theatrical tradition.

Outline

I. Aeschylus was the oldest of the three “great tragedians.” He was born at Eleusis, a town near Athens and the home of a very important religious cult, the Eleusinian Mysteries. His life dates are usually given as 525/524 to 456 B.C.
   A. The date of his birth has been called into question.
   B. We know little about his life beyond the fact that he fought in the Persian Wars, at the battle of Marathon in 490 B.C., and probably at Salamis as well in 480, and died in Sicily in 456.
   C. We know more about his career as a tragedian.
      1. He won his first victory in 484.
      2. One ancient source says that he won thirteen victories in all; another says he won twenty-eight.
      3. The higher figure probably includes victories won after his death with restagings of his works.

II. Aeschylus is invaluable for our understanding of tragedy’s development, both because his work stems from near the beginning of tragedy’s development as a genre and because he is the earliest tragedian whose works have (in part) survived.
   A. According to Aristotle, Aeschylus added the second actor to tragedy.
      1. If this idea is accurate, many scholars think that it makes Aeschylus the inventor of tragedy, because only with a second actor could dialogue be performed between two characters rather than interaction between character and chorus.
      2. His earliest surviving plays could all be performed with only two actors.
      3. Once the third actor was introduced, however (probably by Sophocles), Aeschylus used him; the Oresteia requires three actors.
   B. Aeschylus favored writing trilogies on unified themes, exploring the development of one story through all three plays (and to some extent in the satyr play as well).
      1. The Oresteia is our only surviving example of such a trilogy.
      2. We have the names of various other plays and the trilogies to which they belonged, which seem to show that the unified-story trilogy was indeed Aeschylus’s favored form.

III. According to our ancient sources, Aeschylus wrote between seventy and ninety plays. Unfortunately for us, only seven have survived.
   A. The three earliest extant tragedies are Persians, Seven against Thebes, and Suppliant Maidens.
      1. The first of these, Persians, deals with events of recent history. This was very unusual, and Persians is the only extant tragedy on current history, as opposed to myth.
      2. Seven against Thebes and Suppliant Maidens are on mythic topics, as are the later plays.
   B. Aeschylus’s most famous and most important works are the three plays that make up the one surviving trilogy, The Oresteia.
   C. Finally, Prometheus Bound has come down to us under Aeschylus’s name, but many scholars now think that it was very likely written by someone else (perhaps Aeschylus’s grandson).
IV. One obvious question is how we happen to have just these seven plays and no others. The value of *The Oresteia* is obvious, but why did *Persians, Prometheus Bound, Suppliant Maidens*, and *Seven against Thebes* happen to survive?

A. Classical Greek texts survived through being copied and recopied by hand.
   1. Many texts were probably lost fairly early on, within a few centuries of their creation.
   2. Many survived, however, in the Greek-speaking eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire, which valued classical literature and learning.

B. The Byzantine Empire became important after the division of the Roman empire into two parts, eastern and western, in 395 A.D.
   1. The capital of the Eastern Empire was Constantinople (modern Istanbul). This city was on the site of an earlier city called Byzantium, which gave the empire its name.
   2. The Western Empire fell in 476 A.D., but the Eastern Empire continued until 1453.
   3. Among the many other achievements of the Byzantine Empire was the preservation of many classical Greek texts.

C. Around the third century A.D., a selection of seven of Aeschylus’s plays was made for schools. This selection of seven was later reduced to three, which are often called the “Byzantine Triad.”
   1. The Byzantine Triad included *Persians, Prometheus Bound, and Seven against Thebes*.
   2. The continued use of the Triad in schools accounts for the survival of these three plays.
   3. *Agamemnon* and *Eumenides* survive in various manuscripts, apparently on their own merits.
   4. We owe our possession of *Libation Bearers* and *Suppliant Maidens* to a single manuscript.

D. This exact selection of seven is not the selection most modern scholars would likely make from Aeschylus’s plays, but the Byzantine scholars did not always admire particular classical texts for the same reasons that modern scholars would.

V. *Persians, Seven against Thebes*, and *Suppliant Maidens* are the earliest texts of tragedy we have. Each of them has some oddities of form and style.

A. *Persians*, which was performed in 472, is the earliest. It is unlike later tragedies in various ways.
   1. Most obviously, it deals with events of recent history, not with stories from the mythic (or legendary) past.
   2. It was not part of a unified trilogy in the form that Aeschylus seems to have favored. It was performed with two other plays, *Phineus* and *Glaucus Potnieus*, both of which were on mythological themes.
   3. All the characters in *Persians* are foreigners rather than Greeks, whereas our other extant tragedies always include Greeks, even when their main characters are foreign.
   4. *Persians* has no prologue and no true *exodos* of the chorus.
   5. Because *Persians* is the oldest play we have, these differences from the “norm” are thought-provoking. If tragedy developed out of an earlier ritual drama, then our earliest plays ought to show traces of that origin most clearly.

B. *Persians* has some characteristics that are standard in later tragedies.
   1. Significant events are reported, not enacted.
   2. The chorus represents a group that is in some sense on the periphery of the play’s actions. Here, they are not soldiers who took part in the war against Greece, but elders who stayed behind in Persia waiting for news.
   3. The main characters are royal; in this case, they are the Queen of Persia and her son, Xerxes.

C. *Seven against Thebes* (performed in 467) deals with the fight between the two sons of Oedipus, Polyneices and Eteocles, over who shall have the kingship. It was the final play of a trilogy; the two earlier ones were *Laius* and *Oedipus*.
   1. Polyneices has returned to attack his native city, with six allies leading their troops on his behalf.
   2. The main point of the play is a long scene between Eteocles and a messenger, who describes which of the seven leaders of the assault is stationed at each of the seven gates of Thebes.
   3. Eteocles responds by naming a champion of his own to meet each of his brother’s champions. He himself will face Polyneices at the seventh gate.
4. The play as we have it ends with a lamentation of Oedipus’s daughters, Antigone and Ismene, over the bodies of their brothers. Most scholars agree, however, that this ending is almost undoubtedly a later addition.

D. *Suppliant Maidens* recounts the story of the fifty daughters of Danaus (the Danaids) who are fleeing a forced marriage with their Egyptian cousins.

1. These women are Greek by descent and have come to ask for protection from the king of Argos, Pelasgus. They are accompanied by their father, Danaus.
2. They threaten to commit suicide by hanging themselves from statues of the gods if Pelasgus does not help them.
3. Pelasgus weighs the claims of the Danaids as suppliants and relatives against the possible harm to his citizens when their Egyptian cousins arrive and fight for them. With the populace’s consent, he decides to offer the Danaids his protection.
4. A herald arrives from the Danaids’ Egyptian cousins and tries to force the Danaids to come with him, but Pelasgus orders him away and formally invites the Danaids to enter Argos.
5. The play ends with the Danaids’ song of thanksgiving.

E. *Suppliant Maidens* was the first play in its trilogy; as such, its main purpose probably was to set up themes that would be resolved in the two remaining plays. The other two plays apparently told the rest of the story.

VI. Until the 1950s, scholars were absolutely certain that *Suppliant Maidens* was the earliest surviving tragedy we had. This supposition was based on stylistic evidence and on Aristotle’s statement about the development of tragedy out of *dithyramb*.

A. One of the most noticeable elements in *Suppliant Maidens* is the primary role of the chorus.

1. The chorus is, in effect, the main character of the play.
2. Because the chorus represents fifty maidens, scholars assumed that it had, in fact, fifty members.
3. *Dithyrambs* were sung by fifty-member choruses, which seemed to support the idea that tragedy developed out of the addition of individual actors to *dithyramb*.

B. *Suppliant Maidens* has no real protagonist.

1. Pelasgus and Danaus are both given about equal weight.
2. Scholars thought that this reflected a very early stage in the use of actors and that, at this point, Aeschylus had not quite worked out how to use his actors dramatically.

C. *Suppliant Maidens* appeared to preserve the archaic form of tragedy by emphasizing a fifty-member chorus and downplaying the importance of the actors, as well as by its overall static and formal structure.

1. A date of c. 490 was assumed for the play, and it was seen as a crucial piece of evidence for the development of Aeschylus’s style.
2. In 1952, however, an ancient papyrus was published, which stated that Aeschylus’s Danaid trilogy won in competition with Sophocles—who first competed in 468.
3. Thus, far from being one of Aeschylus’s earliest plays, *Suppliant Maidens* dates to the later years of his life.

D. This cautionary tale reminds us of two important points.

1. It highlights the danger of circularity in using our evidence.
2. It reminds us of the dangers inherent in theorizing about Aeschylus’s development as an author when we have such a small fraction of his work.

VII. Despite these warnings, our three earliest plays, *Persians*, *Seven against Thebes*, and *Suppliant Maidens*, are invaluable resources for theatre historians because they provide much information about staging in the years from 472 to 463.

A. One of the most noteworthy points about these plays is that none of them requires any kind of fixed *skene* building for its performance.

B. These early plays also indicate that some forms of props or scenery were probably used.

1. In *Suppliant Maidens*, the chorus and Pelasgus both refer to the statues of the gods; the chorus members hang wreathes on the statues and threaten to hang themselves from the statues.
2. In *Seven against Thebes*, the highpoint of the play is the description of the shields of the seven enemy champions.
3. In each case, it seems safe to assume that these textual references allude to something that was actually there.

**Essential Reading:**
Aeschylus, *Persians, Seven against Thebes, Suppliant Maidens.*

**Supplementary Reading:**
Adams, “Salamis Symphony.”
Lloyd-Jones, “The *Suppliants.*”
Reynolds and Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars,* chapter 2 (“The Greek East”).
Rosenmeyer, *Art of Aeschylus,* chapter 1.
Vidal-Naquet, “Shields of the Heroes.”

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Most scholars assume that the long description of the “Pageant of Shields” in *Seven against Thebes* must reflect something that was visibly happening in the play. Do you agree? Can you think of any way this scene could have been made compelling and interesting if the champions and shields were *not* visible?

2. Aeschylus’s *Persians* presents the defeat of the great enemy of Athens in the Theatre of Dionysus only seven years after the end of the war. What do you think Aeschylus’s purpose in this presentation was? Why present the defeated Persian king in a noble and compassionate light?
Lecture Six

*The Oresteia: Mythic Background*

Scope: This lecture prepares for our discussion of Aeschylus’s greatest work, the trilogy *The Oresteia*. The lecture examines the mythic background for the trilogy by giving a brief outline of the two interlocking myths that lie behind it: the story of the Trojan War and the terrible House of Atreus. Both of these myths were part of the cultural coin of fifth century Athens and form the essential background material not only for Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* but also for several other extant tragedies.

Outline

I. *The Oresteia* assumes that its audience is familiar with two major themes of traditional mythology: the Trojan War and the history of the previous generations of Agamemnon’s family, the House of Atreus.

A. The Trojan War is the most famous episode of classical myth. This fame results from the fact that it was considered an especially important event by the Greeks themselves and, thus, became especially productive in classical literature.
   1. In the fifth century B.C., the Trojan War was seen as the episode that marked the end of the “heroic” age and the beginning of purely human history.
   2. The heroes of the Trojan War were not only seen as the last of the great race of heroes, but they were also often claimed as ancestors by families living in the classical age.
   3. The Trojan War was a “liminal” event; it looked back to myth but at the same time looked forward into the human present.
   4. Probably because of this liminal nature of the Trojan War myth, it became the most fruitful episode of all Greek mythology for literature.
   5. Many tragedies, extant and lost, deal either with the Trojan War or its aftermath.

B. The myths concerning the House of Atreus were closely connected with the Trojan War; the war began because of events in this family.
   1. The most important members of the House of Atreus were Agamemnon, who led the Greek army against Troy, and his brother, Menelaus.
   2. The Trojan War was motivated by the seduction of Menelaus’s wife, Helen, by Paris, prince of Troy.

C. Remember that the tragedians and their audience would not have thought of these stories as “myths,” in strict opposition to “history.”

II. Despite its importance for Greek culture, no major surviving ancient work tells the entire story of the Trojan War, but the basic story as the tragedians knew it can be pieced together from surviving literature.

A. The most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, daughter of Zeus and wife of the Greek Menelaus, was abducted by the Trojan prince Paris.

B. Under the command of Menelaus’s elder brother, Agamemnon, the Greeks mustered an army to go to Troy and fight for Helen’s return.
   1. When the fleet gathered to sail, the winds blew against them for a month.
   2. The seer Calchas declared that the goddess Artemis was angry; Agamemnon must sacrifice his own daughter, Iphigenia, to get a wind for Troy.
   3. Agamemnon killed Iphigenia, and the winds blew for Troy.

C. The war against Troy lasted for ten years. The fighting was fairly evenly balanced, with each side having its foremost warrior (Achilles for the Greeks, Hector for the Trojans).
   1. Achilles was the son of a goddess mother, Thetis, and a human father, Peleus. Their wedding was arranged by Zeus, and Thetis was not entirely willing.
   2. Like other offspring of a god and a human, Achilles was mortal but exceptional.
   3. Hector was the eldest son of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy.

D. The greatest Trojan warrior, Hector, was killed by the greatest Greek warrior, Achilles, who was himself killed by Paris.
Finally, the Greeks resorted to trickery. Using the famous ruse of the Trojan Horse, invented by Odysseus, they infiltrated the walled city of Troy and sacked it by night.

III. The Greeks committed many outrages against the Trojans during the Sack of Troy, and these actions affected the Greeks’ attempts to return home.
   A. The return to Greece was neither easy nor simple. The outrages committed by the Greeks during the Sack of Troy angered the gods.
   B. The surviving Greeks suffered many hardships on their way home.

IV. The events leading up to the war are closely connected with the whole story of the family of Agamemnon and Menelaus, the House of Atreus.
   A. The most obvious connection is that Helen was the wife of Menelaus, and her half-sister, Clytemnestra (or Clytaemestra in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*), was the wife of Agamemnon.
   B. The abduction of Helen was an offense against the honor of Menelaus’s whole family. Because Agamemnon was the elder brother, the task of leading the expedition to get her back fell to him. This was also a violation of the Greek notion of *xenia*, or guest-host relationship.
   C. The loss of Helen and the sacrifice of Iphigenia are examples of an overall pattern at play in Agamemnon’s family. This family, called the House of Atreus, labored under a hereditary curse that repeated itself generation after generation.
      1. The concept of a hereditary curse implies that moral guilt is inheritable, just as monetary debts are inheritable.
      2. The curse of the House of Atreus manifests itself through (and is caused by) inappropriate and excessive intergenerational violence: parents kill children; children kill parents.
   D. The curse began with the actions of the family’s founder, Tantalus.
      1. Tantalus offended the gods, either by trying to trick them into eating the flesh of his own son, Pelops, or by trying to steal nectar and ambrosia, the gods’ food and drink.
      2. Eventually, Tantalus was punished in Tartarus (the underworld) by being eternally tormented with hunger and thirst.

V. Pelops was resurrected by the gods; he too incurred a curse upon himself and his descendants through violence, though in his case it was extra-familial.
   A. Pelops wanted to marry Hippodamia, a princess. Her father, Oenamaus, had decreed that to marry her, a suitor must first defeat him in a chariot race.
      1. Pelops killed his bride’s father by bribing the charioteer to sabotage his chariot.
      2. Pelops then fled, taking Hippodamia and the charioteer, Myrtilus, with him.
   B. When Myrtilus tried to rape Hippodamia, Pelops threw him to his death from a cliff, and Myrtilus cursed Pelops’s family.

VI. Pelops had several children, but the most important were Atreus and Thyestes.
   A. Atreus and Thyestes were doubly cursed; they inherited the guilt of their grandfather, Tantalus, and they were directly cursed by Myrtilus.
   B. The two brothers quarreled over the kingship of Mycenae.
      1. At Thyestes’s suggestion, they agreed that the kingship would belong to whichever of them had the fleece from a golden lamb.
      2. Atreus had such a fleece, but his wife, Aerope, gave it to Thyestes, who was her lover.
      3. The gods, however, sent an unmistakably clear omen—the sun setting in the east—that Atreus should be king. Atreus thereupon banished Thyestes.
   C. Atreus found out that Aerope and Thyestes had been lovers and decided to take a terrible revenge on his brother.
      1. He summoned Thyestes and his sons back to Mycenae on the pretense of reconciliation.
      2. Atreus killed Thyestes’s sons and served their flesh to their father at a banquet. He then banished Thyestes again.
      3. When Thyestes realized what he had done, he cursed Atreus and Atreus’s descendants.
D. On the advice of an oracle, Thyestes fathered a son by his own daughter so that he would have an avenger. This son, Aegisthus, would be crucial in the further playing out of the family curse.

VII. Atreus’s sons were Agamemnon and Menelaus. By their generation, the curse is tripled: they are affected by the misdeeds of Tantalus, Pelops, and Atreus.

A. Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia is more than an element in his own story; this sacrifice reenacts the pattern of his family curse.

B. The secondary motif of adultery, established by Thyestes and Aerope, also occurs in this generation.
   1. During Agamemnon’s absence, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus become lovers.
   2. When Agamemnon returns home, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus kill him.
   3. Several years later, Agamemnon’s son, Orestes, returns from exile to kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

VIII. All three tragedians wrote plays on aspects of the myth of the House of Atreus, many lost and some extant.

A. Sophocles and Euripides each wrote a play called *Electra*, about the vengeance that Agamemnon’s children took on their mother, Clytemnestra

B. Euripides returned to the stories of Agamemnon’s children in such plays as *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Iphigenia at Tauris*, and *Orestes*.

C. The most significant tragedies on the House of Atreus are, of course, Aeschylus’s three plays *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, and *Eumenides*, which together comprise our one extant trilogy.

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Does modern American entertainment (television, cinema, theatre, novels) have any “touchstone” episodes to which it refers over and over that are analogous to the Trojan War in Greek literature?
2. The Trojan War has remained a popular theme in literature, drama, art, and music. Why do you think this is? What is it about this story that accounts for its continued popularity?
Lecture Seven

The Oresteia: Agamemnon

Scope: We now begin our examination of Aeschylus’s Oresteia by focusing on the first play of the trilogy, Agamemnon. The lecture examines several crucial themes that are explored in that play, including the themes of hereditary guilt and irreconcilable moral duties. The lecture pays close attention to Agamemnon’s character and how the sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia begins the process that will end in his own death. We also examine the character of Cassandra and consider how her words to the chorus set up images and themes to which the two later plays of the trilogy will repeatedly return. Finally, we examine the character of Clytaemestra and consider how the description of her as a “manly” woman sets up another crucial theme, of appropriate gender roles, that will resonate throughout the rest of the trilogy.

Outline

I. The Oresteia was performed in 458 B.C., just two years before Aeschylus’s death. As the only extant trilogy, it is invaluable for giving us a sense of how the trilogy form worked.
   A. In The Oresteia, we can see how Aeschylus sets up themes, complex strands of imagery, and even turns of phrase in the first play that will be amplified, reiterated, and resolved in the second and third plays.
      1. If Libation Bearers and Eumenides, the second and third plays of this trilogy, had not survived, we would find it very hard to know exactly what to make of the first play, Agamemnon.
      2. We know that Suppliant Maidens was the first play in its trilogy and that Seven against Thebes was the third in its trilogy.
      3. It is sobering to realize what a disadvantage we labor under in trying to interpret those plays in isolation.
   B. Even The Oresteia is not complete, however, because its satyr play, Proteus, is lost.
      1. The satyr play almost undoubtedly dealt with Menelaus’s and Helen’s sojourn in Egypt on their way home from the Trojan War.
      2. According to the Odyssey, the sea-god Proteus told Menelaus about Agamemnon’s murder.

II. The first play of The Oresteia, Agamemnon, deals with Agamemnon’s return after the Trojan War and his murder by Clytaemestra. Despite the title, Agamemnon is on stage for a very short time; most of the play deals with anticipation of his arrival and the aftermath of his murder.
   A. The prologue of the play is spoken by a Watchman stationed on the roof of Agamemnon’s palace.
      1. The Watchman’s speech establishes the play’s setting; he tells us that he is guarding the palace of Agamemnon in Argos.
      2. The prologue also sets the mood of the play as one of somberness and dread. His very first words strike an ominous note.
      3. Finally, the Watchman sets up several key themes that will be reiterated through this play and the trilogy. Most important among these are the sense that something is amiss in the palace and unease with Clytaemestra’s character as a “man-like” woman.
   B. The Watchman also calls attention to the importance of the “house” in Agamemnon.
      1. The Greek word oikos means both actual, physical “house” and “family.”
      2. Thus, the unease that the Watchman attributes in his speech to the “house” implies that untoward things are happening in the building and refers to the ill-fated tendencies of the family.
   C. The Watchman is looking out for one particular thing: a beacon fire that will tell him Troy has fallen.
      1. Clytaemestra has arranged a relay system of bonfires so that she will know of Troy’s fall as soon as possible.
      2. The Watchman sees the beacon and rejoices, but ends his speech with another expression of foreboding.
III. The Watchman’s speech is followed by the longest *parados* in extant tragedy. The chorus identifies itself as citizens of Argos who were too old to go to war with the army. It also narrates essential background information, including a description of the sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis.

A. The information that the chorus gives here is absolutely essential for our understanding of the rest of the play and the trilogy.
1. The chorus stresses that the expedition to Troy was both sanctioned and demanded by Zeus in his role as god of *xenia*.
2. Paris had violated *xenia* by abducting Helen; therefore, Zeus sent Agamemnon and Menelaus out against Troy.
3. The idea that the expedition is demanded by Zeus is essential for our understanding of what the chorus narrates next, the sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis.

B. Some versions of the story of Iphigenia attribute some direct wrongdoing by Agamemnon as the motivation for Artemis to demand the sacrifice. Here, the chorus makes it clear that Agamemnon has not done anything to anger Artemis; the goddess is angry because of an omen the army saw in which two eagles devour a pregnant rabbit.
1. The goddess Artemis protects the young of all species, but her anger over the death of the unborn rabbits seems out of proportion.
2. According to the prophet Calchas, the omen signifies that the Greeks will sack Troy.
3. Apparently, Artemis is angry over what Agamemnon will do in Troy, not over anything that he has already done.
4. By demanding the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Artemis in effect requires Agamemnon to become ruthless and merciless; i.e., to become the kind of man who will sack Troy.

C. The chorus’s description of Agamemnon’s position at Aulis stresses the inexorable nature of his dilemma and the fact that it is not brought on by any of his own actions. Agamemnon is an innocent man forced into the position of making an unbearable choice.
1. Zeus demands that Agamemnon’s army go to Troy and punish Paris’s violation of *xenia*.
2. Artemis demands that Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter to get winds to sail to Troy.
3. Thus, Agamemnon must choose between two irreconcilable duties: to his army and to his child.

IV. This picture of a man caught between two irreconcilable moral duties sets up one of *The Oresteia*’s main themes, which we encounter here for the first time.

A. In *Libation Bearers*, we will see the same theme expressed through Orestes, a son who has an absolute duty to kill his father’s killer, but no less absolute a duty not to kill his mother.

B. In *Eumenides*, the irreconcilable duties of the earlier plays will finally be mediated and resolved by the intervention of the goddess Athena.

C. The fact that Agamemnon is forced into making this choice does not free him from the disastrous consequences of his actions.
1. The chorus relates an evocative description of both Agamemnon’s hesitation and the horror of the scene once he has made up his mind to kill Iphigenia.
2. Making the decision to sacrifice his daughter changes Agamemnon.
3. The consequences of these changes can be seen in his later actions and words in the play.

V. Agamemnon finally enters at line 810, nearly halfway through the play. He enters in a chariot, with the captive Trojan princess Cassandra behind him.

A. His first speech contains several ominous points.
1. In his very first words, he says that the gods worked with him (not vice versa) to gain Troy.
2. The terms he uses to describe the taking of Troy are strongly reminiscent of the eagle omen that led to Iphigenia’s sacrifice.
3. He speaks of healing the corruption in the state.

B. When Clytaemestra comes forward to greet him, she showers him with overdone rhetoric about her own misery in his absence, then orders her servants to spread out embroidered cloths for him to walk on.
1. This scene is often called the “carpet scene,” but it is crucial to realize that these cloths are lavish garments or tapestries, not carpets.
2. Carpets are designed to be walked on, but these fine, delicate fabrics will be ruined by such treatment.
3. Agamemnon himself says that such riches are fit for gods, not for humans to misuse; nevertheless, he walks into the house on them.

C. Agamemnon’s walk on the embroideries is emblematic of his character in two ways.
1. First, it is an enactment of hubris. This word is often translated as “excessive pride,” but its basic meaning is “wanton violence,” often arising from pride or passion.
2. Agamemnon’s walk on the tapestries does violence to them and destroys them.
3. More important, the walk epitomizes what Agamemnon does to all lovely and delicate things: he has destroyed Iphigenia, and he is in the process of destroying Cassandra.

VI. Cassandra has been a silent presence in the chariot all through Agamemnon’s opening speech, his exchange with Clytaemestra, and the chorus’s stasimon after Agamemnon enters the house. She remains silent when Clytaemestra comes back out and speaks to her.

A. The three-actor rule applies to speaking actors; most Greek tragedies have a variety of silent characters as well.
1. The audience probably assumed that Cassandra was one such silent character.
2. Clytaemestra’s vain attempt to get Cassandra to speak would seem like a very clever manipulation of the convention.
3. But after Clytaemestra goes back into the house, Cassandra breaks her silence, not with speech but with an eerie howl of lamentation and an anguished call upon the god Apollo.

B. In the scene that follows, Cassandra tells the chorus her own story and prophesies Agamemnon’s and her own approaching murders.
1. As Cassandra herself explains to the chorus, it is her special curse for her prophecies to be unbelieved.
2. She had promised to sleep with the god Apollo, and he gave her the gift of prophecy.
3. She then went back on her word, and Apollo cursed her by making it impossible for anyone ever to believe her.
4. The chorus understands her when she speaks of past events, such as the murders of Thyestes’s children.
5. However, the chorus cannot understand or believe her when she tells them what is about to happen, even when she speaks as plainly as possible.

C. Cassandra is one of the most memorable and pitiable characters in the entire trilogy. She knows what is about to happen to her, but she also knows that there is nothing she can do to stop it.

VII. After Cassandra enters the house, the chorus has time to sing only twenty-six lines before Agamemnon is heard crying out that he has been struck. The chorus members discuss what they should do, but they hesitate too long, and Clytaemestra appears to announce what she has done.

A. The passage in which the chorus debates whether to help Agamemnon is often used as evidence for the number of chorus members.
1. These lines are broken up into twelve couplets, each of which seems to belong to a different speaker.
2. The speakers disagree with one another about what to do: one suggests calling all the citizens; another, bursting in to catch the murderers in the act; another, waiting to see what the situation is.
3. The usual assumption is that, here, the chorus breaks up into individuals, and each couplet is spoken by a different member.
4. This passage does not necessarily mean, of course, that there were only twelve chorus members, but it does suggest that conclusion.
5. The passage is also extraordinarily effective dramatically. The chorus, which up till now has spoken as one, fragments with the murder of the king.

B. Clytaemestra appears, standing over the bodies of her victims, and announces her deed to the chorus.
1. They are absolutely horrified, both that she has murdered her husband and that she feels no shame or remorse.
2. At first, they think she must have gone mad, or been poisoned, to be able to dare such a thing.
3. She reminds them of Iphigenia and says that her killing of Agamemnon was just vengeance.
4. The chorus’s horror does not diminish, but they admit that it is difficult to judge easily between these two sides, where reproach meets reproach.
C. Aegisthus enters and trades recriminations and threats with the chorus. The play ends when Clytaemestra asks for an end of violence, and she and Aegisthus enter the house.

VIII. Clytaemestra’s character throughout the play deserves closer examination.

A. She is referred to several times as a woman who is in some way manlike, who has a “man’s heart.”

B. In her great triumph speech over the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, she herself highlights some of the “masculine” elements in her character.
1. She says that she spoke earlier out of necessity but is not ashamed not to unsay everything.
2. She describes her murder of Agamemnon in terms that invert the usual assumptions about gender roles.
3. She was the hunter, he was the prey; she caught him in a robe as fishermen catch fish.
4. He was in his bath and, therefore, presumably naked and supine; she stood over him, armed, as a warrior.

C. These inversions of gender roles are shocking enough, but then she uses sexual imagery, recasting herself as female, that is more shocking still.
1. She says that she enjoyed his blood splattering on her as flowers enjoy the rain of Zeus.
2. Rain fertilizing plants is a commonplace metaphor for sexual intercourse.
3. Thus, Clytaemestra seems to be saying that she derived sexual enjoyment from killing Agamemnon.
4. It is no wonder that the chorus is appalled.

D. At the very end of the play, Clytaemestra tries to reassert her femininity, soothing Aegisthus and suggesting an end to violence.
1. She points out that she is a woman speaking among men and asks them to deign to listen.
2. But her attempt to reenter the traditional womanly role cannot overcome the image of her standing in the doorway of the oikos, boasting over her murdered husband’s body.

Essential Reading:
Aeschylus, Agamemnon.

Supplementary Reading:
Conacher, Oresteia.
Goldhill, Oresteia.
Knox, “Aeschylus and the Third Actor.”
Lloyd-Jones, “Guilt of Agamemnon.”
McClure, Spoken Like a Woman, chapter 3, pp. 70–100.

Questions to Consider:
1. Is there any sense in which Agamemnon had a choice about whether or not to sacrifice Iphigenia?
2. Under a system of blood vengeance, is Clytaemestra justified in killing Agamemnon? Does her (and Iphigenia’s) gender make a difference in the answer to that question?
Lecture Eight

The Oresteia: Libation Bearers and Eumenides

Scope: This lecture continues our examination of The Oresteia. We consider how the major themes set up in Agamemnon—among them issues of justice, blood guilt, and conflicting moral duties—are continued through Libation Bearers and finally resolved in Eumenides. The lecture also discusses the context of Eumenides as a response to a specific set of political reforms enacted four years before The Oresteia was produced and considers precisely what kind of response the trilogy represents. Finally, the lecture looks at the way in which the gender issues raised in Agamemnon are resolved by Eumenides.

Outline

I. In the second play of the trilogy, Libation Bearers, Aeschylus develops the key themes of conflicting duties and irreconcilable claims that he began in Agamemnon.
   A. The play opens with Orestes at his father’s tomb. Unfortunately, his opening speech is damaged in the manuscript; we do not know how many lines are missing.
      1. The opening five lines survive in Aristophanes’s comedy Frogs, where they are quoted and criticized.
      2. A few other lines survive in commentaries on other authors.
      3. However, much of Orestes’s explanatory prologue is lost. It seems likely, for instance, that he mentioned Apollo’s oracle in this opening speech.
      4. As it stands now, he speaks only nine lines before seeing his sister Electra and the chorus approach and hiding to observe them.
   B. This play takes its name from its chorus, who are slave women in the palace at Argos.
      1. The chorus’s first words stress the miseries of slavery.
      2. The situation of these slave women is parallel to that of Electra, because she is, in effect, as powerless as a slave in her mother’s and Aegisthus’s house.
      3. Her hatred for her father’s murderers makes the chorus her natural allies.
      4. They advise her to pray at her father’s tomb for vengeance and Orestes’s return.
   C. At the tomb, Electra sees a lock of hair and footsteps that Orestes has left.
      1. She exclaims that the hair matches her own.
      2. She sets her feet in the footprints and finds that the shape is similar.
      3. Orestes comes out of hiding and tells her who he is.

II. After Electra and Orestes lament together and pray for their father’s aid in their vengeance, he tells her his plan: he will gain entry to the palace by claiming to be a messenger bringing news of Orestes’s death. Once inside, he will kill Aegisthus and Clytaemestra.
   A. After he explains this plan to Electra, she disappears from the play.
      1. Her main purpose here has been to strengthen Orestes’s resolve, but the story is fundamentally his, not hers.
      2. The actor who had played Electra will reenter as Clytaemestra.
   B. Clytaemestra receives the news of her son’s supposed death with few words and only a mild expression of regret, then welcomes the strangers—Orestes and Pylades—to her palace. When Aegisthus arrives, he immediately enters the palace and is killed by Orestes. Clytaemestra’s murder, however, is given more attention.
      1. When one of Aegisthus’s men tells her “He is alive, and killing the dead,” Clytaemestra realizes that the stranger is Orestes.
      2. Her intelligence and resolution have not slackened since Agamemnon; she calls for an axe to kill Orestes.
      3. When confronted with Orestes himself, however, she stresses her motherhood.
      4. In lines that without question recall the plea of the aged Queen Hecuba of Troy to her son Hector in the Iliad, Clytaemestra asks Orestes to take pity before the breast he suckled at as a baby.
III. Clytaemestra’s reassertion of her maternal role causes Orestes to hesitate but only momentarily. She then tries rhetorical skill to dissuade him, but eventually he leads her into the palace and kills her.

A. When Orestes hesitates, his companion, Pylades, reminds him that he must kill Clytaemestra.
   1. This is another of Aeschylus’s startling effects.
   2. As he did with Cassandra in *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus has led the audience to assume that Pylades is a silent character.
   3. But now, when Orestes asks “Must I kill my mother?” Pylades answers, in the only lines he speaks in the entire play.

B. Faced with Orestes’s new resolution, Clytaemestra tries to persuade him to spare her, but her rhetorical skill fails her.
   1. She refers to a dream she had, in which she nursed a snake at her breast.
   2. Orestes accepts her interpretation that he is the snake and leads her into the house to die.
   3. He does not claim that he is right to kill her, however. Instead, he says that she was wrong to kill and now must suffer wrong.

IV. Orestes displays the bodies of Clytaemestra and Aegisthus to the chorus and does, now, claim that he was right to kill them.

A. Within a few lines, however, his confidence begins to ebb away.
   1. He fears madness; he says that he is like a charioteer who has gone off track.
   2. While he still has his wits, he wants to say that he killed his mother “not without right.”
   3. Clearly the question of whether he was right or not is difficult even for Orestes to answer.
   4. He also says that he will go to Apollo as a suppliant and ask for protection.

B. Almost immediately, Orestes sees the Furies, coming to pursue him for his mother’s death.
   1. Earlier, when he described Apollo’s oracle to Electra, Orestes says that Apollo threatened him with hideous illnesses and madness if he did not avenge Agamemnon.
   2. Thus, Orestes’s dilemma is played out on the divine level, as well as in his own mind: Apollo ordered him to kill Clytemnestra, but the Furies forbid it.
   3. Pylades’s words take on a grim meaning indeed: Orestes is, by no fault of his own, in a position in which some god will be against him, no matter what he does.
   4. This situation parallels Agamemnon’s at Aulis, but on an even more horrifying level.

C. Orestes rushes out, pursued by the invisible Furies, and the chorus wonders where the Curse of the House of Atreus will end.

V. The final play of the *Oresteia* provides a reconciliation for Orestes’s torment and for the wider issues raised by the first two plays. In Aeschylus’s hands, the myth of the House of Atreus becomes a means to discuss methods of justice and the value of a court system.

A. Orestes’s dilemma, as son of both the murdered man and the murderous woman, is insoluble according to a system of individual justice; the only way out is through the invention of a new system of justice.
   1. The duty of exacting vengeance must be removed from the victim’s heirs and handed over to society in general.
   2. A court system must be inaugurated.
   3. On Apollo’s advice, Orestes goes to Athens, and Athena inaugurates just such a system.

B. Orestes appears as the first defendant on a murder charge in the first trial ever held.
   1. Apollo is, in effect, his defense lawyer; the Furies are the prosecution; and Athena serves as judge.
   2. Athena reiterates the idea of conflicting claims to justice that has run throughout the earlier plays.
   3. She appoints a jury of Athenian citizens to hear the case.

C. After Apollo and the Furies both present their arguments, the jurors vote. Two separate interpretations of how the jurors voted can be made, depending on the number of jurors.
   1. The first interpretation is that the jurors’ votes are tied; Athena’s vote breaks the tie and acquits Orestes.
   2. The second interpretation is that the number of jurors is uneven, and that they vote by one to convict Orestes; Athena’s vote thus makes the tie.
3. In actual legal practice, a tied vote amounted to an acquittal, so either way, Athena casts the deciding vote (and establishes the precedent for acquittal in case of a tie).

D. The number of jurors who vote makes a difference in interpretation.
   1. If the jurors’ votes are evenly tied, the matter is indeed utterly insoluble in human terms.
   2. If the jurors vote by one to convict Orestes, this indicates that humans, left on their own, will cleave to the old ways of blood vengeance and that Athena’s direct intervention is necessary to move from vengeance to justice in a court of law.
   3. Scholars will probably continue to disagree on this point.

E. With Orestes’s acquittal, the Curse on the House of Atreus is lifted.
   1. Orestes leaves to live a normal life.
   2. This trial and acquittal also apparently bring an end to the age of heroes; Orestes and his descendants fade into normality.

VI. Aeschylus reshapes the traditional mythic material both to describe and to demonstrate the value of the Athenian court system. More than that, his treatment of these issues is linked to a particular political development of his own day.

A. Athens in the fifth century B.C. had a system of trial by jury that had been in place at least since the early sixth century B.C.
   1. Aeschylus’s backdating of the court’s foundation is an example of what I have called the double timeframe of tragedy’s use of myth.
   2. Aeschylus and his audience were undoubtedly aware that their court system did not really stretch back to the age of heroes.

B. In Eumenides, Aeschylus situates Orestes’s trial on the Areopagus, the “hill of Ares” in Athens. On this site, an actual council met, whose power was very important in the sixth century but decreased in the fifth.
   1. In 462, just four years before the performance of The Oresteia, the powers of the Areopagus council were radically decreased.
   2. Before this time, the council had dominated most areas of Athenian government.
   3. Now its areas of authority were reduced to trying cases of homicide, arson, and malicious wounding.

C. In the Eumenides, then, Aeschylus seems to be responding to these reforms of 462.
   1. He is perhaps chiding the reformers for showing disrespect to an ancient institution.
   2. He is perhaps reminding the members of the Areopagus council that they still have a crucial role to play in Athens.

VII. Finally, in addition to the main conflict between the claims of the oikos and the claims of the polis, the shifting power between the sexes is another conflict raised throughout the trilogy. Eumenides provides a resolution here, as well.

A. The entire trilogy displays a binary system in which female and male are only one contrasting pair in a whole set of opposites.
   1. On one side are blood vengeance, irrationality, night, earth, wildness, uncontrolled anger, the ancient chthonic goddesses, and femaleness in general.
   2. On the other side are justice, reason (including logic and rhetoric), day, sky, civilization, moderation, the younger Olympian gods, and maleness in general.
   3. These oppositions come to a head in the conflict between the Furies, ancient daughters of the Night who had no father, and Apollo, the eternally young god of civilization and reason, son of the sky god Zeus.

B. This conflict of opposites comes to a head in Apollo’s famous argument that Orestes did not, in fact, kill a blood relative when he killed his mother.
   1. Apollo’s argument is that the mother is not a blood relative of her child; rather, she acts as a host, preserving the child of a guest-friend (xenos).
   2. This was a current scientific theory of Aeschylus’s day, however counterintuitive it seems.
   3. Apollo here asserts a key desire of Greek (male) culture that we shall see again: that men should be able to reproduce without women, that one half of the binary system simply did not exist.
   4. However, women do exist, and half of the jurors are not persuaded by Apollo’s argument.
VIII. In this schematization of opposites, two figures do not fit: Clytaemestra, who embodies much of the conflict of the trilogy, and Athena, who ultimately resolves it.

A. Clytaemestra in the *Agamemnon* is, in a fundamental and disturbing sense, both male and female.

B. Athena is the perfect solver of this dilemma. She is female, but her characteristics and outlook are noticeably male.
   1. As the patron goddess of Athens, she is associated with war and justice, both of which are male attributes.
   2. She is a daughter born from a father, with no mother.

C. Yet she is female, and she is able to persuade the Furies to accept their new role as guardians of Athens, or “Kindly Ones.”
   1. This resolution very firmly asserts the primacy of the male in all ways.
   2. The younger Olympian gods have won the day.
   3. However, the older chthonic goddesses do not disappear, nor are they powerless; rather, they are integrated into the system imposed by the new order.

**Essential Reading:**
Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers, Eumenides.*

**Supplementary Reading:**
Cohen, “Theodicy of Aeschylus.”
Conacher, *Oresteia.*
Goldhill, *Oresteia.*
McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman,* chapter 3, pp. 100–111.
Vidal-Naquet, “Hunting and Sacrifice.”
Zeitlin, “Corrupted Sacrifice.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Considering the implications of either a tied vote by the jurors or one in which they vote to convict Orestes, which possible interpretation do you think is more likely, given the overall tenor of *The Oresteia*?
2. Can you think of any issues raised throughout *The Oresteia* that are not addressed by the resolution at the end of *Eumenides*? Are any important questions left unanswered?
Lecture Nine
A Master of Spectacle

Scope: In this lecture, we consider Aeschylus’s stagecraft in *The Oresteia*. We discuss the use of the *skene* building, especially in *Agamemnon*; the entrance of Agamemnon and Cassandra on chariots; the famous “tapestry” scene in which Agamemnon walks into his palace on crimson cloth; the probable use of the *ekkyklema* to display the bodies of the dead in *Agamemnon* and *Libation Bearers*; and the appearance of the Furies in *Eumenides*.

Outline

I. Aeschylus was renowned in antiquity for his use of spectacular visual effects. As our only extant trilogy, *The Oresteia* is valuable to theatre historians not only for its literary and dramatic merit but also for what we can learn from it about Aeschylus’s stagecraft.

A. First and foremost, *The Oresteia* draws our attention to the *skene* building.
   1. From the earliest age of tragedy, some sort of structure probably existed in which the actors changed masks and costumes. Because *skene* means “tent,” the standard assumption is that at first it was just that.
   2. At some point, however, a permanent wooden structure, still called a *skene*, was erected at the back of the orchestra.
   3. None of Aeschylus’s earlier plays requires any kind of permanent *skene* at all.
   4. In *The Oresteia*, however, our attention is drawn to the *skene* building and its presence throughout the trilogy.
   5. It is tempting to presume that Aeschylus “invented” the wooden *skene* for this trilogy.

B. *Agamemnon* opens with the Watchman speaking from the roof of the *skene*.
   1. If a permanent *skene* had not been used before, this opening in itself would have been a startling effect.
   2. The Watchman’s speech calls attention to the “House” in several ways; not only is he physically present on the roof, but he also says that if the House could speak, it would tell horrors.

C. Throughout *Agamemnon*, the House is increasingly important. This becomes especially obvious in Cassandra’s great scene.
   1. From Cassandra’s opening lines, she calls attention to the House, asking where she is and “to what House” she has come.
   2. The House is the focal point of her most terrifying visions; she “sees” Thyestes’s murdered children sitting on it and the Furies hanging over it.
   3. She describes the House as a charnel house, a place of butchery; it is so horrifying that she can scarcely force herself to enter it.
   4. The House itself finally speaks through Cassandra; Clytemnestra’s great speech of triumph, spoken from the doorway over her victims’ bodies, repeats the same effect.

II. Aside from the *skene* building, Aeschylus also uses other remarkable visual elements. In *Agamemnon*, the most noticeable is the tapestry scene.

A. We discussed its importance in the play’s plot earlier; here I want to consider its visual effect.
   1. The word used to describe the color of the tapestries, *porphyra*, is often translated as “purple,” but is also used to describe blood and can mean “crimson.”
   2. If we assume that the tapestries here were crimson, not purple, then from the vantage point of most of the audience, it would look as though Agamemnon were wading in blood.
   3. *Agamemnon’s* walk into the house is thus a startling visual effect.

B. We do not know if the tapestries were left in place for the rest of the play or were removed after *Agamemnon’s* entrance into the house.
   1. If they were left in sight, the effect would be almost an illustration of Cassandra’s words about the house; it would look as if the house itself were bleeding.
2. On the other hand, if the tapestries had been removed, the audience would still have a strong visual image of them; Cassandra’s visions, invisible to everyone else, would clearly recall what the audience had just seen.

III. Other elements of *The Oresteia*’s staging are more controversial. One of the most important of these is the revelation of the dead bodies at the ends of both *Agamemnon* and *Libation Bearers*. How was this managed?

A. One theory is that *The Oresteia* used a device called the *ekkyklema*.
   1. The word *ekkyklema* means, literally, “rolled-out thing.” It may simply have been a wheeled trolley, or it may have been a more elaborate revolving platform of some sort.
   2. In either case, it was rolled out through the *skene* door to display interior scenes.
   3. Anything shown on the *ekkyklema* was accepted as being inside the house, palace, cave, or whatever the *skene* building represented in a particular play.
   4. Its use is well attested later in the fifth century, but not all scholars accept that it existed as early as 458.

B. If we accept that the *ekkyklema* existed at this early date, the display of bodies at the close of *Agamemnon* and *Libation Bearers* can easily be visualized.
   1. When Clytaemestra reveals the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra to the chorus, she says that she is standing where she struck them down.
   2. This statement seems to imply that the scene is meant to be visualized as still inside the palace.
   3. In *Libation Bearers*, Orestes displays the bodies of Clytaemestra and Aegisthus to the chorus.

C. If these displays were not done by means of the *ekkyklema*, then we have to ask how they were done.
   1. Modern translators usually put in some stage direction along the lines of “the palace doors open and reveal the bodies.”
   2. Such an effect would have been impossible in the ancient Greek theatre. Anything inside the *skene* building would have been invisible to almost the entire audience.
   3. The “bodies” could have simply been carried out by “extras,” but this staging would not explain Clytaemestra’s statement that she stood on the spot where she killed them.

IV. One of the most problematic staging questions in *The Oresteia* is how the Furies’ entrance in *Eumenides* was handled.

A. We know from ancient testimonia that their first appearance was electrifying to the audience, but it is hard to tell how it was staged.
   1. An ancient anecdote says that women fainted and pregnant women miscarried when the chorus of Furies first entered.
   2. This story is undoubtedly an exaggeration, but it tells us that the Furies’ appearance was horrifying and in some way unexpected.

B. The *Eumenides* opens with a speech of the Pythia, the oracular priestess of Apollo at Delphi.
   1. The prologue, spoken by the Pythia, establishes that the *skene* building now represents Apollo’s temple.
   2. After speaking the prologue, the Pythia enters the *skene* building but immediately comes back out, saying she’s seen horrors—the Furies—inside the temple.
   3. The Pythia says that they are inside the temple, sleeping on chairs around Orestes, who is seated as a suppliant at the *omphalos*, Apollo’s sacred stone.

C. At this point, the audience would almost certainly have expected the Furies to remain invisible.
   1. Cassandra’s visions in *Agamemnon* established the idea of the Furies as invisible presences, when she described them as hanging above the roof of the house.
   2. Orestes’s vision of the Furies at the end of *Libation Bearers* reiterates the idea that they are present but visible only to certain characters.
   3. This idea is seemingly confirmed by Pythia’s report of what she has seen.

D. The actual appearance of the Furies, then, was a *coup de theatre* worthy of Aeschylus’s reputation for spectacular effects. But when and how exactly did they appear?
   1. They must appear sometime after the Pythia’s report of seeing them.
   2. After the Pythia’s speech, Apollo and Orestes enter, speak to one another, then leave; Apollo refers to the Furies in terms that imply that they are visible, but asleep, at this point.
3. The ghost of Clytaemestra then appears and starts to rouse the Furies.
4. The Furies mumble and mutter during her speech but seem mainly to be still asleep.
5. Once Clytaemestra’s ghost disappears, the Furies begin their parados.

V. The main problem of staging is, how can the Furies be visible but asleep? The text seems to indicate that they appear at the same time as Apollo, Orestes, and Hermes.

A. Scholars often suggest that they first appear on the ekkyklema.
   1. The ekkyklema would have to be remarkably large, however, to hold three actors and twelve sleeping Furies.
   2. Apollo, Orestes, and Hermes could enter first, then the ekkyklema could be thrust out after them; but even so, it seems unlikely that the ekkyklema would have room for twelve Furies.

B. Another possibility is that the Furies simply enter quietly and lie down and that the audience accepts this convention and, in effect, agrees not to notice the entrance.
   1. This staging would allow Apollo, Orestes, and Hermes to appear on the ekkyklema and establish that the scene is still inside Apollo’s temple.
   2. This “cancelled entry” of the Furies, however, does not match the testimony about how horrifying their first appearance was; if the audience had already seen their masks and costumes, then much of the effect would be lost when they stood up and began their parados.

C. My own theory is that two or three Furies appeared on the ekkyklema with Apollo, Orestes, and Hermes.
   1. The few Furies on the ekkyklema could be lying down and “asleep,” which would keep the details of their costuming from being visible.
   2. These few could begin to move and stir during Clytaemestra’s speech.
   3. The other Furies, still inside the skene building, could join in the muttered responses to Clytaemestra’s words.
   4. Finally, after Clytaemestra’s exit, the Furies on the ekkyklema could stand up as the others came pouring out through the skene door to begin the parodos.
   5. This arrangement would be spectacular: what had at first appeared to be merely a pile of rags around Orestes would be revealed as a terrifying chorus matching the Pythia’s description.

VI. All these elements of staging support the ancient view of Aeschylus as particularly skilled in visual spectacle. They also perhaps point to a very generous choregos in 458 B.C.

A. In the fifth-century Theatre of Dionysus, the imaginative use of the skene building, the tapestries, and the horrifying Eumenides would all have been startling and compelling effects.

B. The Oresteia also shows abundant evidence of lavish financing.
   1. Agamemnon and Cassandra enter on a chariot, which would have to be pulled by horses.
   2. Eumenides has at least two, and perhaps three, full choruses: the chorus of the Furies, the Athenian citizens who make up the jury, and the women who lead the final procession.
   3. It seems fairly clear that Aeschylus was fortunate enough to have a generous and enthusiastic choregos in 458.

Supplementary Reading:
Rosenmeyer, Art of Aeschylus, chapter 3.

Questions to Consider:
1. It is tempting to think that The Oresteia must have been the first trilogy to require a permanent, fixed skene building and that this is why so much attention is called to the “House” in Agamemnon. Do you think this inference is valid? Why or why not?
2. Some scholars doubt the use of the ekkyklema as early as 458 B.C. Can you think of any other effective way to stage the scenes discussed above, particularly the first appearance of the Furies?
Lecture Ten
The Three Electras

Scope: This lecture introduces the two other great tragedians, Sophocles and Euripides, by looking at each tragedian’s play Electra. The lecture compares the treatment of Electra’s and Orestes’s vengeance against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus with the treatment in Libation Bearers.

Outline

I. We are exceedingly fortunate to possess the three great tragedians’ treatments of the same episode from the story of Orestes, in Aeschylus’s Libation Bearers, Sophocles’s Electra, and Euripides’s Electra.
   A. In these three plays, each tragedian recounts the same basic events.
      1. Orestes returns to Argos some years after the murder of Agamemnon, having sought the advice of Apollo’s oracle at Delphi about his duty to avenge his father.
      2. He and his sister Electra have an emotional reunion.
      3. With Electra’s encouragement, Orestes kills Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.
   B. A comparison of the way the three dramatists develop this basic narrative offers a useful introduction to Sophocles and Euripides and gives us insight into just how malleable the mythic “story lines” of tragedy were.

II. In Aeschylus’s Libation Bearers, the stress is on Orestes’s position as a son caught between the irreconcilable duties to his father and his mother; in Sophocles’s and Euripides’s plays, the focus is much more on Electra than on Orestes.
   A. The main purpose of Libation Bearers seems to be to set up the dilemma that must be resolved in Eumenides.
      1. Electra is a secondary character, who disappears halfway through the play.
      2. At the crucial moment, it is Pylades, not Electra, who steels Orestes’s nerve to kill Clytemnestra.
      3. We do not see Electra’s reaction to the murders.
      4. All of these points help to focus our attention on Orestes’s reaction and his immediate vision of the Furies.
   B. Sophocles’s and Euripides’s plays are each named Electra, and the name seems just; Electra and her reactions are the main point of interest in these plays, and Orestes is important mainly for his influence on Electra.
      1. Unfortunately, we do not know which of these two plays was written first.
      2. Euripides’s Electra has been very plausibly dated to between 415–413 B.C., from what seems to be a reference to Athens’s military expedition against Sicily in those years.
      3. We have no internal clues at all to help us date Sophocles’s play.
   C. Most scholars assume that Sophocles’s Electra predates Euripides’s.
      1. Thus, Euripides’s play can be read as a response both to Aeschylus’s and to Sophocles’s treatments of the same episode.
      2. However, some scholars take precisely the opposite view.
   D. Whichever of these two plays came first, they could hardly be more different in tone and overall presentation.
      1. In Sophocles’s play, Electra is a brooding, obsessed woman in middle age, whose entire life is focused on revenge against her mother.
      2. In Euripides’s version, Electra is a spoiled, self-indulgent young woman whose life is really not as unpleasant as she makes it out to be.

III. Sophocles’s play opens with the arrival of Orestes, Pylades, and Orestes’s old servant at the palace of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.
   A. As in Libation Bearers, they plan to gain access to the palace by pretending that Orestes is dead.
      1. They have brought an urn with them that they will say contains Orestes’s ashes.
      2. Before setting their plan into action, however, they go to leave offerings on Agamemnon’s grave.
B. We first see Electra in a scene in which she laments both her dead father and her own miserable life, saying that she is unmarried and past the age of childbearing.
   1. In her interactions with others, whether the chorus, her mother, or her sister Chrysothemis, Electra is incapable of moderating either her grief for her father or her hatred for her mother.
   2. Chrysothemis, who was apparently invented by Sophocles, advises Electra to stop complaining or Aegisthus will imprison her.

C. The announcement of Orestes’ supposed death only increases Electra’s obsession with vengeance.
   1. In Libation Bearers, Orestes himself gave the news of his “death” to his mother.
   2. In Sophocles’s version, the servant brings the news in a detailed description of Orestes’s death in a chariot race.
   3. This speech is the only one from a lying messenger in extant tragedy.
   4. Electra tells her sister Chrysothemis that the two of them must now avenge their father. When Chrysothemis recoils from such an idea, Electra declares that she will kill Aegisthus alone.

IV. One of the most remarkable scenes in the play occurs when Orestes and Pylades bring in the urn that supposedly holds Orestes’s ashes.

A. Electra takes the urn and laments over it.
   1. This is the first of several scenes in which we see Sophocles use a prop to remarkable effect.
   2. The image of a woman mourning desperately over an urn that we know is empty is vivid and powerful.

B. When the chorus addresses Electra by name, Orestes realizes who she is; he pities his sister’s sorrow and tells her who he is. After a joyful reunion, the old servant warns them that the time to act is now, while Clytemnestra is alone.
   1. During the murder of Clytemnestra, Electra remains in the orchestra, listening.
   2. Clytemnestra screams for mercy, and Electra gives one of the most chilling lines in tragedy: “If you have strength, stab again!”
   3. Orestes and Pylades come to report that Clytemnestra is dead, and sister and brother exchange a few words. She asks him how things stand, and he says that all is well if Apollo prophesied well.
   4. At this point, Aegisthus is seen approaching, and Orestes and Pylades retreat into the palace.

C. Aegisthus has heard news of Orestes’s death and wants to see his body.
   1. A shrouded body is displayed on the ekkyklema; when Aegisthus lifts the shroud, he sees that it is Clytemnestra.
   2. Orestes leads Aegisthus into the house to die where Agamemnon died, and the play ends with the chorus singing that the descendants of Atreus have finally reached freedom.

V. This play is remarkable in many ways, both for what it leaves out and for what it changes.

A. This version has no Furies and no indication that Orestes feels any remorse.
   1. This is the only version of the three in which Clytemnestra is killed before Aegisthus; in other versions of the story, the Furies attack Orestes almost immediately after he kills his mother.
   2. The play ends before the death of Aegisthus.
   3. Thus, the chorus’s final lines are in fact premature; Aegisthus is not yet dead, and the end of the play leaves a strong sense of lack of fulfillment.

B. The question of whether the oracle of Apollo sanctioned the murders is unclear.
   1. In his opening speech, Orestes says that he went to Delphi to ask how he could avenge his father’s murder, not to ask if he should avenge it.
   2. Apollo told him that he should proceed alone and by stealth.
   3. In tragedy and elsewhere, we see many instances of the oracle answering precisely the question that it is asked, but later stating that such an answer did not imply approval.
   4. Nowhere does the play state that Apollo definitely approved of the vengeance.

C. Scholars are deeply divided on how we should take this play.
   1. Some read it as a straightforward expression of praise for Orestes’s vengeance.
   2. Others see it as a horrifying evocation of the complete degeneration of Electra’s personality caused by her years of powerless brooding.
D. The critical disagreement can be encapsulated in one line of the chorus.
   1. When Orestes comes out of the palace after killing Clytemnestra, the chorus responds by saying either
      ouk echo psegein, or ouk echo legein.
   2. The first of these readings is the one that almost all editors print, which translates as “I cannot
      blame”—presumably Orestes, or the deed of murder.
   3. The second reading translates “I cannot speak.”
   4. The difference in Greek is only one letter, and the letters in question, lambda and psi, are very easy to
      confuse with each another in manuscript.
   5. The reading legein (speak) is in all the manuscripts of the play; psegein (blame) is a scholar’s
      emendation.
   6. The grounds for this emendation are basically interpretative; those who accept it think that the sense of
      the play demands that the chorus approve of the murders.
   7. We should at least consider, however, that the chorus is at a loss for words and that Sophocles meant
      us to see that Orestes and Electra had no good course of action.

VI. Euripides’s play could hardly be more different, either from that of Aeschylus or Sophocles. Euripides makes
several critical changes in the setting and the characters’ situations and personalities.
A. In Euripides’s play, Electra is married to a peasant who lives some distance from the city. Clytemnestra
   and Aegisthus arranged this marriage for her so that her children would not be noble.
   1. The play opens with the peasant speaking the prologue. Among other things, he explains that Electra is
      still a virgin, because he has not thought it right to force himself upon her.
   2. When Electra herself appears, she is dressed as a servant, her head is shaved (so Orestes says), and she
      is carrying a water jar on her head. Her husband immediately reminds her that he does not require her
      to work; she insists on doing so.
   3. If Euripides’s play was written after Sophocles’s, this water jug may be a visual reference to the empty
      urn.
B. The recognition scene between Orestes and Electra is justly famous for its parody of Aeschylus’s Libation
Bearers.
   1. The first thing to notice is that the recognition scene is one-sided; Orestes overheard Electra’s words to
      the peasant and the chorus and knows who she is.
   2. However, he delays telling her, even after her husband has invited him and Pylades to dinner.
   3. The truth is hinted at by an old serving man who comes from the palace to bring Electra a lamb.
   4. He tells her that he saw a lock of hair and footprints that must be Orestes’s, but she heaps scorn on the
      idea that these could be recognizable.
   5. In fact, the old man recognizes Orestes by a scar on his brow.

VII. In his presentation of the murders, Euripides also works against our expectations.
A. As reported in a messenger speech, Orestes finds Aegisthus in the countryside offering sacrifice.
   1. Aegisthus greets him cordially and kindly, in terms that recall Homeric xenia.
   2. Orestes kills Aegisthus by stabbing him in the back, literally, as Aegisthus bends over the sacrificial
      animal to read the omens.
B. Clytemnestra is persuaded to come visit Electra by a lying message saying that Electra has given birth.
C. Both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are presented as decent people; Orestes and Electra seem treacherous and
   deceitful.
   1. Orestes hesitates before killing Clytemnestra, as he watches her approach.
   2. Electra urges him on, and he goes into the house to wait for Clytemnestra’s approach.
   3. Electra sends her mother in and goes after her; only the chorus remains in the orchestra to hear
      Clytemnestra cry out from inside the house.
D. Orestes and Electra are stricken with remorse almost immediately.

VIII. The most surprising element of all in Euripides’s Electra comes at the very end of the play, where the divine
brothers of Helen and Clytemnestra, the Dioscuri, appear and foretell what will happen to Orestes and Electra.
A. These two gods almost definitely were “flown” in on the mechane, or crane.
1. The *mechane* probably stood behind the *skene* building and was able to swing an actor playing a god out over the roof of the *skene*, where it then deposited him.

2. This flying-in of two actors is unusual, but we know that the *mechane* could support large props (such as Pegasus), so it could also be modified to support two actors.

3. Euripides was particularly famous for using the *mechane* at the end of his tragedies, to bring in a god who would resolve the conflicting issues of the play. This is the origin of the term “*deus ex machina* ending.”

B. Here, the Dioscuri not only tell Orestes and Electra what they must do next, but also impart some very surprising information.

   1. They tell Orestes that the Furies will pursue him and that he must stand trial in Athens.
   2. They tell him to give Electra to Pylades as his wife.
   3. They say that the murders were justice, but Orestes has not acted justly.
   4. Furthermore, they say that Apollo knows the truth, but his oracles were lies.
   5. Most surprisingly of all, they say that Helen never went to Troy; only an image of her did.

C. Euripides did not invent this last point; a variant tradition of the Trojan War story said precisely that.

IX. These two plays have introduced us to some of the overall characteristics of these two tragedians as we shall see them in the rest of the plays we study.

   A. Euripides tends to treat his traditional stories in very surprising and disconcerting ways.

   B. If Euripides tends to undercut the traditional stories, Sophocles changes their emphasis to focus our attention on his main characters, who are invariably isolated, implacable, even obsessed.

**Essential Reading:**
Euripides, *Electra*.
Sophocles, *Electra*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Segal, “Tragedy, Corporeality, and the Texture of Language.”
Winnington-Ingram, “The *Electra* of Sophocles.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Is Sophocles’s Electra supposed to be admirable, horrifying--or both?
2. What are some other ways in which Sophocles and Euripides remold the story of Electra as told by Aeschylus?
Lecture Eleven
The Sophoclean Hero

Scope: This lecture continues our examination of Sophocles, the second great tragedian. We summarize what we know about his life, discuss his possible contributions to stagecraft, then examine the often-made statement that Sophocles’s heroes are notable for their extreme isolation.

Outline

I. Sophocles, the second of the three great tragedians, was born in 496 B.C. and died in 406. We know more about his life than we do about Aeschylus’s, though the reliability of some of the details is questionable.
   A. He held several important positions in Athenian political life.
      1. He was one of the Treasurers of Athena in 443–442.
      2. He was a general (one of the others was Pericles) in 441/440. At this time, the island of Samos was rebelling against Athenian authority.
      3. He was one of ten advisers appointed to deal with Athens’s crisis after the defeat of her expedition against Sicily in 413.
   B. Sophocles was also active in religious life.
      1. He was a priest of a local hero, Halon.
      2. When the cult of the healing god Asclepius was introduced into Athens, Sophocles housed the snake that symbolized the god in his own house while the god’s sanctuary was being constructed.
      3. Because of his service to Asclepius, Sophocles was revered as a hero after his death (that is, a spirit who could help the living). He received sacrifices under the new name “Dexion,” the Receiver.
   C. Our sources also contain references to his friendships with various other important literary figures of fifth-century Athens.

II. Sophocles first competed at the City Dionysia in 468 B.C. and last entered the competition in 406, shortly before his death. During this long career, he wrote 123 plays.
   A. Sophocles won at least twenty victories and perhaps more. Unfortunately, only seven of his plays have survived.
      1. This lack of extant work is even more of a handicap in our assessment of Sophocles than it is in our assessment of Aeschylus.
      2. Because Sophocles wrote more plays than Aeschylus, we have an even smaller percentage of his work.
      3. Most of the plays cannot be securely dated, which means that making any statements at all about the development of Sophocles’s style or about contemporary events is difficult.
   B. Sophocles seems to have abandoned the trilogy form and, instead, entered plays that were only loosely, if at all, connected to one another.
      1. A common mistaken assumption is that Oedipus the King, Antigone, and Oedipus at Colonus were presented at one time as a unified trilogy.
      2. In fact, these plays were written a good many years apart.
      3. Because he did not write unified trilogies, we are on firmer ground discussing Sophocles’s plays as self-contained works than we were with Aeschylus.
   C. According to Aristotle, Sophocles was responsible for two very important innovations.
      1. He introduced the third actor, who became standard in all later tragedy.
      2. He is also credited with inventing skenographia.
      3. Whatever this was, it and the introduction of the third actor are evidence that the possibilities for significant innovation still existed when Sophocles began writing.
III. Almost anyone who has ever read them will agree that Sophocles’s plays are very different from Aeschylus’s. The difference has often been summed up by saying that Sophocles concentrates attention on the individual, typically characterized by a kind of heroic or splendid isolation. In short, as the great critic Bernard Knox put it, Sophocles invented the “tragic hero.”

A. Of Sophocles’s seven plays, only one is named for its chorus; the rest take their names from their protagonists. Knox points out that the plots of these six plays all fit a basic pattern.
   1. The circumstances differ, but in each case, the main character is faced with a crisis in which disaster can only be averted by a compromise that, in the protagonist’s view, would constitute betrayal of something that he or she holds to be supremely important.
   2. The protagonist refuses to compromise, despite being urged to by persuasive speeches, threats, actual violence, or all three.
   3. The end result is usually his or her destruction.

B. In all six of these plays, the protagonist is referred to as deinos, a Greek word that means “terrible, wondrous, strange.”
   1. The protagonists are often paired with another character who is more normal, more like an everyday person.
   2. This second character often pleads with the protagonist to yield and is harshly rebuffed.
   3. These protagonists are indeed deinos: they are both repellent and admirable.

C. The isolated protagonist is not the only important characteristic of Sophocles’s tragedies; equally obvious is the almost total absence of the gods.
   1. With the exception of Athena in Ajax, the gods do not appear as characters in Sophocles’s plays.
   2. Instead, the characters must try to determine the will of the gods through omens, prophecies, and oracles, which are often ambiguous or unclear.
   3. Clearly, this situation serves to underscore the isolation of the characters.

IV. Most scholars think that Ajax is Sophocles’s earliest extant play, probably dating to some time in the 440s. In it, Sophocles dramatizes the story of Ajax’s suicide.

A. The background story is quite simple.
   1. Ajax was the second greatest Greek warrior in the Trojan War; the only greater fighter was Achilles.
   2. After Achilles’s death, the Greeks voted to decide who should be awarded his armor.
   3. The two contestants were Ajax and Odysseus.
   4. The armor was awarded to Odysseus, and Ajax committed suicide.

B. Sophocles focuses on Ajax’s reaction to the loss of the armor.
   1. In Sophocles’s treatment, Ajax is driven mad by the goddess Athena.
   2. In his madness, he slaughters sheep, thinking they are his fellow Greek soldiers, and captures other sheep.

V. Ajax is unique among Sophocles’s surviving plays in featuring a goddess, Athena, as a character.

A. As the play opens, Athena tells Odysseus that it is she who drove Ajax mad.
B. Athena’s role as Odysseus’s protector and patron derives from the Odyssey.
C. However, there seems to be no precedent for her driving Ajax mad elsewhere.
D. Furthermore, she brings Ajax out of his tent while he is still mad, so that she may mock him in front of Odysseus and goad him into boasting of his prowess.
E. The one appearance of an Olympian deity in Sophocles’s extant plays is a profoundly disturbing one.

VI. When Ajax returns to his senses, he is overcome with shame at his folly in killing the sheep. Despite the pleas of his wife, Tecmessa, he decides to kill himself.

A. It is noteworthy that neither he nor anyone else ever calls into question his desire to murder all his fellow soldiers over Achilles’s armor.
   1. In other versions of Ajax’s story, he did not go mad but killed himself immediately after the contest over the armor, out of shame at losing to Odysseus.
   2. In Sophocles’s play, however, the main impetus for Ajax’s shame is that he failed in his attempt at revenge and killed only animals; shame at losing the armor is secondary.
B. His character is marked by fierceness and emotional coldness; he is unresponsive to the pleas of his wife that he should think of her and their little son and not kill himself.
   1. Ajax clearly operates by the Homeric code of action in which insults require bloody vengeance and death is preferable to shame.
   2. In contrast, Odysseus adheres to a more modern worldview that allows for compromise.
   3. Odysseus feels pity for Ajax when Athena displays him, even though Ajax is his enemy.
   4. Thus, Athena, though Odysseus’s patron, shares her Homeric moral framework (in which rejoicing over an enemy’s shame and mocking him are perfectly acceptable) with Ajax.

C. Although Ajax remains a troubling figure to modern audiences, in the play, he is spoken of with love and reverence, not only by his wife but also by the chorus and by his brother Teucer.
   1. These characters see him as their protector and their strength.
   2. Remember the significance of Salamis (480 B.C.) for the Greek victory in the Persian Wars; it was reported that Ajax, who was revered as a hero on Salamis, had helped win that victory.
   3. Part of his protective power as a hero was derived from the fact that he had lived in the age of the Trojan War.
   4. The very disjunction that troubles modern audiences between the heroic code of Ajax and the more modern code of Odysseus may have endowed Ajax with a kind of archaic grandeur in the original audience’s eyes.

D. Ajax kills himself little more than halfway through the play, after making a long and deceptive speech to Tecmessa and the chorus that implies that he will not commit suicide. The rest of the play is taken up with the question of whether or not to bury him honorably.

VII. For the theatre historian, the most fascinating thing about Ajax is its stagecraft.

A. When Ajax recovers his senses, he is first heard groaning from inside the skene. Then he is revealed, almost definitely on the ekkyklema.

B. This play also includes one of the most surprising and controversial scenes in all extant tragedy: Ajax’s suicide.
   1. The suicide is introduced by a change of scene, analogous to the one in Eumenides.
   2. Ajax clearly describes what he is doing; he says that he plants his sword in the ground, then falls on it.
   3. How this action would have been managed is unclear.
   4. The situation is even more complicated when we realize that his body must be visible throughout the second half of the play—but three speaking actors are also needed in the rest of the play, so the actor playing Ajax cannot have remained “dead” in the orchestra.

C. We will probably never know exactly how Sophocles managed Ajax’s suicide, the presence of the body, and the absence of the actor. However, the text has some clues that may be helpful.
   1. The chorus and Tecmessa both look for Ajax after his suicide. The fact that they do not immediately find him may indicate that his body is somehow obscured.
   2. When Tecmessa finds him, she says that he is behind a copse or thicket. It is possible that there was some indication of bushes, behind which the actor playing Ajax fell.
   3. If the body was indeed only partially visible, or not visible at all, the actor may have slipped away and a dummy (or a silent actor) may have been substituted.
   4. Another possibility is that the chorus’s dancing would have provided enough screening for the actor to leave the orchestra, allowing a substitution to be made.

D. One theory frequently put forward is that Ajax killed himself on the ekkyklema, which would be withdrawn and then reappear for Tecmessa to discover. Some critics demur. In any case, Ajax should remind us that there is a great deal we do not know about the staging of Greek tragedy and that some often-repeated statements, such as that violence always happens offstage, are simply incorrect.

Essential Reading:
Sophocles, Ajax.

Supplementary Reading:
Blundell, Helping Friends, chapter 3.

Reinhardt, “*Ajax*.”

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Can you think of any other ways that Ajax’s suicide might have been staged?

2. What effect do you think Sophocles achieved by concentrating on Ajax’s shame over his madness and his slaughter of the animals as his reason for suicide?
Lecture Twelve
Antigone and Creon

Scope: In this lecture, we look at one of Sophocles’s most famous plays, Antigone. Though the action of this play takes place after the action of Oedipus the King, Antigone was written first; therefore, we will consider it first.

Outline
I. Antigone is conventionally dated to 441 B.C. and, thus, is considered to be the second of Sophocles’s extant plays.
   A. Many people read Sophocles’s “Theban” plays in the order of their stories; that is, Oedipus the King, then Oedipus at Colonus, then Antigone.
      1. Although this sequence makes sense of the story’s chronology, it makes little sense for our understanding of Sophocles or of the plays as plays.
      2. If the dating of Antigone is correct, Sophocles wrote Oedipus the King some twelve years later and Oedipus at Colonus, twenty-three years later still.
   B. Antigone represents Sophocles’s first thoughts on the story of Oedipus and his family, and it makes sense to consider this play first.
II. Many Greek tragedies are set in Thebes: not just Sophocles’s three “Theban” plays, but many (extant and lost) by Aeschylus and Euripides as well. What does Thebes represent in tragedy?
   A. Froma Zeitlin has suggested that Thebes functions as an “anti-Athens.”
      1. Thebes in tragedy is a city where resolution is impossible.
      2. The conflicts and impasses that characterize tragedy are pushed to their limits in Theban stories.
   B. Antigone is a good illustration of both civic and familial impasses.
III. The action of Antigone takes place after the war described in Aeschylus’s Seven against Thebes.
   A. The two sons of Oedipus’s incestuous marriage, Eteocles and Polyneices, have just killed each other in single combat.
      1. Their uncle, Creon, who is now regent of the city, has decreed that Eteocles will be buried with full honor.
      2. Polyneices’s body will be left unburied, and the penalty is death for anyone who tries to bury him.
      3. This punishment is terrible for Polyneices, because when a body was unburied, the soul could not enter Tartaros.
   B. Antigone, Oedipus’s daughter, resolves to bury her brother despite the penalty.
      1. The play opens with Antigone asking her sister Ismene to help her.
      2. Like Chrysothemis in Electra, Ismene sympathizes but advises obedience to the decree.
      3. Like Electra, Antigone resolves to do what she must alone.
   C. The outcome is predictable. Antigone is caught burying her brother’s body, brought before Creon, and condemned to die.
      1. The plot is complicated by the fact that Antigone is the fiancée of Creon’s son Haemon, who pleads with his father to be merciful.
      2. Creon eventually relents, not because of his son’s pleadings but because the prophet Teiresias tells him that he was wrong and gives evidence that the gods are angry at Creon.
      3. However, Creon changes his mind too late. Antigone has hanged herself in the cave, Haemon kills himself, and when Creon’s wife hears of Haemon’s death, she too commits suicide.
IV. The play is much more than this bare sketch would indicate. The conflict between Creon and Antigone is not a matter of one being absolutely right and the other, absolutely wrong; much can be said for and against each side.
   A. The conflict between Antigone and Creon epitomizes the conflict between the claims of the oikos and the claims of the polis.
1. Antigone believes, and says clearly, that her loyalty to her immediate family—her oikos—must override all other claims.
2. In this, she is following the expected allegiances of a woman but pushing them to an extreme.
3. Creon believes, and says clearly, that his loyalty to his polis and his duty as its ruler must override all other claims.
4. In this, he is following the expected allegiances of a man but pushing them to an extreme.

B. Antigone undervalues her duty to her polis and its ruler; Creon undervalues his duty to his oikos.
1. Yet the categories oikos and polis are confused here.
2. Creon is Antigone’s uncle, as well as her king; Antigone is Creon’s niece and future daughter-in-law, as well as his subject.

C. Creon is often read as an out-and-out villain, but this characterization is unfair and trivializes the entire play.
1. As king, his primary duty is to protect his city. Polyneices has attacked his own city and caused a civil war.
2. Creon’s edict is meant to display the absolutely abhorrent nature of such an act and to deter others.
3. Creon demands that everyone obey his edict, because it is the law.
4. In the play itself, Creon’s right to rule is not questioned. He is the lawful ruler of his city, and his edicts are law.

D. The play is also trivialized by readings that see Antigone as unambiguously admirable.
1. To the original audience, she would have been a very uncomfortable figure indeed.
2. She is a young unmarried girl (probably about fourteen years old) who is defying the head of her household.
3. A citizen, she defies the law; a woman, she defies a male.
4. She holds herself bound by the gods’ laws, not Creon’s.

E. Antigone can be seen as the first drama on the topic of civil disobedience.
1. Creon thinks that the law must be obeyed, whether an individual agrees with it or not.
2. Antigone thinks that her individual understanding of the gods’ laws supercedes human law.
3. Both of these stances have much to be said for them; both are dangerous if pushed to extremes.
4. The extreme of Creon’s position is totalitarianism; the extreme of Antigone’s is anarchy.
5. Finding a balance between them is no less a problem for democracy now than it was for demokratia in the fifth century B.C.

V. Right and wrong exist on both sides, but the play clarifies which way the balance falls.
A. Creon realizes that he was wrong when the seer Teiresias tells him that the gods are refusing to accept sacrifices because Creon has confused the world of the living and the dead.
1. He has left a dead man unburied and has shut the living Antigone up in a cave.
2. Creon’s crucial mistake was to forget the limitations of human power. As king, he can pass edicts about all matters under human control, but the burial of the dead is a divine, not a human, law.
3. Antigone was correct when she told him that his authority did not extend to such matters.
B. Not only does Teiresias tell Creon that he is wrong, but the people also back Antigone, as does Haemon.
1. The fact that she is right in her estimation of the relative power of human and divine law does not make her less disturbing.
2. The chorus is clearly uncomfortable with her.
3. The fact that Creon is in many ways more understandable and more human than Antigone underscores the difficulty of discerning the balance between conflicting areas of duty.

VI. The play’s demonstration that the gods’ laws are paramount and that human power is limited would have had immediate relevance to Sophocles’s audience. These questions were hotly debated at the time, especially by a controversial group of thinkers called the Sophists.
A. The Sophists were a group of itinerant teachers who specialized in teaching rhetoric and techniques of argumentation.
1. They also espoused a naturalistic view of morality and religion and questioned the universal validity of morals.
2. The most famous Sophist was Protagoras, best remembered for his dictum “man is the measure of all things.”
3. Protagoras is also reported to have taught that moral beliefs are true for the communities in which they are held.
4. The Sophists questioned the validity of oracles, which implies questioning the existence or relevance of the gods.
5. Their opponents accused them of corrupting morals and weakening religious beliefs.

B. The controversy over Sophism is relevant both to our understanding of Antigone’s and Creon’s positions and to one of the most famous choral odes of all tragedy, the so-called “Ode to Man.”
1. This ode is often taken out of context and anthologized as Sophocles’s celebration of humanism and humanistic values, but read in the context of the play, the ode seems much less positive.
2. First, the word translated “wonders” is deinos, which already gives a negative slant to the ode.
3. Many of the skills for which the chorus praises man, such as shipbuilding, are themselves ambiguous.
4. The chorus points out that all of human cleverness has not found an escape from death.

C. Seen in context, then, the “Ode to Man” is not a celebration of humanism but, if anything, a reminder of the limitations of the humanism of the Sophists and of its failing points.

Essential Reading:
Sophocles, Antigone.

Supplementary Reading:
Segal, “Sophocles’ Praise of Man and the Conflicts of the Antigone.”

Questions to Consider:
1. What cultural factors do you think account for the chorus’s unease with Antigone as opposed to the modern tendency to glorify her?
2. Similarly, modern productions often cast Creon as a stereotypical villain. To what extent do you think twentieth-century experiences of totalitarianism account for this characterization?
Timeline

c. 1184 ............................................ The most commonly accepted traditional date for the Fall of Troy.
c. 1100–c. 776 ................................ The “Dark Ages” in Greece; 776, the traditional ending date of the Dark Ages, is the traditional date of the first Olympic Games.
c. 800?–780?.................................. The alphabet introduced into Greece.
c. 750?–700?.................................. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are perhaps transcribed into writing.
546–527 ....................................... Tyranny of Peisistratus.
534 ............................................. Date usually given for Thespis’s first victory with tragedy at the City Dionysia.
c. 525 ........................................... Birth of Aeschylus.
510 ............................................. Hippias goes into exile.
508 ............................................. Cleisthenes’s reforms.
Early fifth century ......................... Construction of theatre at Thorikos.
496 ............................................. Birth of Sophocles.
494 ............................................. Persians sack Miletus (in Ionia).
493/2 .......................................... Phrynichus’s *Sack of Miletus*.
490 ............................................. The first Persian War; battle of Marathon.
486 ............................................. Comedy added to the City Dionysia.
484 ............................................. Aeschylus’s first victory.
480 ............................................. Second Persian War; battles of Thermopylae and Salamis. Birth of Euripides.
479 ............................................. Decisive defeat of the Persians at the Battle of Plataea.
472 ............................................. Aeschylus wins victory with trilogy including *Persians*.
468 ............................................. Sophocles’s first victory.
467 ............................................. Aeschylus wins victory with trilogy including *Seven against Thebes*.
462 ............................................. Reform of the Areopagus in Athens.
c. 460 (?) ...................................... Aeschylus wins victory with *Suppliant Maidens*.
458 ............................................. Aeschylus wins victory with *The Oresteia*.
456 ............................................. Death of Aeschylus.
455 ............................................. Euripides’s first entry in the City Dionysia.
449 ............................................. Institution of prize for best actor.
c. 460–445 .................................... Birth of Aristophanes (author of *Acharnians*, *Thesmophoriazuse*, *Frogs*, and others).
?442 .......................................... Performance of Sophocles’s *Antigone*.
441 ............................................. Euripides’s first victory.
438 ............................................. Euripides’s *Alcestis* wins second prize as “proto-satyr” play following trilogy.
431 ............................................. Euripides wins third prize with trilogy including *Medea*.
431–405 ...................................... The Peloponnesian War (between Sparta and Athens and their respective allies).
430 ............................................. Outbreak of plague in Athens.
Probable date of performance of Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King*. Death of Pericles.

Euripides wins victory with trilogy including *Hippolytus*.

Performance of Euripides’s *Andromache*.

Performance of Aristophanes’s *Acharnians*.

Performance of Euripides’s *Hecuba*.

Performance of Euripides’s *Suppliant Maidens*.

Euripides wins second prize with trilogy including *Trojan Women*.

Sicilian expedition.

Performance of Euripides’s *Heraclès*.

Performance of Euripides’s *Iphigenia among the Taurians*. Performance of Euripides’s *Electra*.

Performance of Euripides’s *Helen*.

Performance of Aristophanes’s *Thesmophoriazusae*. Overthrow of democracy; temporary government by oligarchs (the “Four Hundred”).

Performance of Euripides’s *Ion*.

Euripides’s last entry in the City Dionysia; probably included *Orestes*.

Battle of Arginusae. Deaths of Sophocles and Euripides.

Posthumous performance of Euripides’s *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Bacchae*. Performance of Aristophanes’s *Frogs*.

Peace declared between Athens and Sparta, ending the Peloponnesian War. Athens ruled by Thirty Tyrants.

Democracy restored in Athens.

Posthumous performance of Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*.

The execution of Socrates.

Introduction of “Old Tragedy” at City Dionysia.

Death of Aristophanes.

Plato’s *Republic*.

Construction of theatre at Epidauros.

Aristotle writes *Poetics*.

Livius Andronicus writes the first Latin tragedies and comedies.

Naevius adapts Greek tragedies into Latin.

Seneca writes Latin tragedies adapted from Greek originals.

The *Teatro Olimpico* in Vicenza, Italy, opens with a production of *Oedipus the King*.

Racine’s *Phèdre*.

Nietzsche publishes *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*. 

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1913 ................................................ Freud publishes *Totem and Taboo*, which defines the Oedipus myth as a memory of an actual occurrence in the “primal horde.”

1927 ................................................ Murray’s “Excursus on Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy.”

1931 ................................................ O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

1983 ................................................ Telson’s and Breuer’s *The Gospel at Colonus*.

1994 ................................................ Dove’s *The Darker Face of the Earth*.

2000 ................................................ Barton’s *Tantalus*.
Glossary

aetiological myths: Myths that provide an explanation (“aetiology”) for how something came into existence. The myth of Persephone is an aetiology for the existence of the seasons.

agon: In athletics or war, a contest or struggle; in debate, an argument. The term is often used to refer to scenes in tragedy in which the exchange of speeches breaks down into stichomythia debating some vital point.

anagnorisis: According to Aristotle, the crucial moment of recognition in a tragedy.

anthropomorphism: The representation of non-human entities in human form and with human emotions.

archon (pl. archontes): The chief magistrates of Athens, who held office for one year. There were three main archontes: the archon basileus had mainly ritual and religious duties; the archon eponymous was in effect the head of state, and the year was referred to by his name (e.g., “in the archonship of Pericles”); the polemarch was in charge of the army. The dramatic performances at the City Dionysia were overseen by the eponymous archon, not by the archon basileus.

Areopagos: The “Hill of Ares” in Athens; meeting site of the Areopagos council, whose powers were restricted in 462 B.C. to hearing cases of murder, arson, and malicious wounding. In Aeschylus’s Eumenides, it is the site of Orestes’s trial for the murder of Clytemnestra.

Attica: The peninsula on which Athens is located; in the fifth century, it was unified under Athenian government.

Cambridge Ritualists: A group of scholars, centered at Cambridge University, whose work was very influential in early twentieth-century theory about myth, tragedy, and tragedy’s origins. They assumed that tragedy had developed out of an earlier dramatization of the death and resurrection of the eniautos daimon.

choregos: “Chorus leader”; the wealthy citizen whose civic responsibility it was to fund a tetralogy at the City Dionysia.

City Dionysia/Greater Dionysia: Annual Athenian festival in honor of Dionysus, at which dramatic competitions were held. Tragedy may have been performed at the City Dionysia as early as 534 B.C.; other scholars place its inception there at around 500.

Delian League: An alliance formed between Athens and various other Greek poleis, including many Aegean islands, in 478/477 B.C. Originally a defensive alliance to guard against a third Persian invasion, as the century progressed, the league became more and more a de facto Athenian empire. The name reflects the fact that the league’s meetings were held on the island of Delos, where its treasury was also kept (though the funds were moved to Athens in 454).

Delphi: Site of Apollo’s most important oracle and the temple complex associated with it. Oracles at Delphi were spoken by the Pythia, a priestess supposedly inspired with prophetic powers by the god.

demes: Local districts or villages in Greece. Cleisthenes’s reforms of 508 gave the demes of Attica a new importance when the tribes were reorganized to reflect deme membership, not family descent.

deus ex machina: “God from the machine”; refers to Euripides’s practice of solving a plot’s difficulties by having a god flown in on the mechane at the end of a tragedy. In literary criticism, the term has come to mean any ending of a play, novel, or other work in which difficulties are suddenly solved by improbable coincidences or outside agents.

didaskalos: Greek for “teacher”; used for a playwright. The implication is probably that the playwright “taught” the actors and chorus their roles orally.

dithyramb: Choral songs in honor of Dionysus. Aristotle says that tragedy developed out of dithyramb when the leaders of dithyramb “separated themselves” from the chorus.

eisodos (pl. eisodoi): The entrance ramps into the orchestra of the Greek theatre (also called parodoi).

ekkyklema: Literally, “the rolled-out-thing.” A device used to display “interior” scenes in tragedy. Its exact nature is uncertain, but in its earliest form, it was probably a small wheeled platform that could be rolled out of the skene door.
**eniautos daimon:** The Cambridge Ritualists argued that all tragedy developed from an original ritual “passion-play” dramatizing the death and resurrection of the “Year Spirit,” a god representing the grain. They gave the name *eniautos daimon* to this “year spirit,” but the term is not attested in ancient literature.

**Epidauros:** A sanctuary to the healing god Asclepius. The finest surviving example of a Hellenistic theatre is located there, dating to the 350s B.C.

**episodes (episodia):** In a tragedy, scenes involving one or more actors and the chorus. The episodes are divided by *stasima*.

**exodos:** The chorus’s exit song at the end of a tragedy.

**hamartia:** A “mistake” or “error.” According to Aristotle, the main character of a tragedy undergoes reversal of fortune not because of any intentional evil-doing but because of a *hamartia* made in ignorance. The term has often been translated “tragic flaw,” but this definition is misleading.

**mechane:** The crane used to “fly” gods (and occasionally heroes) into the theatre. The details of its use are uncertain, but most scholars think that it deposited actors on the roof of the *skene*.

**Melos:** Cycladic island; maintained neutrality during the Peloponnesian War until 416–415, when Athens invaded the island, executed the men, and enslaved the women and children.

**messenger speech:** One of the most characteristic elements of a tragedy; a narration by a “messenger” of crucially important events that have happened offstage. Oedipus’s self-blinding and Pentheus’s murder at the hands of his mother and aunts, for instance, are narrated in messenger speeches.

**monody:** A “solo song” by one actor. For the most part, in tragedy, the chorus sings and the actors speak, but at times, actors sang individual lyric pieces, usually expressing some strong emotion.

**oikos:** “House.” Refers both to the physical household and to the family.

**orchestra:** The “dancing floor” of the Greek theatre. The perfect circle of fourth-century theatres, such as Epidauros, is almost certainly a late development; in the fifth-century Theatre of Dionysus, the orchestra was probably more or less rectangular. There may have been a low stage in the fifth-century theatre, but most of the drama’s action took place in the orchestra.

**parados (pl. parodoi):** The chorus’s entrance song in a tragedy or the entrance ramps into the orchestra of the Greek theatre (also called *eisodoi*).

**Peloponnesian War:** War between Athens and Sparta and the allies of each *polis*; it began in 431 B.C. and continued (with brief interruptions) until 404, when Athens was defeated.

**peripeteia:** According to Aristotle, the unexpected turn of events in tragedy.

**Persian Wars:** The great conflict between the vast Persian Empire and Greece. The wars occurred in two stages ten years apart; Persia’s first invasion of Greece took place in 490 B.C. and ended with Athens’s victory at Marathon. The second invasion began in 480, the year of the Spartan defeat at Thermopylae and the Athenians’ victory at the naval battle of Salamis, and ended in 479 with the Greeks’ victory at Plataea.

**polis:** The basic political unit of Greece in the fifth century (and in fact, the origin of our word “political”). Often translated “city-state” to indicate the lack of any precise English equivalent; a *polis* was small enough to qualify as a city by modern standards but was also self-governing.

**prologue:** In a tragedy, the part before the chorus’s entrance. It usually sets out the subject of the tragedy and identifies its timeframe and location.

**protagonist:** Literally, “first contestant.” Refers to the first actor and/or the primary character of a Greek tragedy, such as Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*.

**rhapsodes:** Specially trained reciters of Homeric epic.

**rhexis (pl. rheseis):** A formal speech in tragedy.

**satyr play:** A short burlesque or satirical play performed after a trilogy of tragedies.
Sicilian expedition: Athens’s disastrous naval expedition of 415–413; it was the largest military expedition Athens had ever made. The small town of Segesta, allied with Athens, asked for Athenian help in a local dispute, and Athens used this as a rationale for extending its war effort outside Greece to Sicily (which had grain that would be useful to Athens). The expedition ended in a stunning defeat for Athens; the entire army was either captured or killed.

skene: Greek for “tent.” In the earliest fifth-century productions, probably this structure really was a tent at the back of the orchestra where the actors would change costumes and masks. Later, the tent was replaced by a permanent wooden structure and, later still, by a stone skene building. Aeschylus may have developed the wooden skene for use in The Oresteia.

skenographia: “Markings upon the skene.” Aristotle says that Sophocles introduced this; it is unclear what the term means. It is almost certainly incorrect to assume that it means some full system of (re)movable scenery.

Sophism/Sophists: An intellectual movement of the fifth century. The Sophists were first and foremost itinerant teachers of rhetoric. They also espoused a naturalistic view of morality and religion and questioned the universal validity of morals. The most famous Sophist was Protagoras, best remembered for his dictum “man is the measure of all things.” Their opponents accused them of corrupting morals and weakening religious beliefs.

stasimon (plural stastima): Choral passages dividing the episodes of a tragedy.

stichomythia: Rapid-fire conversation, usually in one-line segments, between two characters in tragedy.

tetralogy: Refers to the three tragedies and one satyr play entered into competition by a tragedian. Some scholars think that the term should be restricted to groups of plays written on a unified theme. See also trilogy, satyr play.

Theatre of Dionysus: The theatre of Athens, where the great tragedians produced their works. The extant remains are all much later than the fifth century. It has been estimated that the fifth-century audience capacity was between 14,000 and 17,000.

Thebes: The setting for several major tragedies, including Oedipus the King, Antigone, and Bacchae. Thebes appears as a kind of “anti-Athens” in tragedy.

Thesmophoria: A religious festival in honor of Demeter, celebrated in the autumn. It was a women-only festival, and the celebrants left their homes and camped out together for three days. We know little about the rituals associated with it except that they involved obscenity and some sort of sacrifice.

Thorikos: A small, trapezoidal-shaped theatre in Attica, about 20 miles from Athens. It probably dates from the early fifth century B.C. and is more or less contemporary with the burgeoning of tragedy in Athens.

thyrsus: A staff or wand carried by Dionysus and his Maenads. Usually represented in art as being topped with ivy or a pinecone.

transliteration: The system of representing the sounds of one language (e.g., Greek) in the alphabet of another (e.g., English).

trilogy: The three tragedies entered into competition by a tragedian. Each trilogy would be followed by a satyr play, making a tetralogy. Aeschylus wrote unified trilogies on a single theme; The Oresteia is our only surviving example. Some scholars think the term “trilogy” should be limited to these unified groups of plays. See also tetralogy, satyr play.

xenia: “The guest/host relationship.” Our term “hospitality” does not adequately convey the seriousness of the concept. Xenia was protected by Zeus and covers the whole range of obligations that guests and hosts (xenoi, singular xenos) have to one another. Violations of these obligations bring dire consequences: Paris’s theft of Helen was, among other things, a violation of xenia.

xenos: A guest, host, friend, stranger, or foreigner (cf. xenophobia). The range of this word’s meanings reflects the essential nature of xenia (see previous entry), which does not depend on prior acquaintance but operates between strangers. Once two men have entered into a relationship of xenia by one of them staying in the other’s house, they are “guest-friends” and have obligations to each another.
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Elizabeth Vandiver did her undergraduate work at Shimer College, Mt. Carroll, Illinois, where she matriculated in 1972 as a sixteen-year-old “early entrant.” After receiving her B.A. in 1975, she spent several years working as a librarian before deciding to pursue graduate work in Classics at the University of Texas at Austin. She received her M.A. in 1984 and her Ph.D. in 1990.

At the University of Maryland, Professor Vandiver co-directs the Honors Humanities program and teaches for that program and for the Department of Classics. Before coming to Maryland, she held visiting professorships at Northwestern University, where she taught from 1996 to 1999; the University of Georgia; the Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies in Rome, Italy; Loyola University, New Orleans; and Utah State University. Her course on Classical Mythology has been particularly successful.

In 1998, Dr. Vandiver received the American Philological Association’s Excellence in Teaching Award, the most prestigious teaching award available to American classicists. Other awards include the Northwestern University Department of Classics Excellence in Teaching award for 1998 and the University of Georgia’s Outstanding Honors Professor award in 1993 and 1994.

Dr. Vandiver has published a book, *Heroes in Herodotus: The Interaction of Myth and History*, and several articles, and has delivered numerous papers at national and international conferences. She is currently working on a second book, examining the influence of the classical tradition on the British poets of World War I. Her previous Teaching Company courses include *The Iliad of Homer, The Odyssey of Homer, Virgil’s Aeneid, and Classical Mythology*.

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Lecture Thirteen

Oedipus the King, I

Scope: This lecture begins our discussion of Oedipus the King. The lecture starts by summarizing the mythic background of the Oedipus story, discusses Sophocles’s use of this story in his great play, and looks at several important themes.

Outline

I. Sophocles’s Oedipus the King is the most famous and probably the most often performed Greek tragedy. The story from which Sophocles constructed this play was fairly simple.
   A. Laius and Jocasta, King and Queen of Thebes, learn that a son who will be born to them will kill Laius and marry Jocasta.
      1. Therefore, when the infant Oedipus is born, they “expose” him.
      2. The infant is rescued and brought up by foster parents.
   B. When Oedipus grows up, he comes to Thebes, ignorant of his true parentage.
      1. On the way there, he meets and kills his father, Laius.
      2. When he arrives at Thebes, he outwits the monstrous Sphinx, who has been terrorizing the town.
      3. As a reward, he is granted the hand of the Queen of Thebes in marriage.
   C. Oedipus rules for some time in ignorance of what he has done, and he and Jocasta have four children.
      1. When the truth is finally discovered, Jocasta kills herself.
      2. Versions differed on Oedipus’s reaction.
      3. The most familiar version is the one that Sophocles follows: that Oedipus blinded himself and went into exile from Thebes.

II. Sophocles rounds out this basic story by adding several details.
   A. Jocasta gives the infant Oedipus to a trusted slave, a shepherd, and asks him to expose the child. Instead, Oedipus is adopted by the King and Queen of Corinth, Polybus and Merope.
   B. When Oedipus was a young man, a guest at a banquet taunted him by saying he was not Polybus’s son.
      1. Oedipus decided to go to Delphi to ask the oracle about his parentage.
      2. The oracle foretold that he would kill his father and marry his mother.
      3. Oedipus decided to avoid Corinth forever and turned instead toward Thebes.
      4. On his way there, he killed an old man at a crossroads.
   C. Oedipus arrives in Thebes and overcomes the Sphinx. As it happens, the Theban king, Laius, has recently been killed.
      1. The one eyewitness to Laius’s murder said that Laius had been killed by a band of robbers.
      2. Oedipus is given Jocasta’s hand in marriage.
   D. All these details are brought out in the play in bits and pieces, in fragmented, non-chronological order, as Oedipus slowly pieces together the truth.

III. When the play opens, Oedipus has been king for many years. Sophocles does not concentrate on the actual murder and incest; rather, he directs our attention to the process by which Oedipus learns the truth of what he has done and who he is.
   A. The play begins with a priest, accompanied by the chorus of Theban citizens, begging Oedipus to try to find some cure for a terrible plague that is ravaging the city.
      1. Oedipus has already sent his brother-in-law Creon to ask the Delphic oracle what the cause of the plague is.
      2. Creon returns and reports that the pollution on the land is caused by the fact that Laius’s murderer is living, unknown, in Thebes.
      3. Oedipus responds by invoking a solemn, formal curse against the murderer of Laius.
      4. He summons the seer Teiresias to tell him who the murderer is.
   B. Teiresias’s obvious reluctance to speak arouses Oedipus’s anger and suspicion almost immediately.
1. He interprets the seer’s unhelpfulness as proof that Teiresias cares nothing about Thebes.
2. He also begins to suspect that Teiresias might have helped plot the murder of Laius.
3. Oedipus’s anger angers Teiresias in turn, and the prophet tells Oedipus “you are the land’s pollution.”
4. Oedipus assumes that Teiresias is simply trying to taunt and slander him, because he knows that he cannot be Laius’s murderer; Laius was murdered by many men, not by one.

C. Oedipus further assumes that Teiresias and Creon must be plotting against him and planning to overthrow him. In his circumstances, this fear is not unreasonable.

D. Oedipus next directly accuses Creon of treachery. This quarrel between her husband and her brother leads Jocasta to let slip the one crucial clue.
   1. When she mentions that Laius was killed at a “place where three roads meet,” Oedipus is struck with horror.
   2. At this point, however, he suspects only that the old man he killed might have been Laius; he has no inkling yet of the full horror that awaits him.

IV. Oedipus persists in his desire to find out the truth, whatever it may be. Sophocles’s careful crafting of the play lends a growing sense of inevitability.

A. Oedipus sends for the witness to Laius’s death, to question him. While they are waiting for him to arrive, a messenger comes from Corinth to tell Oedipus that Polybus is dead.
   1. The messenger is astonished when Oedipus reacts not with grief, but with joy, and declares that Apollo’s oracle was false.
   2. The messenger is also puzzled by Oedipus’s remark to Jocasta that he still fears marriage with his mother.
   3. Thinking to comfort his new king, the messenger tells Oedipus that he is not the true son of Polybus and Merope.
   4. The messenger knows that, because he gave the baby to Polybus and Merope.

B. When Oedipus asks who gave him the baby, it turns out that the slave who has already been summoned, the witness to Laius’s death, was the Theban shepherd who handed the baby over. At this point, Oedipus’s whole focus changes; from seeking Laius’s murderer, he is now seeking his own identity.

C. The encounter between the two slaves brings together all the threads of the story and leads to the moment when Oedipus recognizes the truth.

D. Oedipus rushes into the skene building, and a messenger speech reports the death of Jocasta and Oedipus’s own self-blinding.

V. One question that is often asked about this play is why does it take Oedipus so long to understand the entire truth?

A. This question touches on the issue of self-knowledge, one of the main themes of the play.
   1. Oedipus thinks he knows who he is.
   2. Thus, when Teiresias asks him if he knows who his parents are, the question seems purely rhetorical; of course he does.
   3. Oedipus also thinks Apollo has implicitly ratified his belief about his parentage by not answering the question he put to the oracle.

B. Oedipus is not the only one who does not understand Teiresias or see the truth. The chorus members, who hear all of Teiresias’s words as well, also do not understand.
   1. After Teiresias’s prophecy, the chorus comments that they have never heard of a feud between the families of Laius and Polybus.
   2. Even much later, after Jocasta has rushed desperately offstage, the chorus remains as unaware as Oedipus.

VI. The theme of self-knowledge and the difficulty of achieving it are underlined throughout the play by a powerful metaphor.

A. Throughout the play, sight is equated with ignorance, and blindness with knowledge.

B. This pattern of sight and blindness, ignorance and knowledge, is underlined by a play on words involving Oedipus’s name.
1. Oedipus’s name, Oidipous, probably means “swollen foot.”
2. The first two syllables of that name, oidi, sound very much like a Greek verb, oida, that means both “I have seen” and “I know.”

VII. Students often ask questions about the plot that display a kind of realism that is inappropriate for this play and for tragedy as a genre.

A. Concerning Oedipus, such questions include the following:
   1. Why did he kill someone old enough to be his father when he had just been warned by Delphi?
   2. Why did he marry someone old enough to be his mother?
   3. Actually, these questions can be answered, even from the “realistic” paradigm that they assume; again, Oedipus thought he knew who his parents were.

B. Jocasta presents even more of a problem; after all, she knew perfectly well that she had exposed an infant son because it had been prophesied that he would kill Laius and marry her.
   1. When Oedipus showed up, why didn’t it occur to her that this young man was precisely the right age?
   2. Finally, why had Jocasta never asked Oedipus about the very distinctive scars on his feet in all the years of their marriage?

C. The most obvious reply to this sort of question is that myths are not that type of story and tragedy is not that type of genre.

Essential Reading:
Sophocles, Oedipus the King.

Supplementary Reading:
Ahl, Sophocles’ Oedipus.
Bain, “A Misunderstood Scene.”
Knox, “Sophocles’ Oedipus.”
———, “Why Is Oedipus Called Tyrannos?”

Questions to Consider:
1. I have argued that it is reasonable and believable for Oedipus not to understand or accept what Teiresias tells him. Do you agree?
2. Why do you think the Theban slave lied about the number of people who murdered Laius?
Lecture Fourteen

Oedipus the King, II

Scope: This lecture continues our discussion of *Oedipus the King* by examining three influential readings of the play. We start with Aristotle’s discussion in *Poetics* of how tragedy works and the characteristics of the tragic “hero” and discuss its application to *Oedipus*. The lecture then looks briefly at Freud’s interpretation and discusses why, despite its enormous influence, this theory sheds little light on the play. We then examine another common reading of the play that focuses on the conflict between fate and free will. Finally, we look at the implications of Sophism for our understanding of *Oedipus*.

Outline

I. Aristotle’s *Poetics* was one of the earliest attempts at literary criticism. Aristotle not only gave tantalizing bits of information about the history and development of tragedy, but he also analyzed how tragedy works, what its purpose is, and what, in his opinion, makes a good tragedy.

A. Aristotle almost definitely wrote *Poetics* partly in response to Plato’s discussion of poets and poetry in *The Republic* (written c. 380 B.C.).
   1. Plato banished poets from his ideal state for two main reasons.
   2. Poets are imitators of things, which puts them at two removes from (Platonic) reality.
   3. The works of poets are directed to our emotions, that is, to the irrational part of our being.
   4. In particular, poetry arouses such emotions as pity and fear.

B. For Plato, therefore, poetry, including tragedy, is harmful and has no place in the ideal state. Aristotle clearly disagreed, and *Poetics* is his demonstration of his position.

II. In his response to Plato’s attack on poets and poetry, Aristotle addresses Plato’s objections to the arousal of pity and fear.

A. The purpose of tragedy, Aristotle says, is to cause a *catharsis* of pity and fear.
   1. *Catharsis* has several basic meanings: a cleansing, a purification, a clearing, a purgation.
   2. Most modern critics assume that Aristotle means here something like a clearing or purgation and that the emotions to be purged, pity and fear, are raised in the spectators of tragedy.
   3. Other critics think that Aristotle meant something quite different: that the tragic *action* itself must be purified.

B. We are on somewhat firmer ground when we come to Aristotle’s description of the characteristics of the tragic protagonist.
   1. Aristotle says that the protagonist must be a man (or woman) who is preeminent or better than average in some way.
   2. The protagonist must undergo a reversal of fortune or fall from his or her position of preeminence.
   3. For the proper emotions of pity and fear to be aroused, the protagonist must be neither excessively good nor excessively evil; we do not feel pity for an excessively evil person, nor do we feel the right kind of “fear” for an excessively good one.
   4. The protagonist’s reversal of fortune must come about not through wickedness, but through *hamartia*.

C. *Hamartia* was traditionally mistranslated as “tragic flaw,” but its basic meaning is simply “mistake” or “error.”
   1. Some scholars will still argue that *hamartia* includes the sense “moral error.”
   2. Such a reading leads to an over-psychologized interpretation of Greek tragedy; for instance, generations of school children have found Oedipus’s *hamartia* in his quick temper.
   3. The meaning “mistake” seems to make much more sense in the context of *Poetics*; the tragic “hero” undergoes a reversal of fortune because of some error in judgment or an honest mistake.

D. In a good tragic plot, Aristotle says, the reversal of fortune will be brought about by a *peripeteia*, or an unexpected turn of events, and should also include an *anagnorisis*, or recognition.
   1. The example Aristotle gives of *peripeteia* is the Corinthian messenger’s explanation to Oedipus that Merope is not his mother. This news would be expected to reassure Oedipus, but it has the opposite effect.
2. By *anagnorisis*, Aristotle appears to mean the literal recognition of a relative who was previously unknown.

3. Aristotle says that the best plot is one in which the *peripeteia* and the *anagnorisis* come at the same time; again, he cites Oedipus as his primary example.

4. The third crucial element of plot Aristotle identifies is *pathos*, which is often translated “action”; literally, it means “suffering.” Aristotle cites deaths, pain, and woundings as examples of *pathos*.

III. Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy works well for some tragedies and not so well for others.

A. Clearly, this analysis can be applied successfully to *Oedipus the King*.
   1. Oedipus’s downfall comes about through a *hamartia* in the sense of an error in judgment or mistake of fact: he thinks he knows who his parents are and, therefore who he is, but he does not.
   2. The *peripeteia* and the *anagnorisis* come at precisely the same time, just as Aristotle prefers.
   3. The *pathos* includes Jocasta’s suicide and Oedipus’s self-blinding.
   4. Finally, Oedipus is not an exceptionally or perfectly good man. He is quick-tempered and, perhaps, too quick to assume that he knows what he is doing and where his actions will lead him.

B. Applying Aristotle’s analysis to other tragedies can be interesting.

IV. Aristotle was Sophocles’s most famous ancient critic; without question, his most famous modern interpreter was Freud.

A. Freud read *Oedipus the King* as evidence for his theory of infant sexuality and psychological development and took the name of his “Oedipus complex” from it.
   1. He assumed that the play represents unconscious desires.
   2. Freud thought that the play appeals to modern audiences, as it did to ancient ones, as a kind of wish-fulfillment fantasy.
   3. Freud even saw the process through which Oedipus discovers the truth as analogous to the process of analysis.

B. Several possible objections arise to Freud’s reading of the play.
   1. First and most obviously, Oedipus’s ignorance of his parentage is crucial to the myth. If Oedipus felt Oedipal desires, he would have felt them toward his adoptive mother.
   2. A Freudian might answer that this represents the repression that all individuals impose on their Oedipal desires, of course.

C. Another main objection is that Freud assumes that the unconscious operates the same way cross-culturally and through time. This assumption is far from certain.

D. Freud’s interpretation may have merit in explaining why this parricide and incest myth came into existence in the first place, but many scholars think that it does not usefully elucidate Sophocles’s play.

V. Among classicists and literary critics, the most common reading of Sophocles’s play has been to see its main topic as the conflict between fate and free will.

A. The actions taken by Laius, Jocasta, and Oedipus all lead to the inexorable working out of fate.
   1. Precisely by trying to avoid their fate, these characters guarantee its fulfillment.
   2. They are fated to commit the deeds they commit, but this fate works through their own freely chosen actions.

B. Some scholars object that this reading is anachronistic, because the conflict that moderns find between the idea of fate and free will does not seem to have troubled the Greeks.

VI. A final interpretation sets the play in the context of Sophism and reads Oedipus as the paradigm of a rationalist intellectual, seeking to establish truth through his own intellect rather than reliance on the gods’ oracles.

A. Modern readers often assume that such an attempt must be good.

B. To a fifth-century audience, however, Oedipus would be unsettlingly reminiscent of the Sophists.
   1. His refusal to accept the oracle and the words of the prophet Teiresias shows the distrust of religious traditions that was characteristic of the Sophists.
   2. His insistence on his own intelligence and his determination to reason out the puzzles of his own origin and of who killed Laius is also very Sophist-like.
C. *Oedipus King* can thus be read as reiterating crucial points made in *Antigone* that the human intellect alone is not sufficient for understanding the world and that the gods and their oracles must be taken into account.

D. *Antigone* focused on the question of whether humans can chart their own courses without reference to the gods’ ordinances; *Oedipus* focuses on the question of whether oracles (and by inference the gods) are reliable.

**Essential Reading:**
Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Aristotle, *Poetics*.
Bremmer, “Oedipus and the Greek Oedipus Complex.”
Dodds, “On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*.”
Freud, “The Oedipus Complex.”
Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes*, especially chapter 1.
Vernant, “Oedipus Without the Complex.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Aristotle was writing specifically about Greek tragedy in *Poetics*. Do you think that his analysis can be applied to other forms of entertainment? Do we need to feel pity and fear for the main character of a novel or a movie?
2. The Oedipus myth, at least as told by Sophocles, seems to allow for an enormous range of interpretations. Is this part of its appeal? Is the attempt to isolate one primary meaning in the story misguided from the outset?
Lecture Fifteen
Two Tragedians, One Hero

Scope: In this lecture we look at two plays, Sophocles’s *Women of Trachis* and Euripides’s *Heracles*, that take the greatest hero of Greek myth, Heracles, as their subject.

Outline

I. The greatest and most famous Greek hero of all is Heracles, son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene. Heracles was not a frequent subject of tragedy, but among the surviving tragedies three deal with him directly.

II. Like those of many heroes, Heracles’s conception and babyhood were unusual.
   A. Heracles is the son of Zeus and Alcmene, wife of Amphitryon.
      1. Zeus tricked Alcmene into sleeping with him by disguising himself as Amphitryon, who was away.
      2. Amphitryon returned the next day, much to Alcmene’s surprise.
      3. Alcmene conceived Heracles by Zeus and his twin, Iphicles, by Amphitryon.
   B. Hera always hated Zeus’s sons by other females, and she particularly detested Heracles. She sent him madness.

III. Heracles was characterized by extreme strength and courage, but by other extremes as well: of sexual appetite, hunger and thirst, and rage.
   A. The most important episode of his madness, sent by Hera, caused him to kill his children and his first wife, Megara. According to most authors, this led directly to his famous labors.
   B. Euripides’s play *Heracles* deals with the murders of Megara and the children. Euripides departs from the usual version of the story by having Heracles commit these murders after he has completed his twelve labors.

IV. Heracles is one of very few humans in Greek myth to become a god. His road to immortality was caused not by exceptional goodness, but by exceptional wrongdoing and suffering.
   A. Heracles’s second wife was Deianira. His marriage to her was beset with difficulties, including two encounters with semi-animal beings.
      1. Before he could marry Deianira, Heracles had to wrestle the river god Achelous, who had the head of a bull.
      2. As Heracles was returning home with Deianira, the centaur Nessus tried to rape her. Heracles shot him with an arrow that had been dipped in the Hydra’s venom.
   B. As Nessus was dying, he told Deianira to gather some of his blood as a love-charm.
   C. Years later, when Heracles fell in love with another woman, Deianira gave him a robe dipped in Nessus’s blood.
      1. The robe, far from being a charm, burned Heracles’s flesh but did not kill him.
      2. In agony, he mounted a funeral pyre and burned himself to death.
      3. Only his body died, however; he became immortal and went to Olympus, where he married Hebe, a daughter of Zeus and Hera.
   D. This story is the subject of Sophocles’s *Women of Trachis*. Sophocles departs from the usual version by making no mention at all of Heracles’s apotheosis.

V. It is uncertain which of the two Heracles plays was written first, but most scholars think that Sophocles’s *Women of Trachis* dates to between 431 and 420 and that Euripides’s *Heracles* is later, perhaps as late as 418–416.
   A. In *Women of Trachis*, Sophocles’s Deianira is one of the most sympathetic characters in tragedy. Some suggest that she is meant as a kind of anti-Clytaemestra; this idea seems persuasive.
      1. Although Deianira kills her husband, her actions were motivated by a desire to win him back, not to harm him.
2. Unlike Clytaemestra, who is indifferent to praise or blame and argues her own case fiercely, when Deianira is accused by her son Hyllus of murder, she makes no defense but goes silently into the house, where she kills herself.

B. Aristotle’s terms can be applied to Deianira; her *hamartia*, which she herself realizes, was to believe that the Centaur Nessus could have had beneficent intentions when he told her to keep his blood.

C. If Deianira is unusually sympathetic, Heracles in this play is unusually remote and unlikeable.
1. At first he wants to torture Deianira to death.
2. When he learns that she did not intend to kill him, he seems to forget her utterly.
3. He demands that his son Hyllus should marry Iole, on the grounds that no other man must have a woman who has been Heracles’s concubine.

D. Note that Heracles and Deianira never meet in this play. It is almost as though Deianira’s humanity and Heracles’s sheer inhumanity cannot occupy the same space.

E. In light of Heracles’s character, the fact that Sophocles omits the story of his apotheosis is all the more interesting.
1. The usual explanation of this is that Sophocles wants us to concentrate on Heracles as a suffering human.
2. If the play mentions that this suffering will lead to his becoming a god, and if Heracles himself knows it, then his suffering becomes less terrible and less meaningful.
3. Yet, here, Heracles repudiates many, if not most, human characteristics.

VI. Sophocles seems to make Heracles less than fully human in *Women of Trachis*; Euripides stresses his humanity.

A. Heracles’s wife and father speak of him as a good and kind man, and Euripides makes it clear that he is motivated by altruism.

B. The play opens with Heracles’s first wife, Megara, and his father, Amphitryon, longing for the hero’s return to Thebes, where they are living.
1. While Heracles was in Hades to rescue his friend Theseus, who was trapped there, Lycus usurped the throne of Thebes and is planning to kill Heracles’s sons.
2. Megara and Amphitryon are afraid that Heracles is dead.
3. Just when it seems that Lycus will indeed kill the children, Heracles returns.
4. Unlike Sophocles’s Heracles who never meets his wife face to face and shows no affection for his son, this Heracles is utterly human and enmeshed in family affection.

C. Heracles kills Lycus inside the palace and, for a moment, all seems well. Then Iris, the messenger of the gods, and Madness appear. On Hera’s instructions, they have come to drive Heracles mad.
1. Madness must obey Hera, and she drives Heracles insane. In his frenzy, Heracles himself kills Megara and their children.
2. After this slaughter, Heracles wants to kill himself. He is deterred by Theseus, who offers him purification and a home in Athens.

VII. One of the most interesting aspects of this play is the view it takes of the gods.

A. Zeus and Hera both are castigated in the play by human characters.

B. When Amphitryon thinks that Lycus will kill the children, he bitterly denounces Zeus.

C. Heracles says something even more remarkable: he has never believed that the gods commit adultery or other injustices; such stories are the lies of poets.
1. If the gods do not commit adultery, then what becomes of Heracles’s parentage and who is Heracles himself?
2. If the gods do not commit crimes, then who or what explains Heracles’s sudden madness?
3. We are almost forced to conclude that Heracles is simply mistaken, but that judgment leaves the indictment of the gods unanswered.

D. Like Sophocles, Euripides omits any mention of Heracles’s apotheosis.
1. Again, the reason seems to be that Euripides wants to explore Heracles’s humanity.
2. Heracles’s eventual godhood is so much a part of his story that it may explain his rarity as a main character on the tragic stage.
VIII. We have now read two plays by Euripides, the third great tragedian.

A. Euripides was born c. 480 B.C. and died in 406, shortly before the death of Sophocles. We know little about his life.
   1. He first competed in the City Dionysia in 455, when he placed third.
   2. His first victory was in 441, and he won only four times during his life; he was much less successful than Aeschylus or Sophocles.
   3. His last entry in the City Dionysia was in 408; he then traveled to Macedon, where he stayed as a guest of the king, and died in 406.

B. Euripides wrote around ninety plays; eighteen tragedies and one satyr play have survived (plus one tragedy, *Rhesus*, that most scholars think is not by Euripides). We have more plays by Euripides than by Aeschylus and Sophocles combined.

C. Nine of Euripides’s surviving plays seem to have been a selection of the type done for Aeschylus and Sophocles and quite likely used in schools.
   1. The fact that this selection included nine plays may reflect Euripides’s growing popularity in the fourth century B.C. and afterwards.
   2. The other nine surviving plays all begin with the Greek letters epsilon, eta, iota, and kappa.
   3. Scholars are almost certain that these plays are survivors of one or two volumes from Euripides’s “collected works.”

Essential Reading:
Euripides, *Heracles*.
Sophocles, *Women of Trachis*.

Supplementary Reading:
Silk, “Heracles and Greek Tragedy.”

Questions to Consider:
1. If it is difficult to use Heracles as a tragic hero because his eventual apotheosis seems to undercut his human suffering, what does this imply about the gods? Put another way, can beings who can neither die nor be harmed serve as main characters of a tragedy?
2. If we discovered evidence that Euripides’s *Heracles* was written before Sophocles’s *Women of Trachis*, how would that affect our interpretation of these two plays?
Lecture Sixteen
Greek Husband, Foreign Wife

Scope: In this lecture, we consider one of Euripides’s most famous tragedies, Medea. After sketching the mythic background and plot of the tragedy, the lecture looks at various dimensions of Medea’s and Jason’s characters, considers the implications of Medea’s status as a foreigner for our understanding of the tragedy, and finally, discusses what the tragedy implies about Athenian views of sexuality and reproduction.

Outline

I. Medea was princess of Colchis, on the Black Sea, to which Jason sailed in the Argo in search of the Golden Fleece. His usurping uncle, Pelias, had sent him on this quest on the assumption that the search was impossible and Jason would never return.
   A. Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece would indeed have been impossible to fulfill without Medea’s help.
      1. Medea’s father, Aeëtes, who owned the Fleece, had no intention of letting Jason take it.
      2. He set Jason a series of all-but-impossible tasks, promising that if Jason fulfilled these tasks, he could have the Fleece.
      3. Medea, who was skilled in magic, fell in love with Jason. She gave him a magic ointment that would protect him from injury.
      4. Medea further helped Jason get the Fleece by putting to sleep (again through magic) the dragon that guarded it.
   B. Medea helped Jason on the understanding that he would take her with him and marry her. Jason agreed to these terms, and they fled together on the Argo.
   C. Medea’s assistance to Jason did not stop with getting the Fleece; she helped him escape by killing her younger brother, Apsyrtus, and cut his body into pieces to delay her father’s pursuit.
      1. Thus, Medea is entirely cut off from her own society.
      2. She has acted in direct opposition to her father’s interest by taking the Fleece.
      3. She has destroyed her family by killing her brother.

II. Medea is entirely and utterly dependent on Jason to an extent unusual even for a Greek wife; however, in Athenian terms, she is not a wife at all.
   A. Athenian marriages included some safeguards for the wife.
      1. A fifth-century Athenian wife, if mistreated by her husband, could appeal to her father or other male relatives to intervene; Medea cannot.
      2. If the husband’s actions were considered reprehensible enough, the wife’s male relatives could arrange for her divorce; her dowry would be returned intact and she could remarry. Again, Medea has no such option.
   B. By taking Medea with him from Colchis and marrying her, Jason has assumed total responsibility for her welfare and made her completely dependent on him.
      1. However, from 451/450 B.C. on, Athenian men could not legally marry foreign women.
      2. In fifth-century terms, then, Medea was not actually Jason’s “wife” at all.

III. Medea and Jason settle in Corinth on their return to Greece.
   A. They go first to Jason’s native country, Iolcus, where his usurping uncle, Pelias, holds the throne.
      1. Medea, intending to help Jason, tricks Pelias’s daughters into killing their father by making them think that they are performing a spell that will rejuvenate him.
      2. This murder forces Medea and Jason to flee Iolcus.
      3. Because of Medea’s actions, both Jason and Medea are now permanent exiles from their own cities. They take refuge in Corinth, where the king, Creon, allows them to remain.
   B. Years later, Jason decides to marry Creon’s daughter Glauce and to repudiate Medea. Enough time has passed for Medea to bear two sons.
IV. Euripides’s tragedy Medea deals with her reaction to Jason’s new marriage and the terrible revenge she decides to take against Jason: the murder of their sons.
   A. The traditional story of Medea’s revenge included her killing of Glauce, but not necessarily her killing of her children, a detail that Euripides may have invented.
   B. Throughout the play, Euripides underplays Medea’s magical abilities and focuses instead on her human cleverness and ingenuity.
   C. The downplaying of Medea’s role as a sorceress focuses our attention on her murder of her sons.
      1. First, it makes it easier for us to accept that Medea cannot simply spirit her sons away by magic.
      2. Second, it draws our attention to the fact that she must murder her sons herself, with her own hands.

V. Given the atrocious nature of Medea’s act, it is notable that the play presents her in terms that are at least apparently positive.
   A. Medea is the most “Sophoclean” of all Euripides’s characters; she fits the pattern of the isolated Sophoclean hero and shows particular affinities to Ajax.
   B. In addition, Medea presents herself as a paradigm of the wronged wife.
      1. In her most famous speech, she gives a memorable description of the lot of married women that cannot have been entirely comfortable for an Athenian audience to hear.
      2. In her interaction with Jason, she parodies the stereotype about how a woman in her position should act.
   C. When these speeches are considered in their full context, however, a more ambiguous picture emerges.
      1. As part of her lament over the hard lot of women, Medea mentions that she has no brother to help her. This would have to remind the audience of why she is isolated and brotherless.
      2. Her presentation of herself as a “good” woman is part of her plan to trick Jason; she has told the chorus ahead of time that she will pretend to be persuaded so that Jason will trust her.
      3. Her use of rhetoric is very reminiscent of Clytaemestra’s and plays into the same anxieties about clever women and women’s misuse of their inappropriate intelligence.
   D. Many readers try to argue that we are not meant to sympathize with Medea, and the horrible nature of her actions certainly explains the desire for such an interpretation. Some points, however, make this reading difficult to sustain.
      1. Medea “gets away with it”; at the end of the play, she is victorious and Jason, entirely crushed.
      2. Her final appearance, on the roof of the skene building or on the mechane, presents her in a position normally reserved for gods.
   E. Medea remains an ambiguous figure.
      1. Our immediate sympathy for her is undercut not only by her children’s murders but also by reminders of her past.
      2. Our revulsion at her must confront the fact that she is presented throughout the play in terms that normally apply to a Sophoclean, or even a Homeric, hero and, at the end, as almost a god.

VI. Jason’s character is also deeply ambiguous. Modern readers tend to find him immediately and utterly appalling, but it is not absolutely clear that Euripides’s original audience would have agreed.
   A. In their scene of confrontation, Medea reminds Jason that she saved him and that he has now betrayed her. Jason’s response is twofold.
      1. First, he says that Medea has received great benefits from living in Greece and she should be grateful.
      2. Second, he says that his plan to marry Glauce was meant to benefit her and their children. His alliance with the royal household of Corinth will be an added protection for her and their children; furthermore, their children will have royal brothers.
   B. Modern audiences tend to be left entirely cold by both these arguments, but to a fifth-century audience, they probably made a good deal of sense.
   C. Thus, Jason’s acceptance of Medea’s “deception” speech, when she says that she realizes he is right, does not indicate that he is stupid or self-deluded; from his point of view, she has, in fact, seen reason.
Among many possible interpretations, Medea’s story clearly reflects the Greek male’s anxiety about women’s power, particularly their sexual power.

A. This theme is encapsulated in Medea’s name, which means both “genitals” and “clever plans.”

B. Medea’s murder of her children ties in with a regret, often expressed in Greek literature and repeated by Jason, that women are necessary for men to reproduce.

1. This regret is not absurd in a strongly patriarchal society; women are defined as inferior, but the fact of sexual reproduction means that women control men’s ability to have offspring.

2. A mother killing her offspring is simply an exaggerated form of that control.

Essential Reading:
Euripides, Medea.

Supplementary Reading:
Knox, “The Medea.”
Schlesinger, “On Euripides’ Medea.”

Questions to Consider:
1. Do you find Medea sympathetic, utterly abhorrent, or somewhere in between? Can you isolate elements in the play that cause your reaction?

2. The great speech on “women’s wrongs” that Euripides puts into Medea’s mouth has often been anthologized and quoted with approval by modern feminists, especially the line about battle and childbirth. In his own day, however, Euripides was often accused of being a misogynist. Can you account for these absolutely opposite opinions?
Lecture Seventeen
Phaedra, Hippolytus, and Aphrodite’s Wrath

Scope: This lecture focuses on another Euripidean play, Hippolytus, in which issues of gender, sexuality, and reproduction are again in the foreground. After sketching the relevant background, the story of Theseus, the lecture examines Euripides’s treatment in this play of the incestuous passion of Theseus’s wife, Phaedra, for her stepson, Hippolytus. We discuss the way Euripides inverts the normal story to shift blame from Phaedra to Hippolytus and the goddess Aphrodite. Finally, the lecture examines the implications of Hippolytus for our understanding of Athenian attitudes toward sexuality.

Outline

I. Euripides’s Hippolytus deals with events in the life of the great Athenian hero Theseus. He was a very important figure in Athenian myth. His story is in many ways a doublet of that of Heracles, on a smaller scale.
   A. Heracles was the son of Zeus; Theseus may have been the son of Zeus’s brother Poseidon.
      1. Theseus’s human father was Aegeus, king of Athens. However, his mother, Aethra, was raped by Poseidon on the same night she slept with Aegeus; thus, Theseus’s parentage was uncertain.
      2. This situation recalls the story of Heracles’s conception: Alcmené slept with Zeus on one night and Amphimwen on the next.
   B. Heracles performed a series of labors that involved killing monsters; so did Theseus.
      1. As a young man, Theseus had a series of encounters with monsters and brigands, whom he killed.
      2. These “labors” clearly parallel those of Heracles, but where Heracles killed or overcame monsters throughout the known world, Theseus did so in and for Attica.
   C. Heracles traveled to the underworld and returned alive; so did Theseus.
      1. Theseus and his friend Pirithous agreed that they should both marry daughters of Zeus.
      2. For Theseus, they kidnapped Helen (later of Troy), who was too young for marriage but already extraordinarily beautiful, with the plan of keeping her until she was old enough to marry.
      3. For Pirithous, the two men journeyed to Tartarus to kidnap the goddess Persephone, queen of the dead, but they became trapped there.
      4. Theseus remained trapped for years, until Heracles rescued him.
      5. Thus, the adventures of Heracles and Theseus intersect in Tartarus, and their relative greatness is indicated by the fact that Heracles rescues Theseus.

II. When the young Theseus reached Athens, he was received as a guest by his father, Aegeus. After being recognized by his father, Theseus embarked on a dangerous journey to Crete to try to free Athens from its tribute to the Minotaur. This is the most famous part of his story, but for our purposes, it is sufficient to note that Theseus killed the monster and became king of Athens.

III. Theseus married at least twice during his kingship.
   A. He married (or at least took as a concubine) an Amazon, named Antiope or Hippolyta. The son of this marriage was Hippolytus.
   B. Theseus married Phaedra, daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë of Crete (and, thus, the sister of the Minotaur whom Theseus had killed).
      1. This marriage produced two sons but ended unhappily.
      2. The catastrophic events that culminated in the deaths of both Phaedra and Hippolytus are the subject of Euripides’s play Hippolytus.

IV. Again, as in Medea, a union with a non-Greek, “barbarian” woman results in the destruction of the Greek man’s family.
   A. In Jason’s case, his marriage to Medea destroys his family directly and totally.
   B. In Theseus’s case, the destruction is less immediate and less complete than Medea’s destruction of Jason. Theseus’s legitimate sons are not killed, so his family can continue.
C. This difference reflects Theseus’s importance in Athenian myth; for his role as the unifier of Attica to have maximum impact, it was important that he leave living sons who could eventually inherit his throne.

D. But both these Euripidean tragedies reflect, in somewhat different form, the perceived dangers of barbarian wives (and of barbarian culture?) to the stability and prosperity of Greek society.
   1. Note that the Amazons (of whom Hippolyta was the queen) recur frequently in Greek myth as exemplars of a threat to Greek society.
   2. Many of the greatest Greek mythical heroes have encounters with Amazons. These usually involve either a sexual union with the hero and the Amazon or the Amazon’s death at the hero’s hands or both.
   3. These myths of heroes “taming” the Amazons—wild, undomesticated anti-women—can be seen as reasserting the basic premises of Athenian culture about proper gender roles and behavior.
   4. Medea is not an Amazon, but she comes from the same area of the world as they do and represents many of the same dangers.

V. Theseus’s union with the Amazon Hippolyta destroyed his later marriage through their son, Hippolytus. The means of this destruction was inappropriate sexual desire: Theseus’s wife, Phaedra, was smitten with lust for Hippolytus.

A. The traditional story from which Euripides was working presented Phaedra as the traditional “Potiphar’s Wife”; that is, an older woman who tries to seduce a young, chaste man, is rebuffed by him, and takes vengeance on him.

B. In Hippolytus, Euripides reworks the story to make Phaedra blameless, but does so in a very surprising way. Hippolytus recasts Phaedra as a good, even noble, woman who is fighting desperately against a sickness inflicted on her by Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual passion.
   1. The prologue of the play is spoken by the goddess Aphrodite, who tells us that Hippolytus refuses to honor her, instead giving all his devotion to the goddess Artemis.
   2. Aphrodite makes it clear that Phaedra is simply the tool the goddess uses to punish Hippolytus.
   3. Phaedra attempts to resist her “sickness” and vows not to disclose it to Hippolytus.
   4. Her secret is betrayed by her amoral nurse.

C. Notice that Phaedra’s character is, in effect, a mirror image of Medea’s; where Medea meets desperate circumstances by embracing evil, Phaedra tries to be as good a wife as possible.

VI. Phaedra’s destruction of Hippolytus is not motivated by anger, hatred, or the desire for revenge; rather, it is motivated by her desire to act as a proper Athenian wife should.

A. Phaedra’s actions, in fact, give us a clear view of what would be expected of a woman in an Athenian marriage (albeit through a male author’s eyes).
   1. She is determined not to betray Theseus by acting on her passion for Hippolytus.
   2. This determination is not motivated by any romantic love she feels or once felt for Theseus.
   3. Instead, she casts her determination to remain loyal to Theseus in terms of her obligations to him and to their family.

B. Her plan is to die without ever letting anyone know of the passion she feels for Hippolytus; thus, as the play opens, she is attempting to starve herself to death.
   1. Her determination underlines the importance of reputation for a woman.
   2. If anyone learns that she is stricken with passion for her stepson, her entire character will be called into question.
   3. Such a questioning of her character, in turn, throws her sons’ parentage into doubt.

C. Once the nurse has told Hippolytus of Phaedra’s passion, silence is no longer an option for her. At this point, she devises her plan to kill Hippolytus.
   1. It is not enough, now, that she die; that would not clear her name. She must get rid of all suspicion of adultery.
   2. Therefore, she kills herself, leaving a letter that accuses Hippolytus of raping her.
VII. This treatment of Phaedra shifts the focus of the story radically. If anyone is a sexual transgressor (i.e., guilty of inappropriate attitudes toward sexuality), it is Hippolytus, not Phaedra.

A. Hippolytus’s character is often misread as a kind of proto-Christian ascetic, someone whose renunciation of sexuality indicates a noble and admirable purity.
   1. This reading is anachronistic in the extreme. In fifth-century Athens, men had a duty to marry and reproduce.
   2. A young, unmarried man had a duty to refrain from adultery but no reason at all to remain a virgin.

B. Thus, Hippolytus’s “refusal to worship Aphrodite” is a refusal to become a fully functioning male citizen. Far from being noble, Hippolytus’s rejection of sexuality is weird, excessive, and out of line.

C. Hippolytus’s tendency toward excessive behavior is important for understanding his famous diatribe against women.

VIII. Phaedra’s plan to protect her reputation and her sons’ status works; Theseus returns home, reads Phaedra’s note, believes her, and calls down curses on his son.

A. Hippolytus tries to persuade his father of his innocence, but Theseus will not listen.
   1. Hippolytus was bound by an oath to the nurse not to speak directly of Phaedra’s passion.
   2. He cannot offer his father any explanation of why Phaedra would have lied about such a thing or why she would have killed herself.

B. Theseus assumes that Phaedra’s note told the truth, and he banishes Hippolytus.
   1. Theseus had been granted three curses by his father, Poseidon.
   2. Poseidon sends a bull from the sea, which frightens Hippolytus’s horses.
   3. Hippolytus is thrown from the chariot and dragged behind the horses.

C. Hippolytus is brought on stage, dying, and the goddess Artemis appears ex machina.
   1. Artemis tells Theseus the truth of what happened.
   2. When she bids Hippolytus farewell, she tells him that the next time Aphrodite loves a human, she will destroy him in vengeance for Hippolytus.

IX. Throughout Hippolytus, along with the emphasis on inappropriate sexuality and the merciless nature of the goddess’s power, Euripides stresses the dangerous and ambiguous nature of speech.

A. Here again, we can see a connection with Sophism: one of the standard rhetorical antitheses in fifth-century Athens was between logos, word or speech, and ergon, deed.

B. It is noteworthy that Hippolytus has almost no direct action; all the erga, or works, are accomplished by logoi, or words.

C. The play also stresses the power of speech in a less direct but no less significant way in its presentation of Phaedra’s understanding of her situation.
   1. Phaedra lays very little emphasis on the fact that she is determined not to sleep with Hippolytus; instead, she stresses that she has decided not to tell anyone of her passion.
   2. Similarly, what she dreads is that her passion should be spoken of and have the power to destroy her children’s lives.

D. The entire play meditates on the power of speech, the ways in which logos can transform itself into ergon, the inherently untrustworthy nature of speech, and its relationship to human action.

Essential Reading:
Euripides, Hippolytus.

Supplementary Reading:
Knox, “Hippolytus of Euripides.”
McClure, Spoken Like a Woman, chapter 4.
Questions to Consider:
1. Who would you consider the “protagonist” or “main character” of this play, Phaedra or Hippolytus? Does it make a difference for our understanding of the play?
2. Given the assumptions of her society, is Phaedra justified in blaming Hippolytus to save her own reputation?
Lecture Eighteen
Euripides on War and Women

Scope: We next examine two of Euripides’s tragedies (Hecuba and Trojan Women) in which he paints vivid portraits of the damage caused to civilians, particularly to women, by war. We begin with a sketch of the Peloponnesian War, which was in full swing when these plays were performed. We then discuss Euripides’s treatment of the conquered women of Troy and discuss the possible implications of his choice of Greece’s mythical enemies, the Trojans, as subjects of these tragedies.

Outline

I. In Hecuba and The Trojan Women, Euripides offers two versions of the same events.
   A. Both plays are set immediately after the Sack of Troy.
      1. The Trojan men have all been killed.
      2. The Trojan women and children have been enslaved.
      3. The women are waiting outside Troy to be taken to Greece by their new masters.
   B. Both plays highlight the sufferings of Hecuba, queen of Troy. Not only has she lost her home, her husband, and her freedom, but in the plays, she also loses her remaining children.
   C. Euripides treats these basic narrative points very differently in the two plays. To understand why, we must look at what was happening in Athens when Hecuba and The Trojan Women were produced.

II. Hecuba was probably produced around 424, and Trojan Women was produced in 415 B.C. From 431 to 404 B.C., Athens and Sparta were fighting one another in the Peloponnesian War.
   A. The war was between Athens and her allies on one side and Sparta and her allies on the other. The war began in 431 and ended in the defeat of Athens by Sparta in 404.
   B. The war dragged on for nearly three decades, during which time many of the surviving tragedies were written.
   C. The history of so long a war is obviously very complicated, but some highlights from just the early years will be enough to demonstrate the implications of this war for tragedy.
      1. In 430–429, plague broke out in Athens; the statesman Pericles was among those killed by it.
      2. From about 429 onward, Athens was home to war refugees from allied city-states.
      3. Attica was invaded by the Peloponnesian army several times.
      4. In 427–426, plague broke out a second time, killing, one-third of the Athenian population.
      5. In 427, Plataea, a city about forty miles from Athens, surrendered to Sparta after a two-year siege and was destroyed by the Spartans.
   D. All these events meant that Euripides (and Sophocles, as well) were writing during a time when the realities of war were only too evident and too obviously applicable.

III. Hecuba is the earlier of Euripides’s two tragedies about the aftermath of the fall of Troy.
   A. We do not know the exact date of Hecuba, but we can be all but certain that it was produced after 426 B.C. and before 423 B.C.; most scholars accept the date 424.
   B. The play focuses on Hecuba herself and the impact of events on her.
      1. Hecuba shows us a defeated woman who is nevertheless capable of action and revenge.
      2. Hecuba, like most of Euripides’s plays, has been read in various ways, some assuming that Hecuba remains a sympathetic character throughout the play, and others that we are meant to lose our sympathy for her as the play progresses.
   C. The plot of Hecuba revolves around Hecuba’s two devastating losses, of her daughter Polyxena and her son Polydorus. Polyxena is sacrificed by the Greeks, and Polydorus is murdered by his host, Polymester.
   D. The murder of Polydorus leads to the culminating scene of the play, Hecuba’s revenge on Polymestor.
      1. Hecuba sends a message to Polymestor asking him to come visit her and to bring his sons.
      2. Once he is there, she persuades him to believe that she has treasure hidden in her tent.
      3. He enters the tent with her, where she and other women kill his sons and put out his eyes.
E. One of the primary critical questions about this play is whether the audience should see Hecuba’s revenge on Polymestor as justified or should feel revulsion at her deeds.

F. In either case, Euripides has given us a portrait of a human personality driven beyond endurance by suffering and yet not powerless. *The Trojan Women* paints a very different picture.

IV. We are unsure of *Hecuba*’s exact date, but we know much more about the context in which *The Trojan Women* was produced. We have evidence of the date (415) and of the other plays in the tetralogy.

A. The complete tetralogy included *Alexander, Palamedes, The Trojan Women*, and the satyr play *Sisyphus*. In this tetralogy, Euripides apparently followed Aeschylus’s practice of writing a closely connected set of plays that explores one continuous story.

B. By 415, the Peloponnesian War’s effects had become even grimmer than in the earlier years. Ironically, Athens was nominally at peace.
   1. Athens and Sparta had ratified a peace treaty in 421.
   2. Almost immediately, it was clear that this peace would not hold.

C. In 416, Athens sent an expedition against the neutral island of Melos.
   1. Melos surrendered in the winter of 416/415.
   2. Athens killed all the adult males of Melos and enslaved the women and children. Five hundred Athenians were then sent to the island as colonists.

D. In the summer of 415, Athens undertook the “Sicilian Expedition.”
   1. This unprovoked assault against Sicily ended in 413 in the massacre of the Athenian troops.
   2. The Sicilian Expedition had already been voted on when Euripides presented *The Trojan Women*. It is remarkable that this play was produced right before the expedition.

V. The timeframe and events of *The Trojan Women* are much the same as those of *Hecuba*, but the emphasis is very different.

A. In *Hecuba*, Polyxena’s and Polydorus’s deaths were important.

B. In *Trojan Women*, Hecuba herself remains, but in place of Polyxena and Polydorus, we meet her daughter Cassandra, her daughter-in-law Andromache, and her grandson Astyanax.

C. The stress here is on the daughters of Hecuba who will survive to suffer more, not on those who will die and end their suffering.

D. Perhaps the most striking difference between the two plays is that the Hecuba of her name-play, though destroyed by her grief, is still able to act, while the Hecuba of *Trojan Women* is able only to speak.
   1. In *Hecuba*, the queen takes direct and bloody vengeance on Polymestor. She uses persuasive speech to get him into her power, but the action is her own.
   2. In *Trojan Women*. Hecuba attempts revenge but indirectly; she tries to persuade Menelaus to kill Helen.

E. *Hecuba* does not emphasize Helen’s role as the ultimate cause of the Trojan War. In *Trojan Women*, however, Hecuba directly confronts Helen and accuses her. The culminating scene of the play is a debate between Hecuba and Helen in which each woman says that the other was ultimately responsible for the Trojan War.
   1. Helen pleads her own cause by saying that Hecuba, as Paris’s mother, bears ultimate responsibility.
   2. Hecuba vehemently rejects Helen’s claims.
   3. In the play, Hecuba seems to prevail and Menelaus says that he will kill Helen as soon as they arrive home, but we know from many other ancient works that he did not do so.
   4. Thus, the question of blame is left unresolved, and Hecuba’s revenge is unaccomplished.

F. Helen’s Spartan origin is stressed throughout *Trojan Women*.
   1. One possible interpretation is that Helen represents the Spartans.
   2. If so, then her debate with Hecuba over the allocation of blame for the war may reflect a sense that blame for the Peloponnesian War is not so easily fixed either.

G. Comparing these two plays reminds us of the flexible nature of the myths from which the tragedians drew their plots and warns us against looking for consistency of characters from play to play.
VI. In both these plays, the use of language and the problematic nature of rhetoric and speech are, once again, clear subsidiary themes.

A. This theme is particularly notable in Hecuba, in which Odysseus’s use of speech is both powerful and horrifying. He is a glib, polished rhetorician who argues for Polyxena’s death.

B. In Trojan Women, Hecuba faces Helen in a debate in which Helen, like Odysseus, argues persuasively but falsely.

C. Once again, we are reminded of the importance of Sophism and the questions it raised about the inherent untrustworthiness of language.

Essential Reading:
Euripides, Hecuba, The Trojan Women.

Supplementary Reading:
Demand, A History of Ancient Greece, chapter 12 (“Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War”).

Questions to Consider:
1. Can either Hecuba or The Trojan Women be read simply as an “anti-war” play? In other words, by drawing such attention to the suffering of noncombatants, is Euripides questioning the idea of war, or is he simply describing that suffering as among the inevitable evils of human existence?

2. Critics disagree over how we are supposed to take Hecuba’s revenge in the play of her name. Is she justified, or are we supposed to see her revenge as an example of suffering that has degraded a noble woman to the level of her tormenters? Is there some middle ground?
Lecture Nineteen
Euripides the Anti-Tragedian

Scope: This lecture looks at two of Euripides’s least “tragic” tragedies: *Iphigenia in Tauris* and *Orestes*. Written near the end of both the Peloponnesian War and Euripides’s life, these plays differ greatly in tone, but resemble one another in their reversal of many standard aspects of tragedy. The lecture summarizes each play and discusses why it is “anti-tragic” and what the implications of this “anti-tragedy” may be.

Outline

I. *Iphigenia in Tauris* was produced between 414 and 410 B.C.; the commonly accepted date is 413. In this play, Euripides again turns to the House of Atreus to find his subject matter. However, the plot contains several startling differences from the more familiar versions of Iphigenia’s and Orestes’s stories.

   A. *Iphigenia in Tauris* reflects a variant tradition that Iphigenia was not actually killed at Aulis but was rescued by Artemis.

   B. According to the prologue, spoken by Iphigenia, Artemis demanded her sacrifice in fulfillment of a vow Agamemnon had made long previously to offer his most beautiful possession to the goddess.

      1. This version contradicts both Aeschylus’s treatment in *The Oresteia*, in which the sacrifice was not the result of any action of Agamemnon’s, and the more standard variant, in which Agamemnon directly angered Artemis by claiming to surpass her in the hunt.

      2. The sacrifice of Iphigenia is, thus, merely incidental to the narrative of the Trojan War: Artemis demands fulfillment of Agamemnon’s vow, then, but could have demanded it at any time.

   C. Orestes and Pylades arrive in Tauris, because Apollo has advised Orestes to go there and steal a wooden statue of Artemis. This is necessary for Orestes’s final release from the torments of the Furies.

      1. Perhaps the most surprising innovation in this play is the statement that Orestes’s trial on the Areopagus did not free him from the Furies.

      2. When he tells Iphigenia his story, Orestes says that several of the Furies refused to accept the verdict and continued to torment him.

      3. Again, this version undercuts and rejects the paradigm set up by *The Oresteia*.

II. The plot of *Iphigenia in Tauris* has two main focal points: the two siblings’ recognition of one another and their plan for escape.

   A. Iphigenia, as a priestess of Artemis, is responsible for overseeing the sacrifice of any travelers who come to her land. Orestes and Pylades arrive there on Apollo’s orders and are, of course, almost sacrificed.

   B. The recognition scene is delayed through a long and effective build-up.

      1. Iphigenia agrees to let one of the two strangers return to Greece if he will carry a letter for her to Argos.

      2. Orestes (who has not told her his name) agrees to stay. Pylades accepts the letter and vows to deliver it but asks how he could keep his vow if the letter were lost.

      3. Iphigenia then tells him the content of the letter and mentions for the first time that its addressee is Orestes.

   C. The recognition scene was singled out for praise by Aristotle.

      1. Orestes understands who Iphigenia is as soon as she recites the letter, but he has to prove his identity to her.

      2. Instead of the use of tokens, as in the Electra plays, Orestes and Iphigenia exchange memories of their parents’ house in Argos and the stories their older sister Electra told them.

   D. Iphigenia then plans a way for all three of them to escape and to take the statue of Artemis back to Greece with them.

      1. She tells the king, Thoas, that the statue has been defiled by the pollution of Orestes’s matricide and that both it and the two victims must be taken to the sea and purified by salt water.

      2. Once at sea, Orestes, Pylades, and Iphigenia will escape on Orestes’s ship.

   E. In one final surprising twist at the end of the play, Euripides has the escape plan almost fail.
III. *Iphigenia in Tauris* differs from a standard tragedy in some very important ways.

A. It has a happy ending for all the main characters.

B. The play is anti-tragic, because dreadful and irremediable actions are avoided at the last moment.

C. Despite these “happy” elements, the overall tone of *Iphigenia in Tauris* is melancholy and bittersweet; it emphasizes loneliness, exile, and sorrow.

D. Critics have long disagreed over what to call this play; suggestions have included melodrama, romance, and tragicomedy. In view of its tone, tragicomedy is perhaps the best term.

IV. *Orestes* (408), too, starts from the traditional stories of the House of Atreus but focuses on an episode that seems to be Euripides’s own invention: the actions of Orestes and Electra between the murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and Orestes’s trial in Athens. As in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Euripides changes some of the traditional details of the story in ways that have a profound impact.

A. Most important, Euripides suggests that Orestes’s murder of his mother took place at a time when a fully functioning court system already existed.

1. Unlike *The Oresteia*, in which Orestes is the victim of two contradictory duties and his dilemma is the catalyst for developing a system of justice, in this play, Orestes is simply a brutal murderer, a vigilante with little or no justification for his actions.

2. In fact, the play develops around the idea that Orestes and Electra both are being tried in Argos for murder and that they are condemned to death by the citizens.

B. Orestes’s torment by the Furies is described as physical sickness accompanied by spells of madness.

1. Electra questions whether the Furies are responsible or whether it is “all in his mind.”

2. Again, such a question pulls the story out of the realm of mythic grandeur and into the mundane and repellent.

C. Euripides also changes the traditional storyline by having Menelaus and Helen arrive in Argos right after the murder.

V. In the first half of the play, Orestes, Electra, and Pylades are mainly sympathetic characters. After they learn that they have been sentenced to death, they are revealed as little more than utterly amoral, psychotic thugs.

A. The sentence of the people of Argos is that Orestes and Electra must kill themselves.

1. Pylades agrees to die with them but suggests that they should try to cause some anguish to Menelaus as well by killing Helen.

2. Electra suggests that they can do even better; they can kill Helen, then escape, if they also take Menelaus’s daughter Hermione hostage and threaten to kill her if Menelaus tries to stop them.

B. Any possible sympathy we had for Orestes’s murder of his mother and Aegisthus is undercut by his immediate and enthusiastic willingness to kill both Helen and the utterly innocent Hermione.

VI. No less noticeable than Euripides’s undercutting of the traditional presentation of characters and storyline is his treatment of some of the conventions of tragedy in this play.

A. Helen cries out from inside the *skene* building that she is being murdered, but she is not killed.

B. The messenger speech recounting Orestes’s attempt on Helen’s life is given by a Phrygian slave in such garbled Greek as to be almost incomprehensible.

C. Orestes, Pylades, and Electra appear on the roof of the *skene* in the standard position of *deus ex machina* at the end.

1. Instead of being gods who will solve the problems, they stand ready to murder Hermione and to burn down the palace.

2. Their appearance is reminiscent of Medea’s but even more startling; Medea was in some sense godlike, and they are anything but.

VII. All these elements together call into question the meaning of the actual *deus ex machina* ending of the play and our understanding of the play as a whole.

A. Apollo appears and apparently resolves all the difficulties.

1. He declares that Helen has escaped Orestes’s and Pylades’s murderous intentions and become a goddess and that Menelaus should, therefore, remarry.
2. Orestes must travel to Athens for purification and must then marry Hermione (at whose throat he is currently holding a sword).
3. Pylades must marry Electra.

B. The convention of the *deus ex machina* has never been more problematic.
   1. The conflicts to be resolved are so great that the easy solutions offered by Apollo seem inadequate.
   2. Because the murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have been ripped out of their mythic context and put into a modern, judicial context, it is difficult to accept Apollo’s comment that he ordered the murders as sufficient justification.
   3. Finally, Apollo himself has been called into question so frequently during the play that he does not seem a wholly unambiguous character here at the end.

C. As with *Iphigenia at Tauris*, critics continue to be puzzled over how to classify *Orestes*.

VIII. The question remains of what we are to make of these “anti-tragic” tragedies. Is it significant that in his old age, Euripides wrote such revisionist versions of the Trojan War background myths? That question has two possible answers.
   A. On the one hand, these plays (and others) can be seen as representative of Euripides’s growing disillusionment with Athens as the Peloponnesian War dragged on.
   B. On the other hand, it is worth remembering just how small a sample of tragedies has come down to us. If we had more tragedies to work from, we might find that such “anti-tragic” plays were a common subset of tragedy all along.

**Essential Reading:**
Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris, Orestes*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Arnott, “Euripides and the Unexpected.”
Wolff, “Orestes.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. In *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Euripides seems to reject Aeschylus’s portrayal of the foundation of the Athenian justice system. What do you make of this? What point might Euripides have been trying to make?
2. Do you think it is valid to see these plays as representative of Euripides’s disillusionment with Athens, or is it a mistake to try to extrapolate information about the playwright’s personal opinions from his plays?
Lecture Twenty
The Last Plays of Euripides

Scope: In this lecture, we examine Euripides’s last two plays, both performed posthumously (as part of the same trilogy), *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Bacchae*. The emphasis of the lecture is on *Bacchae*, but we will begin by looking briefly at *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Euripides’s last revisiting of the House of Atreus theme, and discussing how the modifications he makes to the traditional story differ from his earlier treatments. The lecture then turns to a discussion of the *Bacchae*, the only Greek tragedy to feature Dionysus as a main character. We will discuss several of the play’s major themes, including the emphasis on the worship of Dionysus as a form of madness; the resistance of the main character, Pentheus, to the god’s power; and the terrible price that Pentheus pays for his lack of belief.

Outline

I. The last two plays by Euripides to be performed were *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Bacchae*. These plays, performed posthumously, could hardly be more different from one another and remind us of the dangers of drawing sweeping characterizations about the playwright’s “late” style.

II. In *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Euripides returns once more to the story of the House of Atreus and elaborates on the events leading up to Iphigenia’s sacrifice. The play focuses on the emotions and conflicts of the main characters—Agamemnon, Menelaus, Clytemnestra, and Iphigenia herself.

A. The Agamemnon of this play is not Aeschylus’s powerful paradigm of the human condition, or even the coldly logical general of *Hecuba*, but simply a father faced with an agonizing dilemma.
   1. When the play opens, Agamemnon has written Clytemnestra to bring Iphigenia to Aulis to be married to Achilles but regrets doing so and writes a second letter telling her not to come.
   2. The second letter is intercepted by Menelaus, and the two brothers quarrel.
   3. When Clytemnestra arrives with Iphigenia and the baby Orestes, Agamemnon and Menelaus reverse positions; Menelaus recommends that the army be disbanded, but Agamemnon sees no alternative to sacrificing Iphigenia.

B. This Clytemnestra is a tour de force. Euripides has recast the frightening, “man-hearted” figure of earlier tragedy into a noble but sympathetic and understandable woman.
   1. Clytemnestra learns of Agamemnon’s intentions through a conversation with Achilles. She greets him as her soon to be son-in-law, but it quickly becomes obvious that he has no idea what she is referring to.
   2. Agamemnon’s plan to sacrifice Iphigenia is revealed to both Clytemnestra and Achilles by Agamemnon’s old servant.

C. Clytemnestra also makes a passionate and moving appeal to Agamemnon not to kill Iphigenia, in which Euripides makes some of his most startling innovations.
   1. Clytemnestra says that Agamemnon had killed her first husband and her infant child and married her by force but that she forgave him and became a good wife to him.
   2. She asks him to consider what the sacrifice of Iphigenia will mean to her as she sits at home waiting for him to return.
   3. Both these details work to make the Clytemnestra of the later story understandable.

D. Finally, in the character of Iphigenia herself, Euripides acts against our expectations and reverses the normal course of the story.
   1. At first, Iphigenia is horrified and begs her father not to kill her.
   2. She then undergoes a change of heart and decides to die willingly.
   3. Aristotle objected to this change of heart, saying that the girl who dies willingly has no connection with the one who pleads for her life, but in fact the change is understandable; Iphigenia cannot accept Achilles’s offer to fight for her life, because it will cost too many Greek lives.
4. The play ends with a messenger speech describing Iphigenia’s last-minute rescue by Artemis. Most scholars, however, think that this is a later interpolation and that Euripides probably left open the question of whether Iphigenia died or was rescued.

E. *Iphigenia at Aulis* is less clearly linked to the Peloponnesian War than were *Hecuba* and *Trojan Women*, but it shares several themes in common with those plays.
   1. Again, the suffering of innocent women is highlighted.
   2. Iphigenia’s willing sacrifice of her life clearly parallels Polyxena’s willing death. In both cases, Euripides endows a young girl with “masculine” attributes of courage, honor, and self-sacrifice.

III. *Bacchae* is so different from *Iphigenia at Aulis* that if we did not know that they were both written at the end of Euripides’s life, we would never have guessed it. *Bacchae* is also unique in being the only surviving tragedy in which Dionysus is actually a character.

A. The play describes Dionysus’s establishment of his worship in his hometown of Thebes and the terrible vengeance he takes against his relatives, who refuse to believe in his divinity.
   1. Dionysus speaks the prologue and sets the scene of the play. He says that he has returned to Thebes in disguise.
   2. He is presenting himself as a human priest of Dionysus and is accompanied by a band of Asian women who are worshippers of this new god.
   3. Throughout the play, the audience knows that the character in question is the god himself, but the other characters in the play think that they are dealing with a human being.

B. In the prologue, Dionysus says that he has come to Thebes for two main reasons: to avenge his mother’s honor and to establish his religion. Both of these will involve punishing his recalcitrant relatives.
   1. Dionysus’s mother, Semele, was incinerated when she was tricked by the jealous Hera into seeing Zeus in his full glory.
   2. Semele’s sisters have refused to believe that she ever had an affair with Zeus or that such a being as Dionysus exists.
   3. They say that Zeus struck Semele with a thunderbolt to punish her for claiming that her lover was Zeus.
   4. In retribution, Dionysus has possessed all the women of Thebes (including his aunts) with Dionysiac frenzy.

C. The worship of Dionysus appears in two separate forms in this play, marked by two contrasted bands of female worshippers.
   1. The members of the chorus, who willingly accepted the divinity of Dionysus and have followed the “priest” of Dionysus from Asia Minor to Greece, enjoy a beneficent and controlled experience of Dionysus.
   2. The women of Thebes have had Dionysian madness thrust upon them as a punishment for their disbelief in the god’s existence. They enjoy their Dionysiac frenzy while they are in its grip, but it comes at a great cost both to them as individuals and to Pentheus, who tries to interfere.

IV. The play’s action revolves around the conflict between Dionysus and his cousin, Agave’s son Pentheus. Pentheus’s grandfather Cadmus (the founder of Thebes) has handed the kingship over to Pentheus as his one living grandson.

A. Pentheus disbelieves in the existence of any such god as Dionysus.
   1. It is obvious, therefore, to Pentheus, that the stranger who claims to be a priest of this new god must be a charlatan.
   2. Pentheus believes that his duty as King of Thebes is to protect his city by exposing the charlatan for what he is and reclaiming the Theban women.

B. Pentheus orders the “stranger” to be captured, bound, and brought before him.
   1. When the bound Dionysus appears, Pentheus questions him contemptuously, cuts off his hair, and takes away his *thyrsus*, or staff.
   2. Dionysus does not resist any of this; he simply reminds Pentheus with each step that Pentheus is offending Dionysus by his actions.

C. Pentheus orders the imprisonment of Dionysus, and the god is led off. He soon frees himself, however, simultaneously causing an earthquake that destroys Pentheus’s palace.
1. This earthquake is one of the most discussed scenes in extant tragedy; theories on it range from the idea that Euripides had somehow arranged for a collapsible skene to the idea that nothing at all happened visibly.

2. Dionysus reappears after the earthquake and tells the chorus that Pentheus was unable to chain him; whenever he tried, a bull appeared instead.

3. Pentheus is irritated at Dionysus’s escape but still does not accept the reality of the new god.

D. Pentheus’s continued disbelief after the earthquake and Dionysus’s escape strikes some readers as implausible. Given Pentheus’s assumptions, however, it makes sense.
   1. Pentheus cannot accept the idea that there could be a new god.
   2. Even more impossible than the idea of a new god is the idea that a god could be born from a human mother.
   3. Given these assumptions, even an earthquake and a miraculous escape are not evidence enough.

V. Pentheus decides to send soldiers to force the women back to Thebes. Dionysus suggests that Pentheus should go to see the women’s revels on the mountain instead.
   A. Dionysus slowly gets Pentheus into his power, until the ultra-rationalist King of Thebes is dressed as a woman, seeing double, and hallucinating.

   B. The two cousins’ conversation before Pentheus goes off to the mountain is packed with double meanings and irony.
      1. Dionysus tells Pentheus that he will be an example to all men.
      2. He adds that Pentheus will be brought home in his mother’s arms.
      3. He further tells Pentheus that an extraordinary fate awaits him.
      4. Pentheus interprets all these remarks positively, but the audience knows that he is going to a gruesome death.

VI. We learn of his death through one of the most famous messenger speeches in tragedy. The messenger describes how Pentheus was torn limb from limb by his mother, Agave, and his aunts, who thought they were dismembering a mountain lion.
   A. The horror of the messenger speech has barely sunk in before Agave enters, brandishing Pentheus’s head on her thyrsus. Still hallucinating, she thinks she has killed a lion.
   B. Cadmus, Agave’s father, has to talk her out of her mania and bring her to see that she has killed her son. She asks Cadmus why they had to suffer, and he tells her that it was punishment for their disbelief.
   C. Dionysus’s revenge against his family is complete, and his worship is established.

Essential Reading:
Euripides, The Bacchae, Iphigenia at Aulis.

Supplementary Reading:
Diller, “Euripides’ Final Phase.”
Rosenmeyer, “Tragedy and Religion.”
Sale, “Psychoanalysis of Pentheus.”

Questions to Consider:
1. Many scholars have read Pentheus in psychological terms, as someone who has “repressed” his own aspirations toward the Dionysiac release of wild and irrational impulses. Do you think this approach is valid for analyzing characters in tragedy? Why or why not?

2. Do you agree that the earthquake in Bacchae could have been “staged” simply through the chorus’s description and dance, or do you think (as many scholars do) that something visual must have happened to or around the skene? If so, can you suggest what that something might have been, given what you know about the possibilities of Greek stagecraft?
Lecture Twenty-One
Euripides and the Gods

Scope: This final lecture on Euripides turns to one of the most vexing critical questions about this tragedian: what was his attitude toward the traditional gods of Greek culture?

Outline

I. Any reader of Euripides’s plays will notice that the gods in them appear to be callous, merciless, petty, vengeful, and anything but admirable. Dionysus in The Bacchae is a good illustration of many of these qualities.
   A. The vengeance Dionysus takes on his family is complete and ruthless.
      1. Pentheus dies as horrible a death as can be imagined, Agave must come to the realization that she has murdered her own son, and Cadmus must endure the destruction of his family line.
      2. Cadmus pleads with Dionysus for mercy and pity, but Dionysus remains implacable.
      3. Cadmus is not the only Euripidean character to reproach a god for cruelty; Heracles’s father, Amphitryon, gives a stinging rebuke of Zeus, even before Heracles’s madness, when he thinks that Lycus will kill Heracles’s children.
   B. This lack of the finer human emotions of compassion, mercy, and forgiveness does not appear only at the end of Bacchae; throughout the play, Dionysus shows no understanding for human frailty, no compassion, no mercy.

II. Dionysus is not the only god Euripides portrays in this way; other examples include Aphrodite and Artemis in Hippolytus, Hera in Heracles, and (though less obviously) Helius and Medea in Medea.
   A. In Hippolytus, Aphrodite is fixated on the dishonor done to her by Hippolytus’s lack of attention and decides to take her vengeance by destroying Hippolytus, just as Dionysus takes his vengeance by destroying his Theban relatives.
      1. Nor is Aphrodite the only such deity in Hippolytus; Artemis says that she will avenge Hippolytus by destroying the next mortal that Aphrodite cherishes.
      2. In Hippolytus, humans are pawns the gods use to fight their own battles.
   B. The implacable hatred of Hera for Heracles is a given of Heracles’s myth. However, Euripides’s reworking of the order of Heracles’s story draws our attention inexorably to the goddess’s hatred and cruelty.
   C. Medea is presented as a god-like figure at the end of her play, and she possesses characteristics that fit the pattern of Euripidean gods: ruthlessness, mercilessness, and cruelty.
      1. She kills her children as a means of taking vengeance on Jason.
      2. She refuses to show any pity toward Jason when she sees him utterly grief-stricken.
      3. Although no god appears in the play, the fact that Helius sends the dragon chariot to rescue Medea certainly indicates, at a minimum, that he does not disapprove of his granddaughter’s actions.

III. Judging from the extant plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, this is not the only way to portray gods in tragedy.
   A. Aeschylus puts his gods on stage in The Oresteia, but imbues them with nobility and grandeur. Aeschylus’s gods are not petty.
   B. With the one exception of Athena in Ajax, the gods are noticeably absent in Sophocles’s plays. Sophocles’s characters must try to figure out the gods’ will through oracles, omens, and their own sense of what their culture teaches about gods.
   C. With these counterexamples in mind, it seems safe to say that Euripides chose to portray the gods as petty and vindictive. The question is, why?

IV. The answer may lie in the nature of the gods themselves. The traditional gods of Greek culture were highly anthropomorphic, both in their physical appearances and attributes and in their emotions; at the same time, they were (among other things) personifications of powerful natural forces.
   A. Anthropomorphism brought many problems with it, from the Homeric epics on.
1. Endowing the gods with human-like emotions and qualities makes them easier to conceptualize and to imagine.
2. The gods are immortal and ageless, however—they are immune from human suffering.
3. Immunity from suffering inevitably implies a lack of the nobler human emotions and impulses. Courage, altruism, and self-sacrifice cannot be attributed to beings who have nothing to lose.
4. To some extent, therefore, a certain pettiness among the gods is “built into the system.”

B. Anthropomorphism cannot, however, account for the pitilessness and mercilessness of the gods in Euripides. We must consider the other important aspect of the gods, that they are personifications of forces of nature.

C. It makes no more sense to ask such deities for mercy than it would to ask forces of nature for mercy.

V. The nature of the gods was among many other intellectual, religious, and philosophical topics being fiercely debated in the fifth century. Perhaps Euripides is intentionally “pushing the envelope” of anthropomorphism as a way of contributing to this debate.

A. No sane person can deny the power of elemental forces, such as sexual attraction, or physical realities, such as the sea.

B. But sane people can debate whether anthropomorphizing those forces as self-aware, sentient beings is the proper or most useful way to theorize them.
   1. Euripides’s treatment of the gods, then, takes anthropomorphism to its absurd end.
   2. If we anthropomorphize our gods, then these are the gods we get: Dionysus of The Bacchae, Aphrodite of Hippolytus.

C. These characterizations do not imply that Euripides was in any sense an “atheist.”
   1. In a culture in which the gods are personifications of realities of nature, atheism, in the sense of disbelief in such gods, becomes almost a cognitive impossibility.
   2. Euripides may have been making the point that however those forces and powers of nature should be represented and however we go about respecting their power, traditional anthropomorphism was simply not adequate.

VI. Of all Euripides’s plays, Ion gives perhaps the strongest sense of this disjunction between the numinous power represented by a god and the god as his anthropomorphized self.

A. The plot of Ion focuses on the son of the god Apollo and a mortal woman, Creusa.
   1. Apollo raped Creusa, daughter of the King of Athens. She gave birth to a son, Ion, whom she put in a basket and left in a cave.
   2. Apollo sent Hermes to rescue his son, and Hermes left the baby where the Pythia would find him.
   3. Thus, Ion was brought up at Delphi.

B. Creusa married Xuthus, and through her, he became King of Athens, but they had no children.
   1. They go to Delphi to ask the oracle for advice.
   2. Hermes, who speaks the play’s prologue, says that Apollo will declare that Ion is Xuthus’s son.
   3. Ion will be reunited with his mother, though neither will know their true relationship.

C. Ion and Creusa meet outside the temple, and Creusa says that she wants to consult an oracle on behalf of a friend who bore Apollo’s child to find out if the child is still alive.

D. Xuthus is told by the oracle that Ion is his son.
   1. He introduces himself to the boy and makes him swear not to tell Creusa.
   2. However, the chorus leader breaks the news to Creusa that Apollo has given Xuthus a grown son.
   3. Creusa’s old tutor persuades her that Xuthus is passing off some son of a slave woman as a gift from Apollo and plans to put this slave’s child on the throne after him.

E. At the tutor’s urging, Creusa decides to kill Xuthus and Ion both.
   1. The townspeople of Delphi discover Creusa’s plot, and she takes refuge at Apollo’s altar for safety.
   2. The Pythia enters and tells Ion not to harm Creusa but to leave Delphi and look for his mother. She gives him the basket and the clothes in which she found him.
   3. Creusa recognizes the basket. By describing the tokens inside it, she proves to Ion that she is his mother.
F. Creusa tells Ion that his father was Apollo. Ion is about to enter the temple to ask Apollo if this is true and, if so, why he told Xuthus that Ion was his son, when Athena appears ex machina and assures Ion that Creusa’s story is indeed true.

VII. Ion is obviously another Euripidean tragedy that does not fit our expectations of the genre. Our main consideration is the view it gives us of the god Apollo.

A. Apollo hardly shows in a noble light here. He lies, never acknowledges his son, and does not even appear himself to settle Ion’s doubts but sends his sister Athena.

B. Yet in Ion’s view, Apollo is a numinous, glorious, and praiseworthy god. When we first see Ion, he is singing praise to Apollo. He later says that gods should not be accused of breaking their own laws.

C. Once again, Euripides has a character state an objection that is insuperable if the traditional anthropomorphic portrayal of the gods is maintained.

Essential Reading:
Euripides, Ion.

Supplementary Reading:
Knox, “Euripidean Comedy.”

Questions to Consider:
1. What do you think Euripides intends his audience to make of his gods? Is he arguing that the gods in their traditional forms must be respected, that such gods cannot exist at all, or something in between the two poles?
2. Is it even possible for us, so far removed from Euripides’s culture in both time and assumptions, to make useful speculations about such matters as question 1?
Lecture Twenty-Two
The Last Plays of Sophocles

Scope: In this lecture, we return to Sophocles, who died a few months after Euripides. The lecture looks at his two last plays, *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. We begin with a detailed summary of the plot of *Philoctetes*, then consider the implications of its portrayal of Odysseus. We examine the “happy” ending of the play and some of the points it leaves unresolved. Next, we discuss Sophocles’s last play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, focusing on Oedipus’s role as a guardian hero in Colonus. Finally, we look at the portrait of Athens painted in *Oedipus at Colonus* and discuss its relationship to the state of the *polis* in 406, the year in which Sophocles wrote the play.

Outline

I. Both *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus* were written near the end of Sophocles’s long life. In *Philoctetes*, Sophocles deals with a side episode of the Trojan War, while in *Oedipus at Colonus*, he returns once more to the story of Oedipus and his family.

A. *Philoctetes* is unusual among Sophocles’s extant plays: it is the only play with a “happy” ending and the only one in which the hero finally yields and does what other characters have tried to persuade him to do.
   1. The basic storyline from which Sophocles worked is quite simple: the Greeks need Philoctetes and his bow (which had formally belonged to Heracles) to win the Trojan War.
   2. Philoctetes was among the Greeks who sailed for Troy, but he was bitten by a serpent in a sacred precinct and left with a poisoned wound in his foot.
   3. His cries of pain and the smell from his wound were so noxious that the Greeks abandoned him on the island of Lemnos.
   4. When a prophecy declared that Troy could only be taken with the bow of Heracles, the Greeks returned to Lemnos for Philoctetes.
   5. Philoctetes was not eager to go and had to be either persuaded or compelled to do so.

B. In Sophocles’s version, the task of getting Heracles’s bow falls to two men: Odysseus and the young son of Achilles, Neoptolemus. The play revolves around the interaction between Neoptolemus and Odysseus on the one hand and Neoptolemus and Philoctetes on the other.
   1. The play begins when Odysseus instructs Neoptolemus in the use of deceit to get Philoctetes’s cooperation.
   2. Neoptolemus asks if they cannot use force instead of deceit, but he eventually agrees to Odysseus’s plan.

C. Neoptolemus introduces himself to Philoctetes as the son of Achilles but lies about the reason for his presence on Lemnos. He claims that the Greeks insulted him by giving Achilles’s armor to Odysseus; therefore, he is sailing home for Greece.

D. Philoctetes believes Neoptolemus, greets him cordially, and asks for transportation home to Greece. Philoctetes also describes his suffering of the past nine years; he has been in constant pain and utterly alone, surviving on what he can kill with his bow.

E. Odysseus’s lying plan is furthered by the entrance of a sailor disguised as a merchant.
   1. This “merchant” warns that Odysseus is pursuing Neoptolemus and that other Greeks are on their way to take Philoctetes to Troy, either by persuasion or by force.
   2. Philoctetes asks Neoptolemus to get ready to sail for Greece, and Neoptolemus agrees.

II. The play changes direction when Philoctetes is stricken with an attack of his sickness and Neoptolemus is stricken by conscience.

A. In intense pain, Philoctetes begs Neoptolemus to kill him or, at least, to cut off his foot. He mentions that the bow was a gift to him because he put Heracles out of his agony by lighting the funeral pyre; now he wants Neoptolemus to do the same for him.
   1. At this point, Neoptolemus seems to move from mere lying rhetoric to genuine pity for Philoctetes’s suffering.
   2. Philoctetes hands the bow to Neoptolemus and falls asleep.
3. The chorus hints that Neoptolemus should take the bow and leave, but he refuses to do so.

B. When Philoctetes awakes and expresses gratitude that Neoptolemus is still there, Neoptolemus is overcome by his conscience and tells Philoctetes about Odysseus’s plot.
   1. In anger, Philoctetes asks Neoptolemus to return his bow to him.
   2. As Neoptolemus hesitates, Odysseus enters and demands the bow.

C. When Philoctetes says that he will never voluntarily help those who had abandoned him, Odysseus replies that he can stay in Lemnos. Odysseus and Neoptolemus leave, taking the bow with them.

D. Neoptolemus and Odysseus soon reenter; Neoptolemus has changed his mind and intends to return the bow. Odysseus leaves, saying he will return with armed men.

III. After Odysseus leaves, Neoptolemus tries to persuade Philoctetes that it is in his own interest to come willingly to Troy, but Philoctetes is adamant.

A. When he sees that he cannot persuade Philoctetes, Neoptolemus agrees to sail for Greece and take Philoctetes home. The play seems set to end in a way that the audience knows it cannot, because Troy did fall.

B. The discordance between the events in the play and the outcome dictated by tradition is resolved by the appearance of Heracles in a deus ex machina ending. He instructs Philoctetes to go to Troy and prophesies Paris’s death at his hands.

IV. This play has received a great deal of critical attention in recent years; it has been called the most ethically complex of Sophocles’s extant plays. The complexity is centered on the question of how we should read the character of Neoptolemus.

A. One very intriguing interpretation of the play focuses on Neoptolemus’s position as a young man over whom two different “teachers” are vying for influence.
   1. One of these teachers, Odysseus, is ultra-modern and holds an “end-justifies-the-means” view of conduct and, especially, of language.
   2. The other, Philoctetes, represents old-fashioned, Iliadic virtues in which language and action both should be trustworthy.
   3. The struggle between the two reiterates the anxiety about Sophism that we discussed in Antigone and Oedipus the King.
   4. This anxiety is underlined by the fact that it is all but impossible to tell what Neoptolemus’s actual motives are at any given moment in the play.

B. The “happy” ending of Philoctetes does not offer any easy solution to the problems raised by the conflict of modern politician and ancient Homeric warrior and their struggle to influence the character of the young Neoptolemus.
   1. Philoctetes succeeds in persuading Neoptolemus to take him home again, but this action would have resulted in disgrace for Neoptolemus.
   2. The intervention of Heracles ex machina means, in effect, that Odysseus wins.
   3. Heracles’s final words include an ominous foreshadowing of Neoptolemus’s later career. Heracles reminds the young man to revere the gods when Troy falls, but Neoptolemus was infamous for murdering Priam at his household altar.
   4. For all its appearance of resolution, the end of the play brings up as many questions as it answers.

C. Some scholars have even suggested that we should see Heracles at the end of the play as a false messenger, just as the “merchant” was false.
   1. In its fullest version, this theory says that Heracles is just Odysseus in disguise and that the deus ex machina speech is simply Odysseus’s final rhetorical flourish, in which he succeeds in duping Philoctetes.
   2. Intriguing though this idea is, it is hard to see how it could have been successfully conveyed to the ancient audience.

V. Oedipus at Colonus, Sophocles’s last play, shares some important features with Philoctetes.

A. In both plays, the title character is an outcast, banished from his society, because his company is too distressing to bear. Oedipus is a wanderer while Philoctetes is alone on a deserted island, but their situation is similar in that both are cut off from the life of the polis.
B. In both plays, the title character’s isolation is the result of an action he took in ignorance, but he must bear the consequences.

C. In both plays, the resolution is reached when the outcast becomes somehow necessary for the well-being of society and, therefore, in some sense, reintegrated into it. Oedipus the blind beggar becomes a “hero,” that is, a spirit who promises his protection to Colonus, the site of his death.

VI. *Oedipus the King* showed Oedipus’s rapid fall from a godlike state to the condition of an outcast; *Oedipus at Colonus* shows his slow rise from being an outcast to a godlike state.

A. The play begins with Oedipus’s arrival at a grove that is sacred to the Eumenides near the Attic village of Colonus.
   1. He recognizes from a prophecy that he will die in this place, and he sends for Theseus, King of Athens, to ask for his protection so that he will be allowed to stay in Colonus.
   2. At first a submissive beggar, Oedipus becomes more powerful and more numinous as the play progresses. The chorus members are frightened by him and call him *deinos*, even before they know who he is.
   3. At the end of the play, he “dies” by apparently being spirited away by the gods.

B. Oedipus’s disappearance is marked by the only time that the gods speak directly to him in either of his plays. Even in their direct speech (quoted by a messenger), these gods are still puzzling and remote.

VII. One of the most compelling aspects of this play is its portrait of Athens as it had been. This portrayal is manifested both in the character of Theseus and in the chorus’s words about Attica.

A. Theseus is portrayed as outstandingly noble. He receives Oedipus kindly and agrees to let him stay in the Eumenides’ sacred grove.
   1. Theseus also confers Athenian citizenship on Oedipus and defends him from his enemies.
   2. All these actions make Theseus, and through him, Athens, worthy of the protection Oedipus can bestow after his death.

B. One of the most moving descriptions of Athens in its glory days is given by the chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Ostensibly, the chorus is talking about Attica in general but everything mentioned refers directly to Athens.

C. Sophocles died before the defeat of Athens, but it must have been obvious by 406 that Athens might not win the war and that even if she won, she had been terribly damaged. Of all Greek heroes, Oedipus is perhaps the perfect emblem of what Sophocles must have hoped for Athens.

Essential Reading:
Sophocles, *Philoctetes*, *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Supplementary Reading:

———, “*Phusis* of Neoptolemus.”
Easterling, “*Philoctetes* and Modern Criticism.”
Gill, “Bow, Oracle, and Epiphany.”
Wilson, *The Hero and the City*.
Questions to Consider:

1. Many critics think that Neoptolemus starts to feel pity for Philoctetes and to regret deceiving him long before he actually tells Philoctetes about the deception. Do you agree with this reading?

2. Greek “heroes” (in the sense of spirits to whom sacrifices were offered) are often compared to Catholic and Orthodox saints; both are beings who lived as humans, but after death gained protective powers and are assumed to be attentive to the prayers of living humans. Does this comparison strike you as valid? Why or why not?
Lecture Twenty-Three
Other Tragedians and a Comedian

Scope: This lecture has two main sections. First, it discusses two tragedies of disputed origin, one famous and one obscure; second, it looks briefly at reflections of tragedy in Athenian comedy.

Outline

I. We have two extant tragedies yet to discuss, which have been handed down to us under the names of Aeschylus and Euripides, but many modern scholars now doubt the authenticity of these attributions. These plays are *Prometheus Bound*, attributed to Aeschylus, and *Rhesus*, attributed to Euripides.

A. *Prometheus Bound* dramatizes the myth of Prometheus, a Titan who angered Zeus by bringing fire to humans. His punishment was to be shackled to a rock in the Caucasus, where he will undergo eternal torture.

B. Prometheus remains shackled to his crag throughout the play; the action consists in the visits he is paid by a series of well-wishers. The first to enter is the chorus, representing the Oceanids, or ocean nymphs. They pity Prometheus and he tells them of Zeus’s ingratitude.

C. Prometheus’s next visitor is the Oceanids’ father, Oceanus. He sympathizes with Prometheus, councils him to stop railing against Zeus, and promises to ask Zeus to release him.

D. Io appears next. She was one of Zeus’s mistresses whom he turned into a cow to try to hide her from the jealous Hera. Prometheus tells Io that one day a descendant of hers will release him; this will be Heracles.

E. Prometheus also tells Io that he knows the secret of Zeus’s downfall: Zeus will one day beget a son who is fated to be stronger than his father. Only Prometheus knows the identity of this son’s mother, so only Prometheus could tell this secret to Zeus. He will do so when freed.

F. Finally, Hermes enters and tries to persuade Prometheus to tell him the secret of the fateful union. Prometheus refuses, and the play ends when an earthquake engulfs Prometheus and the chorus.

II. Many arguments can be made against the authenticity of *Prometheus Bound*. Among the most telling are the extraordinarily elaborate staging “effects” required by the play.

A. First, the play seems to require a very elaborate mechanē.

B. More important, the earthquake that ends the play seems beyond the capabilities of any staging devices Aeschylus was likely to have had available.

C. Another objection to this play’s authenticity is the view it gives of Zeus, which seems at odds with the Zeus of *The Oresteia*.

D. Finally, the play presents questions of Greek style; the language of *Prometheus Bound* differs in several respects from that of Aeschylus’s other plays. Most notably, it is much simpler, both in grammatical structure and in diction, than the language of other plays.

E. The question of the authorship of *Prometheus Bound* is far from settled.

III. Among the plays transmitted under Euripides’s name is one called *Rhesus*. We are on much firmer ground in questioning its authenticity; few scholars now argue that it was written by Euripides.

A. *Rhesus* dramatizes the events of Book 10 of the *Iliad*, in which Odysseus and Diomedes infiltrate the Trojan camp by night and kill Rhesus, a newly arrived Thracian ally of the Trojans.

B. The authenticity of *Rhesus* was already questioned in antiquity, and most modern scholars think that it dates to the fourth century B.C. There are several stylistic reasons to question its attribution to Euripides, which lead scholars to think that *Rhesus* represents a post-classical stage of tragedy.

IV. Remember that the apparent anomalies in *Prometheus Bound* and *Rhesus* may be illusions. Like the question of how to categorize such Euripidean plays as *Alcestis*, *Iphigenia at Tauris*, and *Orestes*, our feeling that these plays in some sense don’t “fit” may be created by our preconceived ideas of what tragedies should be, rather than by anything in the plays themselves.

A. Students of tragedy have tended to rely heavily on Aristotle’s descriptions of how tragedy should work.
B. The other fact that we must always keep in mind is just how small our sample of tragedy is, especially for Aeschylus and Sophocles.

V. We have not yet discussed another important source of information about tragedy, specifically about how it was viewed by its fifth-century audience and about the mechanics of staging, that is, the comedies of Aristophanes.
A. Aristophanes wrote near the end of the fifth century and into the beginning of the fourth century. We are uncertain how many plays he wrote. Eleven survive.
B. Several of Aristophanes’s surviving plays include scenes that satirize tragedy, tragic diction, and the conventions of tragic stagecraft, particularly Euripides’s stagecraft. I would like to discuss three plays in particular: Peace, Acharnians, and Thesmophoriasuzae.

VI. Aristophanes satirizes the mechane in the opening scene of Peace and in a pivotal scene in Thesmophoriasuzae.
A. In Peace, the character Trygaeus flies in on the mechane. He is riding an enormous dung beetle and says that he is trying to fly up to Olympus to speak to Zeus.
1. This scene is usually interpreted as a spoof of Euripides’s lost Bellerophon, in which the eponymous hero tried to ride his winged steed Pegasus to Mount Olympus.
2. At the very least, Peace tells us that by the end of the fifth century, the mechane could support not only an actor, but also some sort of representative of a mount for the actor.
B. To understand the scene that uses the mechane in Thesmophoriasuzae, we need a little background information on that play’s plot.
1. Euripides’s elderly relative Mnesilochus has disguised himself as a woman and infiltrated the Thesmophoria, a women’s religious festival. The women discover he is a man and tie him up.
2. In the scene in question, Mnesilochus hopes that Euripides will rescue him before the women do something dreadful to him.
3. Euripides’s attempt at “rescue” appears to involve flying by on the mechane, in character as Perseus, which allows Mnesilochus to recognize that he himself is supposed to be playing Andromeda.

VII. The ekkyklema, no less than the mechane, was also the target of Aristophanes’s satire.
A. In Acharnians, the main character, Dicaeopolis, visits Euripides to ask to borrow the rags he had seen the character Telephus wearing in Euripides’s play by that name. Euripides apparently appears on the ekkyklema.
1. Dicaeopolis calls to Euripides inside the house and receives the answer from a servant that Euripides is writing a tragedy.
2. Dicaeopolis responds, “Have yourself ekkyklemaed out.” When Euripides says that isn’t possible, Dicaeopolis tells him to do it anyway.
3. Finally, Euripides agrees to be “ekkyklemaed” out.
B. Finally, Thesmophoriasuzae includes a similar scene that seems to poke fun at the convention of the ekkyklema.
1. Near the beginning of the play, Euripides and Mnesilochus visit the tragedian Agathon to ask him to disguise himself as a woman and infiltrate the Thesmophoria.
2. Agathon is wheeled out of his house on the ekkyklema and proceeds to sing part of one of his tragedies.
C. These parody scenes seem to indicate that although the mechane and ekkyklema were frequently used in tragedy, the perception was that they at least had the potential to be ludicrous.

VIII. Aristophanes’s play Frogs approaches tragedy from a different angle. In it, Dionysus descends to Hades to bring back Euripides, who has just died. Frogs makes fun of some aspects of tragedy, especially its language, but also gives us a view of tragedy’s social importance at the end of the fifth century B.C. The play is extremely funny, but it has a serious core.
A. Dionysus wants to go to Hades because he wants to save Athens.
1. To do so, he needs a poet, specifically a tragedian, because the great ones are all dead.
2. He intends to bring Euripides back with him, but the play quickly turns into a contest between Euripides and Aeschylus over which one of them did more for Athens and so deserves to be resurrected.
B. The contest between Aeschylus and Euripides over which one is the better tragedian is also a contest between the “good old days” and the bleak present of 405.

C. The contest begins with the two tragedians critiquing lines from one another’s plays; it then progresses to an actual weighing of lines in a scale to see which is “weightier.” The upshot of the contest is that Dionysus chooses Aeschylus.

D. Aristophanes is an invaluable source of information on tragedy’s staging and on how Athenians in the late fifth century viewed the conventions of stagecraft; he also provides strong evidence for the serious, social, and moral role that tragedy played in Athens.

Essential Reading:
Aeschylus (?), Prometheus Bound.
Aristophanes, Frogs.
Euripides (?), Rhesus.

Supplementary Reading:
Aristophanes, The Poet and the Women.
Herington, “Aeschylus: The Last Phase.”

Questions to Consider:
1. Many scholars use the inconsistency in the depiction of Zeus in Prometheus Bound with Zeus in The Oresteia to support the idea that Aeschylus did not write this play. Our sources tell us, however, that Prometheus Bound was the first play in a trilogy and that the second play was Prometheus Unbound. Considering the other first plays we have read (Agamemnon, Suppliant Maidens), do you think it is valid to make assumptions about the portrayal of Zeus throughout the trilogy based only on Prometheus Bound?

2. Many scholars use Aristophanes’s parody scenes as our strongest evidence for the actual staging of tragedy and the use of the ekkyklema and the mechane. Do you think this supposition is valid? Why or why not?
Lecture Twenty-Four
The Tragic Legacy

Scope: This final lecture sketches the later history and continued influence of Greek tragedy. It begins by discussing the revivals of the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in the Hellenistic theatre, then turns to a sketch of the modification of the tragedians’ works in the Roman Seneca’s tragedy. The lecture then discusses various later “revivals” of tragedy in forms as different as Italian opera, Shakespearean drama, and French classicism. We conclude by looking at modern productions of Greek tragedy and some adaptations by such authors as Eugene O’Neill and Rita Dove.

Outline

I. It is a notable paradox that Greek tragedy, a dramatic form that flourished for less than a full century, has had such a profound influence on later theatrical and literary traditions.
   A. As we saw in the last lecture, Frogs indicates that the Athenians themselves considered other tragedians greatly inferior to Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.
      1. This preference does not mean that the writing of tragedy ceased after 406 B.C.; tragedies continued to be written throughout the fourth century.
      2. An indication that fourth-century tragedy was considered inferior in its own time to fifth-century tragedy is the introduction in 386 of contests in “Old Tragedy” at the City Dionysia. These were revivals of plays by the three great tragedians.
   B. It is also paradoxical that as the playwrights’ skills waned, the theatrical building was perfected and plays were performed more frequently. These developments became particularly marked in the Hellenistic period (323–31 B.C.).
   C. We are uncertain when dramatic contests stopped being held in Athens.
      1. Records of the City Dionysia exist up to the first century A.D.
      2. We know that the Theatre of Dionysus was used intermittently for some type of performances or spectacles up until at least the fourth century A.D.

II. As they did with many other forms of Greek literature, Roman authors adapted tragedy into Latin, with some changes and modifications.
   A. We have no extant tragedies from the first three centuries of Roman theatre, but we do know that tragedies were written in Rome throughout the third, second, and first centuries B.C., and we know the names of the most important playwrights. Most of these tragedies were adaptations from Greek originals.
   B. We have nine tragedies by Lucius Annaeus Seneca (5/4 B.C.–A.D. 65). All of them are adaptations of Greek originals.
   C. Tragedy does not seem to have been performed in the Byzantine Empire. We have the text of one religious drama, the Christus Patiens, probably written in the eleventh or twelfth century A.D., which is based on Euripides’s tragedies.

III. Tragedy reappeared as a theatrical form in the Renaissance, but Seneca, rather than one of the Greek tragedians, was the main influence on both form and style.
   A. Various Greek manuscripts were brought to Italy after the fall of Constantinople in 1453.
   B. The Italian Renaissance interest in Greek tragedy peaked in 1585 when Palladio’s great Teatro Olimpico, modeled after the classical Roman theaters, was opened in Vicenza with a production of Oedipus the King.
   C. One surprising outgrowth of the Italian interest in Greek tragedy was the development of opera.
      1. Around 1600, a group of Florentine scholars, poets, and musicians undertook to develop a new theatrical art form that would, they hoped, recreate Greek tragedy as closely as possible.
      2. The result was the beginning of Italian opera.

IV. Greek tragedy influenced authors outside of Italy as well, both directly and through the mediation of Seneca.
   A. Italian plays were often translated into English, and Italian plots were popular among English playwrights.
      1. Shakespeare’s tragedies were undoubtedly influenced by Italian plays.
2. When Shakespeare’s subject matter is classical, however, it is taken mostly from historians, not from tragedians.
3. Despite the tendency of modern scholars to compare Shakespearean and Greek tragedy, the Greek authors had little, if any, influence on Shakespeare.

B. In France, Greek tragedy had a more direct influence, though even there, it was often mingled with traces of Seneca. Jean Racine, one of the greatest of French playwrights, wrote tragedies based directly on the work of Euripides, such as Andromache and Phèdre.

V. Only in modern times has Greek tragedy really come into its own again, both as a source of influence and inspiration for playwrights and as a theatrical form in its own right. In fact, tragedy has become so popular that I will limit myself to the English-speaking world in discussing it.

A. The reasons for the renewed popularity of Greek tragedy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are undoubtedly numerous.
1. One very important cause is the growth of interest in classical mythology that marked the nineteenth century.
2. Another influence must be Freud. His interpretation of Oedipus the King, controversial though it remains, showed that the themes of classical drama could still resonate powerfully with modern audiences.

B. The renewed interest in classical tragedy led to a spate of performances, beginning in the late 1800s, that continues today. New translations continue to proliferate and are often accompanied by new productions.

VI. Perhaps even more important than tragedy’s resurgence in its own right is its importance as a source of inspiration, to be drawn upon, adapted, and reused in all sorts of ways by modern authors.

A. Some of the most important English-language playwrights of the twentieth century used Greek tragedy as a springboard for their own works. One of the most famous of such adaptations was Eugene O’Neill’s Mourning Becomes Electra, in which he reset The Oresteia in New England right after the Civil War.
B. Greek tragedy continued to inspire adaptations throughout the twentieth century. One of the most striking of these was the musical The Gospel at Colonus (1983), which interweaves the story of Oedipus at Colonus with a service in an African-American Pentecostal church.
C. More recently still, Rita Dove reset the story of Oedipus the King in an antebellum southern plantation in The Darker Face of the Earth.
D. It is too early to tell, but it seems that adaptations and reworkings of Greek tragedy will continue in the twenty-first century.

VII. A recent episode of Star Trek: Voyager featured the shipwreck of a character, B’Lana Torres, on a preindustrial world, where she became both the subject matter and the inspiration of a young playwright. The entire episode was built around Greek tragedy and our understanding of it.

A. The acting space and stagecraft reflected standard theories about tragedy.
B. The developing plot of the play reflected Aristotle’s Poetics and actual texts of Greek tragedy.
C. Even the idea that many of Euripides’s late plays were intended to call the Peloponnesian War into question found a place, because the playwright’s society was clearly a small, polis-like city-state often at war with other such communities.
D. Undoubtedly, many of the fans of Star Trek: Voyager did not recognize these references. Nevertheless, fifth-century Athenian tragedy permeated the episode and had clearly inspired the author.

VIII. We end where we began; by noting that this dramatic form that began in a particular religious festival of a particular god some 2,500 years ago remains vibrant, alive, and productive today.

A. The same cannot be said of other forms of Greek performance; we no longer gather for recitations of epic, for instance.
B. Something about tragedy seems to lift it out of its particular circumstances and beyond its particular gods, social issues, and political concerns to a kind of universality that is, in the last analysis, very surprising.
1. Tragedy remains an invaluable resource for scholars of the ancient world to learn about the social institutions, religious beliefs, and cultural constructions of Athenians in the fifth century B.C.
2. It seems no less certain that it will continue to speak directly to modern authors and modern audiences in theatres, cinemas, and their own living rooms, as well.

Supplementary Reading:
Brockett and Hildy, History of the Theatre, chapter 2, pp. 38–46.
Burian, “Tragedy Adapted.”
Dove, Darker Face of the Earth.
Easterling, “From Repertoire to Canon.”
Green, Theatre in Ancient Greek Society, chapters 3–6.
Taplin, Greek Tragedy in Action, chapter 11.
Vidal-Naquet, “Oedipus in Vicenza and in Paris.”

Questions to Consider:
1. What is it about Greek tragedy that makes it continue to be so productive for modern playwrights? Is the answer simply a matter of the familiarity of these stories, or can we point to some additional reason for its continued power?

2. Two modern adaptations of tragedy, The Gospel at Colonus and The Darker Face of the Earth, have intertwined Greek tragedy with references to race in modern American culture. Do you think this is merely a coincidence, or is there something about the form and tone of Greek tragedy that makes it particularly useful as a means of thinking about our own social problems and anxieties?
Biographical Notes

Note on transliteration of names: No easy way exists to handle transliteration of Greek names into the Roman alphabet. The old-style, Latinized system (in which Greek kappa becomes c, the ending -os becomes -us, iota on the end of diphthongs becomes e, and so on) is the most familiar, but it is inaccurate in many ways. The more accurate system is jarring to English readers’ eyes and often renders familiar names unrecognizable (Oedipus becomes Oidipous, Ajax becomes Aias, Jocasta becomes Iokaste, and so on). Because the Latinized system is followed in the translations of the tragedies that I recommend, I have followed it in these outlines, with a few exceptions for place names.

I. Real People

Aeschylus (?525–456 B.C.). The first and oldest of the three great Athenian tragedians. He wrote over ninety tragedies, of which seven are extant: Persians, Prometheus Bound (some scholars doubt that this is really by Aeschylus), Seven Against Thebes, Suppliant Maidens, and the trilogy The Oresteia (composed of the plays Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, and Eumenides).

Agathon (c. 450–c. 399 B.C.). Highly admired in his own day and considered the best tragedian apart from Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Many fragments of his works have survived, but no complete plays are extant. His style was apparently highly rhetorical, probably influenced by the Sophists. According to Aristotle, he wrote at least one tragedy in which all the characters were invented. He is caricatured in Aristophanes’s Thesmophoriasuzae.

Aristophanes (?450–?386 B.C.). The greatest Athenian comic playwright. Quite apart from their merit in their own right, his works contain invaluable information about tragic staging and give us some sense of how the tragedians were perceived by their fellow citizens.

Aristotle (384–322 B.C.). The great philosopher, scientist, and polymath. His importance for the study of tragedy is his authorship of Poetics (probably c. 335 B.C.). In this work, he analyzes the structure and function of tragedy and puts forward his famous (though still controversial) theory that tragedy causes a catharsis of the emotions of pity and fear.

Cleisthenes (late sixth century B.C.). Responsible for the reorganization of Athenian tribes on the basis of deme membership rather than family descent (508). This had profound political effects and left the way open for the development of democracy in the fifth century.

Darius (d. 486 B.C.). King of Persia; ordered the first invasion of Greece, which ended with the Athenians’ victory at the battle of Marathon (490). His ghost appears in Aeschylus’s Persians.

Euripides (480–06 B.C.). The third and youngest of the three great Athenian tragedians. His eighteen extant tragedies include The Bacchae, Hippolytus, and Iphigenia at Aulis.

Freud, Sigmund (1856–1939). The father of psychoanalysis. His “Oedipus complex” is probably the most famous modern interpretation of any classical myth.

Herodotus (?484–c. 420 B.C.). The first Greek historian; his great work tells the story of the Persian Wars with many digressions on other themes and cultures. According to tradition, he was a friend of Sophocles.

Hippias (late sixth–early fifth century B.C.). Tyrant of Athens, son of Peisistratus. He was forced into exile in 510, which left open the way for Cleisthenes’s reforms. He fled to Persia and helped the Persians in the invasion of 490.

Homer (c. 750 B.C.?). The name traditionally given to the bard of the Iliad and the Odyssey. Scholars do not agree about when or where such a person lived or if it is even reasonable to refer to one bard for the epics at all.

Livius Andronicus (fl. 240 B.C.). Latin playwright; produced a comedy and a tragedy in 240 B.C. Probably the first to translate Greek tragedy into Latin. Tradition says that he was half-Greek, from a Greek colony in Italy.

Murray, Gilbert (1966–1957). British classicist and translator of tragedy. His essay on the origins of tragedy, in which he set out his theory of the original “pattern” of tragedy as a passion play about the death and resurrection of the entiautos daimon, was published in 1927.
Naevius (fl. 235–204 B.C.). Latin poet who wrote at least thirty-two comedies and at least six tragedies based on Greek originals.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1844–1900). German philosopher. His 1872 work, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, exercised a profound influence on theories about tragedy’s function and origins. It was especially important to the Cambridge Ritualists.

Peisistratus (d. 527 B.C.). Tyrant of Athens, father of Hippias. According to tradition, tragic competitions at the City Dionysia were begun during his rule.

Pericles (495–429 B.C.). The greatest Athenian statesman of the “golden age” of Athens. It is often said that under him, Athens, in effect, returned to one-man rule under the guise of democracy. As a young man, he was *choregos* for Aeschylus’s *Persians* in 472. Ten years later, he worked with Ephialtes to bring about the reformation of the Areopagus Council.

Phrynichus (late sixth–early fifth century B.C.). Early tragedian, none of whose works are extant. He was fined 1,000 drachmas for his tragedy *The Sack of Miletus*, which dramatized the defeat (in 494) of an Athenian ally.

Protagoras (c. 490–c. 420 B.C.). The most famous of the Sophists; best known for his saying “Man is the measure of all things.”

Pythia. The title of Apollo’s priestess at Delphi, who spoke the god’s oracles. She was a woman over fifty and unmarried.

Racine, Jean (A.D. 1639–1699). French neoclassicist playwright. His tragedies include *Phédre* and *Andromache*.

Seneca (?4 B.C.–A.D. 65). Roman Stoic philosopher and playwright. His nine extant tragedies are all based on Greek originals.

Sophocles (496–406 B.C.). Second of the great Athenian tragedians. He wrote perhaps as many as 120 plays of which only 7 survive: *Ajax, Antigone, Electra, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Philoctetes*, and *Trachiniae*. One tradition, probably trustworthy, holds that after his death, he was worshipped as a hero under the name “Dexion.”

Thespis (mid–late sixth century B.C.). According to tradition, the founder of tragedy, who added the first actor to the chorus. The traditional date given for his first victory at the City Dionysia, 534 B.C., may be unreliable.

Xerxes (d. 465 B.C.). King of Persia 486–465 B.C. He led the Persian army in the second Persian invasion of Greece (480–479). He is a character in Aeschylus’s *Persians*.

II. Mythological and Fictional Characters: Humans, Monsters, and Gods

Achilles. Greatest Greek warrior in the Trojan War, main character of the *Iliad*. Son of the goddess Thetis and a human father, Peleus.


Aerope. Wife of Atreus, mother of Agamemnon and Menelaus. She gave the golden ram on which the kingship of Mycenae depended to Atreus’s brother Thyestes, with whom she was having an affair.

Agamemnon. Commander-in-chief of the Greek forces at Troy. Brother of Menelaus, husband of Clytemnestra. He sacrifices his daughter Iphigeneia to receive a fair wind for Troy. On his return, Clytemnestra kills him; she is later killed by their son Orestes to avenge Agamemnon’s death. These events form the plot of Aeschylus’s trilogy *The Oresteia*.

Aegeus. King of Athens, father of Theseus by the Troezenian princess Aethra. Briefly married to Medea.

Aegisthus. Cousin of Agamemnon and Menelaus, who seduces Clytemnestra while Agamemnon is away at war. He murders Agamemnon on his return from Troy and is himself killed by Agamemnon’s son Orestes. This story is frequently cited in the *Odyssey* as a parallel to Odysseus’s family situation.

Aethra. Princess of Troezen; mother of Theseus, either by Aegeus or Poseidon.
**Ajax the Greater.** Son of Telamon, greatest warrior of the Greeks after Achilles. Brother of Teucer, husband (or owner) of Tecmessa. Sophocles’s great play deals with Ajax’s suicide after he loses the armor of Achilles to Odysseus.

**Alcmene.** Wife of Amphitryon, mother of Heracles and Iphicles. Heracles’s father was Zeus, while Iphicles’s father was Amphitryon.

**Amazons.** A race of warrior-women who lived somewhere at the edges of the world; the most common location for their homeland was somewhere near the Black Sea. The theme of fighting an Amazon recurs in the stories of various heroes, including Heracles, Theseus, and Achilles.

**Amphitryon.** Alcmene’s husband, father of Iphicles, stepfather of Heracles.

**Andromache.** Wife of Hector, mother of Astyanax.

**Antigone.** Daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta; sister of Ismene, Eteocles, and Polyneices. She accompanied her father, Oedipus, in his exile from Thebes. In Sophocles’s play *Antigone*, she buries her brother Polyneices at the cost of her own life.

**Antiope.** See Hippolyta.

**Aphrodite.** Goddess of sexual passion. Wife of Hephaestus, mother of Eros, lover of Ares.

**Apollo.** Son of Zeus and Leto, twin brother of Artemis. In the *Iliad*, he appears mainly as the god of prophecy and as the bringer of plague and sudden death. Later authors would stress his association with reason, healing, and music. His identification with the sun is much later than Homer. He is also called Phoebus.

**Apsyrtus.** Medea’s younger brother, whom she kills, chops into pieces, and throws overboard to slow down her father’s pursuit of the Argo.

**Ares.** Son of Zeus and Hera; god of war; particularly associated with the physical, bloody, distressing aspects of war (cf. *Athena*).

**Argo.** The ship on which Jason sailed to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece. All the greatest heroes of his day sailed with him.

**Argonauts.** The sailors on the Argo.

**Artemis.** Daughter of Zeus and Leto, twin sister of Apollo. A virgin goddess. She is the patron of hunters, wild animals, and girls before their marriage. She brings sudden death to women. Her identification with the moon is later than Homer.

**Astyanax.** Baby son of Hector and Andromache; killed when the Greeks threw him from the walls of Troy after they sacked the city.

**Athena.** Daughter of Zeus, who sprang from his brow fully grown and wearing armor. Athena is the goddess of warfare in its nobler aspects (cf. *Ares*). A virgin goddess, she is associated with wisdom, cleverness, and weaving.

**Atreus.** Grandson of Tantalus, son of Pelops, father of Agamemnon and Menelaus. After his brother Thyestes seduced Atreus’s wife, Aerope, Atreus took revenge by killing Thyestes’s sons and serving their flesh to him at a banquet.

**Cadmus.** Founder of Thebes, father of Agave and Semele, grandfather of Pentheus and Dionysus.

**Calchas.** Agamemnon’s seer during the Trojan War. He interpreted the omens to tell Agamemnon that Artemis demanded the sacrifice of Iphigenia.

**Cassandra.** Daughter of Priam and Hecabe, sister of Hector and Paris. During the Sack of Troy, Ajax the Lesser rapes her in the temple of Athena. This outrage motivates the goddess’s anger at the Greeks. In Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, she is brought to Argos as Agamemnon’s slave.

**Chrysothemis.** In Sophocles’s *Electra*, the sister of Electra and Orestes.

**Clytemnestra/Clytaemestra.** Wife of Agamemnon, mother of Orestes, half-sister of Helen. She takes Aegisthus as her lover while Agamemnon is away at Troy and assists Aegisthus in murdering Agamemnon on his return.
Creon. 1) Brother of Jocasta; he becomes regent of Thebes after Oedipus’s exile and king after the deaths of Eteocles and Polyneices. 2) King of Corinth, who gives refuge to Jason and Medea. Jason intends to marry his daughter; this leads to Medea’s killing of her sons.

Creusa. Princess of Athens, raped by Apollo; mother of Ion.

Danaids. The fifty daughters of Danaus, who flee to Argos to avoid marriage with their Egyptian cousins. They make a pact to kill their husbands on the wedding night; only Hypermnestra breaks her word.

Deianira. Heracles’s wife. Her use of the centaur Nessus’s blood, which she thinks is a love charm, leads to Heracles’s death.

Dionysus. Son of Zeus and the mortal woman Semele. After Semele’s incineration, Dionysus was incubated in Zeus’s thigh. He is the god of wine, intoxication, frenzy, and drama; also associated with rapidly growing plants, such as vine and ivy. Euripides’s Bacchae is our fullest extant description of him.

Dioscuri. Castor and Polydeuces, the divine brothers of Clytemnestra and Helen.

Electra. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra’s daughter, who helped her brother Orestes avenge their father’s death.

Eros. God of sexual desire. Usually described as the son of Aphrodite.

Eteocles. Younger son of Oedipus and Jocasta; brother of Antigone, Ismene, and Polyneices. He and Polyneices killed one another in single combat after Polyneices attacked Thebes to try to regain the kingship.

Eumenides. A euphemistic term for the Furies; literally means “Kindly Ones.”

Eurystheus. King of Tiryns, whom Heracles served for twelve years, probably as expiation for killing his wife, Megara, and their children.

Furies. Spirits of blood vengeance who avenge violence against kin and especially violence of children against their parents. In Aeschylus’s Eumenides, they torment Orestes for killing his mother, Clytemnestra. See Eumenides.

Glauc. Princess of Corinth whom Jason intends to marry. This marriage would require Jason to divorce Medea.

Hades. Brother of Zeus, husband of Persephone. Ruler of the Underworld (Tartarus), which comes to be called Hades after him.

Hebe. Daughter of Zeus and Hera; her name means “youthful bloom.” Wife of the deified Heracles.

Hecuba. Queen of Troy; wife of Priam; mother of Hector, Paris, Cassandra, Polyxena, and Polydorus.

Helen. Daughter of Zeus and Leda, sister of Clytemnestra, wife of Menelaus; the most beautiful woman in the world. Her seduction (or kidnapping?) by Paris was the cause of the Trojan War.

Hephaestus. Son of Zeus and Hera or, perhaps, of Hera alone. In the Iliad, he is married to Charis; in the Odyssey, to Aphrodite. He is lame and ugly. The smith-god who, to some extent, represents fire itself.

Hera. Wife and sister of Zeus, mother of Hephaestus and Ares. She is the patron goddess of marriage and married women. She hates Zeus’s sons by other females, especially Heracles.

Heracles (Roman Hercules). Greatest Greek hero, son of Zeus and the mortal woman Alcmene. He lived (probably) two generations before the Trojan War.

Hermes. Often identified as the “messenger of the gods,” his role is actually far more complex. He is a god of boundaries and transitions and of exchange and commerce. He serves as the patron for travelers, merchants, thieves, heralds, and messengers. In his role as Psychopomp, he escorts the souls of the dead to Tartarus.

Hermione. Daughter of Helen and Menelaus; she married her cousin Orestes after his purification from blood guilt.

Hippodamia. Daughter of Oenamaus of Pisa; any suitor who wants to marry her must first defeat Oenamaus in a chariot race. Pelops does so by treachery, bribing Oenamaus’s slave Myrtilus to remove the linchpins from
Oenamaus’s chariot. Oenamaus is killed, and Pelops marries Hippodamia. Their children include Atreus and Thystes.

**Hippolyta.** Amazon queen; Heracles’s ninth labor was to fetch her belt (or “girdle”). She may be the same queen (often called Antiope) whom Theseus married.

**Hippolytus.** Son of Theseus and Hippolyta (or Antiope), the Amazon queen. His devotion to Artemis and scorn for Aphrodite and its consequences are the subject of Euripides’s play *Hippolytus.*

**Hyllus.** Son of Heracles and Deianira.

**Io.** A young woman whom Zeus seduced. He turned her into a cow to try to hide the affair from the jealous Hera. Hera sent a gadfly to torment Io, and it drove her from country to country trying to escape its torments. During her wanderings, she encountered Prometheus.

**Iocasta/Iocaste.** See Jocasta.

**Iole.** Young woman with whom Heracles falls in love, with disastrous consequences. Heracles’s passion for Iole motivates Deianira to use the “love charm” given her by the centaur Nessus, which leads to Heracles’s death.

**Ion.** Son of Apollo and Creusa, brought up at Delphi.

**Iphicles.** Heracles’s twin and half-brother; Heracles was fathered by Zeus, and Iphicles was fathered the next night by Alcmene’s husband, Amphitryon.

**Iphigenia.** Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Agamemnon sacrificed her to gain a fair wind to sail to Troy.

**Ismene.** Daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta; sister of Antigone, Eteocles, and Polyneices.

**Jason.** Leader of the Argonauts, who sailed to Colchis on the Black Sea in search of the Golden Fleece. He married the Colchian princess Medea, whose magic helped him get the Fleece. Years later, when he wanted to divorce her to marry a Greek princess, Medea retaliated by killing their sons.

**Jocasta.** Wife of Laius; wife and mother of Oedipus; mother (and grandmother) of Antigone, Ismene, Polyneices, and Eteocles.

**Laius.** King of Thebes, husband of Jocasta, father of Oedipus. Because he received an oracle telling him that any son he had with Jocasta would kill him, Laius exposed the baby Oedipus on a mountain. Years later, Laius was indeed killed by Oedipus, who did not know that Laius was his father.

**Leda.** Wife of Tyndareus, mother of Clytemnestra and Helen (as well as two sons, Castor and Pollux). Zeus appeared to Leda in the form of a swan, and Helen was hatched from an egg.

**Maenads.** Female followers of Dionysus; in myth, they have extraordinary powers, such as the ability to make wine or milk flow from the ground, to handle snakes, and to tear animals apart with their bare hands.

**Medea.** Princess of Colchis, daughter of Aeëtes, and granddaughter of the sun god, Helios. She was skilled in sorcery and magic. She helped Jason obtain the Golden Fleece and returned with him as his wife to Greece, where she bore him two sons. When Jason wanted to divorce her to marry the princess of Corinth, Medea retaliated by killing her own children. She then escaped on a dragon-drawn chariot sent her by Helios and went to Athens, where she married Aegeus and bore him a son. However, she was exiled from Athens for trying to kill Aegeus’s son Theseus.

**Megara.** Heracles’s first wife. In a fit of madness sent by Hera, he killed their children (varying in number from three to eight, depending on the source) and, perhaps, Megara as well.

**Menelaus.** Brother of Agamemnon, husband of Helen.

**Minotaur.** Man-eating monster, half-human and half-bull. He was conceived when Pasiphae mated with a bull. He was kept in the Labyrinth and, each year, was fed seven young men and seven young women from Athens. He was killed by Theseus with the help of Ariadne.
Mnesilochus. In Aristophanes’s play *Thesmophoriazusae*, Euripides’s elderly relative who disguises himself as a woman to infiltrate the Thesmophoria.

Myrtilus. Charioteer whom Pelops bribed to help him win Hippodamia. Myrtilus removed the linchpins from Oenomaus’s chariot wheels so that the wheels fell off and Oenomaus was killed. Myrtilus was later killed by Pelops for trying to rape Hippodamia.

Neoptolemus. Son of Achilles. During the Sack of Troy, he killed the aged Priam. In Sophocles’s *Philoctetes*, he accompanies Odysseus to Lemnos to bring Philoctetes and the bow of Heracles to Troy.

Nessus. Centaur (i.e., half-man, half-horse) who tried to rape Heracles’s wife, Deianira. Heracles shot him; as he was dying, Nessus told Deianira to save some of his blood as a love charm in case Heracles ever lost interest in her. She did so, but when she used the “charm” years later, it burned Heracles’s flesh and caused him such agony that he killed himself.

Oceanids. Ocean nymphs, the daughters of Oceanus.

Oceanus. The god who personifies the River Oceanus, which flows around the edges of the world.

Odysseus. Cleverest and craftiest of the Greeks; the Trojan Horse was his idea. Main character of the *Odyssey*. In fifth-century tragedy, his skill in deceit and trickery make him a problematic character.

Oedipus. Son of Laius and Jocasta. He was exposed as an infant, because Laius had received an oracle that any child of his and Jocasta’s would grow up to kill him. Not knowing who his true parents were, Oedipus did kill Laius and marry Jocasta. Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* is the most famous account of this myth.

Oenomaus. Father of Hippodamia; killed when Pelops bribes Myrtilus to sabotage his chariot before a race.

Olympians. These originally included Zeus, his five siblings, and eight of his children: Zeus, Poseidon, Hades, Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, Hephaestus, Aphrodite, Hermes, and Dionysus. Later, the number twelve became canonical; Hades and Hestia were then omitted.

Orestes. Son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. He avenges his father’s murder by killing Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.

Paris. Son of Priam and Hecabe, brother of Hector, prince of Troy. His abduction or, perhaps, seduction of Helen from her husband, Menelaus, motivated the Trojan War.

Pelasgus. King of Argos, to whom the Danaids appeal for protection.

Peleus. Achilles’s father, mortal husband of Thetis.

Pelias. Jason’s usurping uncle.

Pelops. Son of Tantalus, whom Tantalus butchered to feed to the gods. He was resurrected and given an ivory shoulder to replace the shoulder Demeter ate. His children were sons Atreus and Thyestes.

Pentheus. Young king of Thebes; his refusal to believe in the divinity of Dionysus leads to his terrible death at the hands of his own mother and aunts. Euripides’s *Bacchae* tells the story of these events.

Phaedra. Cretan princess, sister of the Minotaur, wife of Theseus. Her passion for her stepson, Hippolytus, leads to her own and Hippolytus’s death. Euripides’s *Hippolytus* tells the story.

Philoctetes. Lit Heracles’s funeral pyre and received the hero’s great bow as a gift. On the way to Troy, he was bitten by a snake and left with a poisoned wound. The other Greeks abandoned him on the island of Lemnos, until a prophecy told them that the bow of Heracles was necessary for their defeat of Troy.

Phoebus. See Apollo.

Pirithous. Friend of Theseus; they went together to Tartarus to try to kidnap Persephone to be Pirithous’s wife. They were trapped there—Theseus, for many years until freed by Heracles; Pirithous, forever.

Polydorus. Youngest son of Hecuba and Priam; he is sent to Polymestor, King of Thrace, for protection during the Trojan War. After the Sack of Troy, Polymestor kills him to keep the treasure that had been sent with the boy.
Polymestor. King of Thrace. Entrusted with Polydorus during the Trojan War; he kills the boy after the end of the war.

Polyneices. Elder son of Oedipus and Jocasta; brother of Antigone, Ismene, and Eteocles. He leads the expedition of the “Seven against Thebes” and is killed by his brother Eteocles, whom he also kills, in single combat.

Polyxena. Young daughter of Priam and Hecabe, whom the Greeks sacrificed to the ghost of Achilles as they leave Troy.

Poseidon. Brother of Zeus, god of the sea. One of the twelve Olympians.

Priam. King of Troy. During the Sack of Troy, he was slain by Neoptolemus at his own household altar.

Prometheus. Son of Iapetus, benefactor of mankind. In Theogony, he tried to trick Zeus into accepting the worse portion of the first sacrifice. Zeus responded by hiding fire, which Prometheus then stole for humans. His punishment was to be tied to a crag in the Caucasus and have his liver eaten every day by an eagle. He was eventually freed by Heracles.

Rhesus. A Thracian ally of the Trojans during the Trojan War.

Pylades. Orestes’s friend, who accompanies him and encourages him to kill Clytemnestra.

Satyrs. Mythical male followers of Dionysus. They are usually shown in art as snub-nosed men with animal-like ears and horses’ tales. They are extremely sexually aggressive.

Semele. Princess of Thebes, mother of Dionysus. Hera tricked her into making Zeus promise to show himself to her in his full glory. When he did so, Semele was incinerated; Zeus rescued her son, Dionysus, from her womb and sewed him into his own thigh.

Sphinx. A female monster that was devastating Thebes by eating anyone who could not answer her riddle. Oedipus solved the riddle and the Sphinx killed herself.

Tantalus. One of the “cardinal sinners” in Tartarus. He tried to trick the gods into eating the flesh of his own son, Pelops. His punishment is to stand forever in a river of water with fruit trees over his head; he is eternally hungry and thirsty, but when he tries to drink, the water flows away and when he tries to eat, the fruit blows out of his reach.

Tartarus. The Underworld, the land of the dead, the realm of Hades.

Tecmessa. Slave concubine of Ajax.

Teiresias. Great Theban seer; a character in Sophocles’s Oedipus the King and Antigone and in Euripides’s Bacchae.

Theseus. Athenian hero and legendary king of Athens. His most famous exploit was fighting and killing the Cretan Minotaur. Father of Hippolytus and husband of Phaedra.

Thetis. Sea-goddess, mother of Achilles, wife of Peleus.

Thoas. King of Tauris; receives Iphigenia as priestess of Artemis in Euripides’s Iphigenia in Tauris.

Thyestes. Grandson of Tantalus, son of Pelops, father of Aegisthus. After Thyestes seduced his brother Atreus’s wife, Aérope, Atreus took revenge by killing Thyestes’s sons and serving their flesh to him at a banquet.

Titans. The elder generation of gods who preceded the Olympians. After Zeus overthrew his father, Cronus, the two generations engaged in a “Battle of the Gods and Titans” that ended in victory for Zeus and his fellow Olympians. Prometheus is a Titan.

Tyndareus. King of Sparta, husband of Leda, father of Clytemnestra, stepfather of Helen.

Xuthus. Husband of Creusa.

Bibliography

Essential Readings

Note: Most of the Greek and Roman texts cited are available in many different translations. The editions listed here reflect my own preferences; the Chicago series of translations is uniformly excellent, clear, and readable.


Supplementary Bibliography

Note: In recent decades, a vast amount has been written on the development of Greek tragedy, ancient Greek theatrical conventions and stagecraft, and on the texts and interpretations of the tragedies themselves. I have tried to winnow out a representative selection of useful and interesting studies while avoiding books that assume knowledge of complicated modern theoretical approaches. I have also included several works that disagree, at least to some extent, with my own views of tragedy’s origins and functions and the interpretation of individual tragedies, so students may gain some sense of the immense complexity of these topics. In addition, I have listed a representative sample of works that are now several decades old, and with which many recent critics disagree, but that had and continue to have a strong influence on scholars’ understanding of tragedy. Finally, I have tried to favor works that have good bibliographies to aid those students who wish to continue their investigations.


Ahl, Frederick. *Sophocles’ Oedipus: Evidence and Self-Conviction*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1991. A controversial work, arguing that Sophocles did not intend us to assume Oedipus’s guilt in *Oedipus the King* and that the play does not support the conclusion that Oedipus killed his father and married his mother.


Blundell, Mary Whitlock. *Helping Friends and Harming Enemies: A Study in Sophocles and Greek Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. A close study of the importance in Sophocles of the Greek ethical imperative to help one’s enemies and hurt one’s friends. Includes individual chapters on all the plays except *Oedipus the King* and *Women of Trachis*.

———. “The *Phusis* of Neoptolemus in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes*,” in McAuslan and Walcot, *Greek Tragedy*, pp.104–115. An examination of the character of Neoptolemus in terms of his *phusis*, or inherited nature, and the degree to which he adheres to and deviates from his father’s *phusis*.


———. “Oedipus and the Greek Oedipus Complex,” in Bremner, *Interpretations*, pp. 41–59. Examines and critiques various interpretations of the Oedipus myth; concludes that the main point of the incest is to underline the horror of the parricide.


Cohen, David. “The Theodicy of Aeschylus: Justice and Tyranny in the *Oresteia,*, in McAuslan and Walcot, *Greek Tragedy*, pp. 45–57. Argues for a reading of *The Oresteia* that does not see Zeus as just.


Dodds, E. R. “On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex,*,” in Berkowitz and Brunner, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, pp. 218–229. An influential article that locates the main point of Sophocles’s play in Oedipus’s role as an intelligent questioner. Argues against several earlier interpretations that stress fate or Oedipus’s guilt.


“From Repertoire to Canon,” in Easterling, *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, pp. 211–227. Surveys Greek tragedy’s post-classical transformation from a local art form into one influential throughout the Greek-speaking world.

“Philoctetes and Modern Criticism,” in Segal, *Oxford Readings*, pp. 217–228. Discusses some of the foremost critical issues in Sophocles’s *Philoctetes* and several critics’ interpretations of them.


———. “Euripidean Comedy,” in Knox, *Word and Action*, pp. 250–274. Discusses the melodramatic and comic elements of several plays. Argues that *Ion* was “the prototype of comedy in the modern sense of the word” (p. 264).

———. *The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy*. Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983. A reissue of a seminal study that first appeared in 1964. Knox argues that the concept of the “tragic hero,” that is the “presentation of the tragic dilemma in the figure of a single dominating character” (p. 1), was Sophocles’s invention. Also provides close readings of *Antigone*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. 


———. “Sophocles’ Oedipus,” in Knox, Word and Action, pp. 96–111. An essay on the character of Oedipus that points out the plays on his name and the Greek verb oida (meaning “I know/I have seen”).

———. “Why is Oedipus Called Tyrannos?” in Word and Action, pp. 87–95. Analyzes the appropriateness of the term “tyrant” for Oedipus and relates the character in the play to the political situation in Athens.


Lloyd-Jones, Hugh. “The Guilt of Agamemnon,” in Segal, Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy, pp. 57–72. A detailed discussion of Agamemnon’s character in Aeschylus’s play, focusing both on his role as a fated member of a cursed family and on his individual guilt and responsibility for his actions.

———. “The Suppliants of Aeschylus,” in Segal, Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy, pp. 42–56. A careful analysis of Suppliant Maidens, written a few years after the discovery of the play’s late date, that discusses the characteristics of the play that caused scholars to believe it must be an early work. Includes a discussion of the number of the chorus.


Murray, Gilbert. “An Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy,” in Jane Harrison, Themis. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927, pp. 341–363. This is the original and primary statement of the pure “ritualist” theory of tragedy’s origin and development. Although few scholars now accept Murray’s theory, it continues to have a strong influence on the study of tragedy in various modified forms.


Silk, M. S., “Heracles and Greek Tragedy,” in McAuslan and Walcott, Greek Tragedy, pp. 116–137. Examines the use of Heracles in Sophocles’s Trachiniae and Euripides’s Heracles and considers possible reasons why this hero is difficult to cast as the main character of tragedy.


——. “The Pictorial Record,” in Easterling, Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy, pp. 69–90. A thorough and fascinating analysis of the possibilities and drawbacks inherent in using vase-paintings as evidence for theatrical practice.

Vellacott, P. H. “The Guilt of Oedipus,” in Berkowitz and Brunner, Oedipus Tyrannus, pp. 207–218. A provocative article that goes against most interpretations of the play by arguing that Oedipus actually knew Laius was his father and Jocasta, his mother.


Winkler, John J. “The Ephebes’ Song: Tragodia and Polis,” in Winkler and Zeitlin, Nothing to Do with Dionysos, pp. 20–62. A groundbreaking article, arguing that the tragic chorus was made up of ephebes, or young men on the cusp of adulthood.


———. “Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama,” in Winkler and Zeitlin, Nothing to Do with Dionysos, pp. 130–167. Argues that Thebes functions in tragedy as an anti-Athens, where neither familial nor civic reconciliations can be effective.