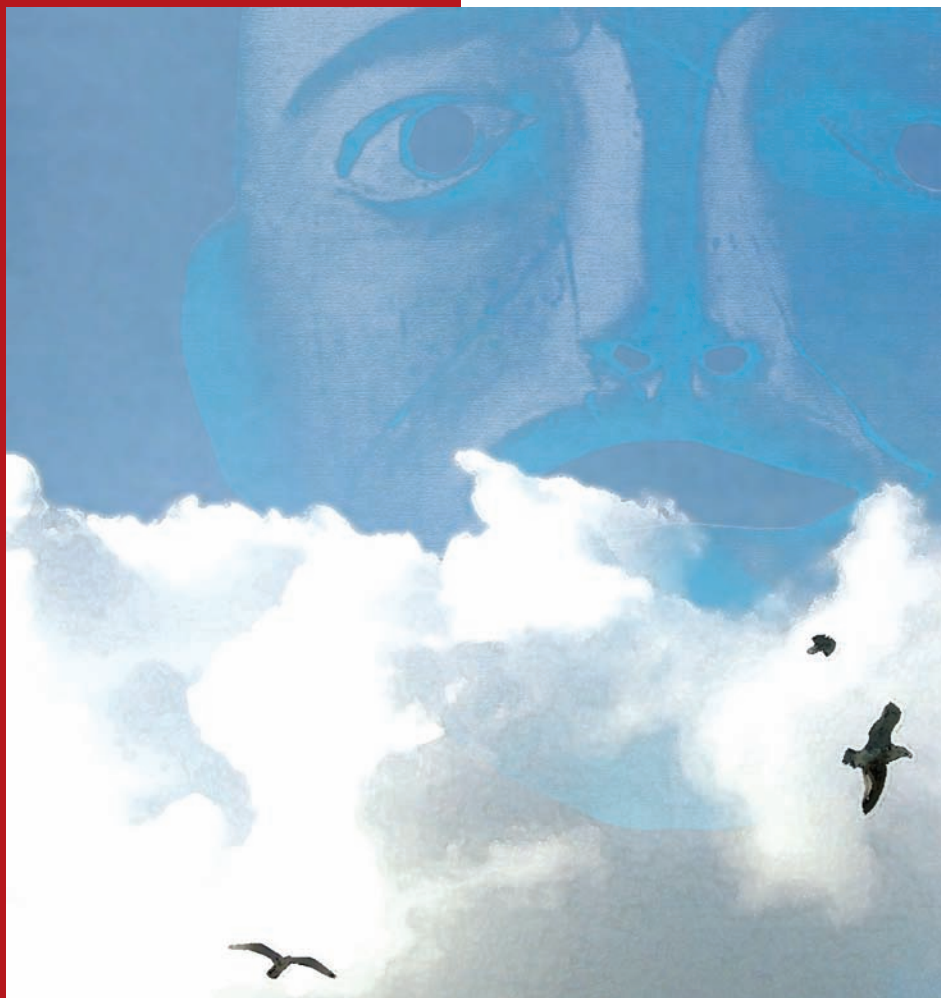


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GREEK DRAMA: TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

COURSE GUIDE



Professor Peter W. Meineck
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

Greek Drama: Tragedy and Comedy

Professor Peter Meineck
New York University



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Professor Peter Meineck



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About Your Professor

Peter Meineck

Peter Meineck is a clinical assistant professor of classics and artist in residence at the New York University Center for Ancient Studies and the producing artistic director and founder of the Aquila Theatre Company. Peter currently teaches in the Classics Department at New York University in ancient drama, Greek literature, and classical mythology. He has held teaching appointments at Princeton University, the University of South Carolina, and the Tisch School of the Arts. Fellowships include the Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies, Princeton, the University of California at San Diego, and the University of Texas at Austin. He has lectured and held workshops on ancient drama and Shakespeare at conferences, academic institutions, museums, festivals, and schools throughout the world.

Peter's publications include Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (Hackett Cambridge, 1998); *Aristophanes Vol. 1 - Clouds, Wasps, Birds* (Hackett Cambridge, 1998); Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* with Paul Woodruff (Hackett Cambridge, 2000); Aristophanes' *Clouds* (Hackett Cambridge, 2000); and *The Theban Plays* with Paul Woodruff (Hackett Cambridge, 2002).

He has translated several Greek plays for the stage (*Clouds, Wasps, Birds, Philoctetes' Ajax, Agamemnon, and Oedipus the King*). He founded Aquila in 1991 after working extensively in West End theatre, including the Aldwych, the Almeida, the English National Opera, the Phoenix, the Royal National Theatre, the Royal Court Theatre, the Royal Opera House, and Sadler's Wells. Peter trained as a lighting designer and has lit and co-designed many Aquila shows.

His work as a director includes Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*; Sophocles' *Ajax*; a new play, *Villain*, which he also co-wrote; Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*; and Aristophanes' *Wasps*.

Professor Meineck has also recorded two other titles for the *Modern Scholar* lecture series: *Classical Mythology: The Greeks*, and *Classical Mythology: The Romans*.



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Introduction

The plays of one ancient city 2,500 years ago by just four playwrights have had a profound effect on the development of all subsequent Western drama, not only on the theatrical stage, but on opera, film, television, stand-up comedy, and dance—in fact, most, if not all, of the live arts owe a debt to the theatre of ancient Greece and the city of Athens.

This course will examine the social, historical, and political context of ancient Greek drama and equip listeners with a set of critical analytical tools for developing their own appreciation of this vitally important genre. We will focus on the four extant playwrights, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, and examine several of their plays closely.

This course will also spend time on a deep analysis of the only surviving trilogy to come down to us from classical Greece, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Using the knowledge gained from looking in depth at this work, we will delve into the tragedies and comedies of the fifth century BCE, examining plot structure, themes, motifs, social and political questions, staging conditions, masks, costumes, translations of Greek drama, and ancient Greek theatre architecture.

The following are the plays we will be specifically referring to:

- Aeschylus' *Persians* and *Oresteia* (*Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, and *Furies*)
- Sophocles' *Ajax*, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*
- Euripides' *Medea*, *Hecuba*, *Trojan Women*, and *The Bacchae*
- Aristophanes' *Clouds*, *Wasps*, and *Birds*

Lecture 1: Why Athens?

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Thomas R. Martin's *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*.

Athens in the fifth century BCE had grown into a major sea power protecting important trade routes crisscrossing the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. During the preceding century, Greeks had spread colonies from the Black Sea coast to North Africa, Southern Italy, the South of France, and Spain. Athens, with her three excellent harbors at Piraeus, was ideally located to take full advantage of trade links between her Ionic neighbors spread out on the Greek islands and the western coast of Turkey, the Greek mainland, and the new colonies to the northeast and west.

Athens and her countryside of Attica was blessed with a number of important raw materials that also helped her prosper from these trade routes.

Olives

The crude oil of the ancient world. Olives were used to produce cooking oil, soap, oil for lamplight, and a myriad of other purposes. The Athenians believed that their olives were the finest in the world and developed a myth that their trees were the descendents of the first olive tree given to the Athenians by Athena herself. The Athenians exported their olives all over the Greek world.

*And here is a miracle like nothing else
In all of Asia or the Land of Pelops.
Growing wild,
Self-perpetuating,
Terrorizing all our enemies,
It thrives in our soil, eternal,
The nurturing gray-green olive.*

~Oedipus at Colonus, lines 694–700
(Trans. Peter Meineck)

Pottery

Certain parts of Attica boasted a fine clay with a reddish hue that, when fashioned into pottery and fired, produced distinctive Athenian ware that was highly prized all over the Greek world. Expert painters would render intricate scenes on these vases, many of which depicted scenes from popular tragedies and comedies.

Silver

In 482, a massive new vein of silver was unearthed in the mountains of Laurion in Attica. The Athenian statesmen Themistocles persuaded his countrymen to invest in a fleet of new ships. This new Athenian navy proved

invaluable at the Battle of Salamis two years later, when an Athenian-led force decisively defeated a much larger Persian invasion. Aeschylus fought at the battle of Salamis and encapsulated that famous sea battle in the messenger speech in *Persians*.

*Then the Greek ships, seizing their chance,
Swept in circling and struck and overturned our hulls,
And saltwater vanished before our eyes—
Shipwrecks filled it and drifting corpses.*

~Aeschylus: *Persians*, lines 411–417
(Trans. Lembke and Herington)

The silver from Laurion was used to mint Athenian coins, known as “owls.” The purity of the silver meant that these little owls were highly prized, and Athenian trade, fueled by this excellent coinage and protected by a strong navy, flourished.

The bustling harbor at Piraeus turned Athens into a cultural sponge, absorbing influences from all over the ancient world and a huge population of foreign workers known as *Metics*. Trade and money flowed, art flourished, and new ideas spread. This hive of activity was a great breeding ground for the development of Athenian drama.

Politics

Politics is a Greek word meaning of the polis, or of the city. Athenians were fiercely proud of their polis, just one independent state among more than 300 in the Greek world, but in the fifth century, the polis of Athens grew to a cultural supremacy, the effects of which are still very much with us today. Athenian politics underpin all Greek plays. The presentations of the plays themselves were political events, financed by the state and part of a huge national holiday.

Athens in the early part of the sixth century had been an aristocracy with a traditional memory of an ancient monarchy, like many other Greek city-states. In the middle part of the sixth century, a new breed of leader emerged: a “*Tyrannus*”—a sole leader who ruled by popular consent, but was not elected. In Athens, Pisistratus set about a huge building program to beautify the city and may well have instituted the first state-sponsored theatrical festival in Athens.

As the population of Attica expanded because of the increased prosperity, so too did their involvement in military affairs as citizen-soldier infantrymen called *hoplites*. The former preserve of the aristocracy began to crumble as Athens moved toward a proto-democratic system with land and population reforms and the development of elected posts. Because Athens needed its citizens to row the huge fleet of ships, more members of Athenian society were enfranchised, until the radical democracy of the fifth century, where every member of the *demos* (Athenian men, born into one of the ten tribes, who have served in the armed forces) could come to the peoples assembly and vote. Yet the only structure the Athenians ever built capable of accommodating the majority of the *demos* (around 30,000, or 10 to 15 percent of the entire population) was the theatre of Dionysos on the slope of the Acropolis in Athens.

Although we know of drama existing in other Greek cities, such as Megara and Corinth, we only have complete plays from Athens. Later audiences and scholars regarded Athenian drama as the best. Perhaps because drama has always been of the people and under the radical democracy of Athens, it flourished in that polis, a place of relative free speech and unbridled creativity. Drama spoke to the Athenians in a dynamic and visceral way, allowing them to see their society reflected in a mirror of dramatic mythology. Just imagine the audience of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, who had just lived through a devastating plague a few short years earlier, watching the opening scene in which a plague has broken out in Thebes. It's no surprise that Aristotle saw Athenian drama as a university of adults, where they might come to reach a new level of understanding.

Our Debt to the Athenians

Consider the meaning of the words listed below for an indication of the debt we owe Greek drama.

- Theatre seeing place (*theatron*)
- Drama “doing” or “performing an action”
- Scene from *skene* (Latin *proscenium*)
- Chorus singing and dancing troupe
- Catharsis healing or purification through empathy
- Orchestra choral performing space
- Thespian *thespis*
- Deus ex machina* god on a machine
- Protagonist the first actor in a tragedy
- Odeion small covered theatre
- Podium raised platform

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What myth did the Greeks develop about the origin of their olive trees?
2. What was the relationship between politics and drama in ancient Greece?

Suggested Reading

Martin, Thomas R. *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

Boardman, John, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray. *Greece and the Hellenistic World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Bury, J.B., and Russell Meiggs. *A History of Greece*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

Kagan, Donald. *Pericles of Athens and the Birth of Democracy*. New York: Free Press, 1998.

Woodruff, Paul. *First Democracy: The Challenge of an Ancient Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Lecture 2: The Play's the Thing: How Greek Drama Came Down to Us and a Typical Day at the Greek Theatre

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is A.H. Sommerstein's *Greek Drama and Dramatists*.

A Brief Historical Outline of Ancient Greek Civilization

Early to Middle Bronze Age
(3000–1600 BCE)

- Beginning of Minoan Palace culture on Crete/Thera
- Cycladic culture in the Aegean

Late Bronze Age
(1600–1100 BCE)

- Mycenaean culture on Greek mainland
- Height of Minoan culture—1400 BCE
- Destruction of Troy in 1250 BCE

Dark Age
(1100–800 BCE)

- Collapse of palace culture

Archaic Period
(800–480 BCE)

- Foundation of the *polis* city-state
- Colonization by Greeks
- Development of Greek writing

Classical Period
(480–323 BCE)

- Defeat of Persian forces led by Athens at Salamis in 480
- Development of democracy in Athens
- Emergence of history, philosophy, rhetoric, drama

Hellenistic Period
(323–31 BCE)

- Death of Alexander in 323 BCE
- Spread of Hellenic culture throughout Alexander's former empire
- Conquest of Hellenic world by Rome—fall of Alexandria in 31 BCE

Textual Transmission

Greek dramatic texts have not traveled the 2,500 years to the present day without undergoing serious corruptions. We do not possess any “original” ancient text; in fact, there is some debate as to whether the ancient dramatists even used written text as part of their creative process. Plays may have been remembered orally and only written down toward the end of the fifth and early fourth centuries BCE, when it became fashionable to collect textual editions of older classic works.

Most texts come down to us from Middle Age Europe and are copies of copies spanning several generations of manuscripts back to the private libraries of Byzantium, Rome, and the Hellenistic world. Most of these texts were preserved in monasteries by literate priests, and we find editions with comments written by scholiasts from the Byzantine and Hellenistic period.

These texts are often what we call “corrupt” in that they have been damaged, altered, revised, or edited. Specialized classicists known as papyrologists study these ancient manuscripts and try to re-create the ancient text. Any edition of a Greek text available to us today has been through this rigorous process and papyrologists and philologists are often suggesting new revisions.

One Dramatic Journey: How Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* Came Down to Us

458 BCE—Aeschylus stages his epic trilogy *The Oresteia* (*Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, *The Furies*) and wins first prize at the City Dionysia.

405 BCE—*The Frogs* of the comic dramatist Aristophanes has Aeschylus as a character dead in Hades competing to come back to earth and save Athens. This suggests that his plays were still well known fifty years after his death.

Fourth Century BCE—Authors have little to say about Aeschylus, and Aristotle hardly even mentions him in *The Poetics*.

Hellenistic Period—Between seventy and ninety of Aeschylus’ plays are known to have survived as texts during the period of Alexandrian scholarship, when there was a new interest in collecting manuscripts, such as at the great Library at Alexandria in Hellenic Egypt.

Roman Period—Although papyrus fragments prove that his plays were being copied and read up until the third century CE, only the most learned seem to know of Aeschylus.

Third Century CE—A collection of seven plays by Aeschylus may have been circulated as a schoolbook. These are the seven plays we possess today, including the three plays of *The Oresteia*.

Byzantine Period—The volume of seven plays was reduced to just three, and this new text did not include *The Oresteia*. In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries CE, we find the scholars Thomas Magister and Demertius Triclinius working on these three plays (*Prometheus Bound*, *The Persians*, and *The Seven Against Thebes*).

Late Fourteenth Century—At some point, a version of *Agamemnon* and *The Furies* was reincorporated into the manuscript of Aeschylus’ works. Byzantine scholars were unaware that these two plays were part of a larger trilogy.

1423—In Renaissance Florence, new text is purchased by the powerful Medici family from Giovanni Aurispa, who brought it from Byzantium. It seems to be much older than the existing manuscript, perhaps dating back to 1000 CE, and it contains all seven plays, including *The Libation Bearers*. However, its version of *Agamemnon* is very corrupt.

1518—An edition of the plays of Aeschylus is printed in Italy.

1557—Vettori publishes an edition that restores the trilogy.

1599—The first performance of the play in English was Thomas Dekker’s *Agamemnon* at the Rose Theatre in London (where many of Shakespeare’s plays were also performed).

A Day at the Theatre

The Athenians went to the theatre just twice a year at two festivals in honor of the god Dionysos:

The City Dionysia—This festival took place in the Athenian month of Elaphebolion (March). This was the major dramatic festival in Athens and took place over three days. Performances consisted of choral recitals called *Dithyrambs*, tragic plays, comedies, and Satyr plays. In between the performances, the audience would probably watch state announcements, award ceremonies, and passing out parades.

The Lenaia Festival—This festival took place in the month of Gamelion (January). This was during the winter, when there was no sailing, and so the Lenaia was traditionally an Athenian-only festival and may have been instituted later than the Dionysia. It seems to have been a lesser festival in importance, a kind of “Off-Acropolis” set-up where dramatists might be more experimental. Aristophanes performed his early works at the Lenaia.

The Night Before

This would have been a great feast and celebration honoring the presence of Dionysos, whose statue had been brought into the city earlier that day on a ship and rolled through the streets of Athens. This may be the origin of the carnival float, and it’s interesting that the president of Mardi Gras in New Orleans is still called “Bacchus”—the Roman name for Dionysos.

The Day of the Festival

The audience of Athenian citizens, and therefore all men, would gather at the theatre in the precinct of Dionysos Eleutheria (“The Free”) on the south-east slope of the Acropolis in Athens. The theatre could accommodate up to 30,000—nearly the entire voting population of Athens. Work would stop in Athens for the three days of the festival and men would come into the city from all over Attica.

The audience would watch the performance of three tragedies staged by a single dramatist. They were usually performed as a trilogy.

Following the three tragedies (each play would last one to two hours), the audience would watch a type of physical comedy called a Satyr play. Here, the cast of the tragedies would don the half animal/half human Satyr costume and perform a ribald comedy based on the previous trilogy.

After the Satyr play, the audience would watch a comedy by a playwright such as Aristophanes, Eupolis, or Cratinus. The comedy may have been added later in the fifth century, but it soon proved popular as it poked fun at contemporary politics and social mores. Athenian comedy was obscene and reveled in dramatic free speech.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What two Athenian festivals honored Dionysos?
2. What are some of the characteristics of Athenian comedy?

Suggested Reading

Sommerstein, Alan H. *Greek Drama and Dramatists*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Other Books of Interest

Arnott, Peter D. *Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre*. London: Routledge, 1991.

Csapo, Eric, and William J. Slater. *The Context of Ancient Drama*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Green, Richard, and Eric Handley. *Image of the Greek Theatre*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995.

Lecture 3: The Origins of Greek Drama

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is P.E. Easterling's *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*.

The plays that have come down to us were all created in the Classical Period, when cities, particularly Athens, organized drama into large state-run festivals and the plays themselves began to be written down and preserved as texts. In this lecture, we will examine the origins of Greek drama, with its roots in mythological storytelling, the worship of the god Dionysos, religious ritual, and the Epic tradition.

Influences

There were many artistic, cultural, and religious aspects that influenced Greek drama, but broadly speaking, we can identify three main areas:

- Mythology
- The Epic tradition
- Religious worship

Mythos

The term “myth” is derived from the Greek word “mythos,” which simply means “spoken story,” “speech,” or “the plot.” A mythos is a traditional tale handed down, whereas a “logos” is an account that can be accredited to the actual speaker. Myths play a vitally important part in Greek culture, conveying information about the Greek’s own past, their relationship to their gods, morality tales, explanations of natural phenomena, and all manner of human social relations. Much of the plot content of Greek tragedy and Satyr plays (and comedy, to a lesser extent) is derived from mythology.

The Greek dramatists often used the same myth in vastly different ways. Of our surviving tragedies, we have different versions of the same Electra myth as told by Aeschylus (*Libation Bearers*), Sophocles (*Electra*), and Euripides (*Electra*). In comparing the three plays, we can clearly see how each dramatist develops the myth to suit his own narrative needs.

Electra is the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. She pines for her banished brother Orestes, and when he returns home, she helps him to kill their mother in revenge for the murder of her father, a man she barely knew.

Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers*—Electra meets Orestes as she leads a group of women to the tomb of Agamemnon at the insistence of her mother, who has been suffering bad dreams. They are to soothe the dead man’s spirit with libations of water. Instead, the siblings reunite and, encouraged by the chorus, plan to kill Clytemnestra. Electra disappears from the second half of the play, as the focus falls on Orestes.

Sophocles' *Electra*—Electra is the central character, and Sophocles introduces a loyal sister, Chrysothemis, who rebukes Electra for her fixation on her dead father. Electra clashes with Clytemnestra and unites with her brother later in the play and actively participates in the murder.

Euripides' *Electra*—Orestes comes home and discovers that Electra has been married off to a lowly farmer. He and his friend Pylades kill Clytemnestra's partner Aegisthus at a festival and then lure Clytemnestra to the farm, where they both kill her. Two gods emerge to tell them that they were wrong and force them to part forever.

The Oral Tradition

Myths were primarily conveyed by bards—storytellers who crisscrossed the Mediterranean world singing fantastical tales of gods, heroes, great kings, massive wars, impossible quests, and death-defying journeys. In Dark Age Greece, these bards were the artistic glue of the often isolated and scattered Greek peoples, spreading common mythological stories, adapted for the particular audience to whom they were performing. In this way, myths became mutable, changing down through the generations to reflect differing social mores and local political attitudes. This use of myth is reflected in the work of the fifth-century Athenian tragic dramatists, who were able to exploit their audiences' common knowledge of certain mythic stories and then bend those stories to create new plot twists and dramatic themes.

The Bard

The Greek bard was the ancestor of our theatre. He (sometimes she) was a performer, a singer of songs who often also accompanied his or her tales with music from a lyre. The importance of the bard cannot be understated. A beautiful white marble Cycladic figure from Amorgos, an island in the Cyclades dating from as far back as 2300 BCE, depicts a seated man playing a lyre with his head stretched up to the heavens singing his tale. This artwork from the Early Bronze Age is archaeological evidence for the central importance of the bard in Greek culture, and it was the bard who retained the Greeks' cultural memory through the Bronze Age down through the Dark Age and into the blossoming of artistic activity that flourished in the Archaic and Classical periods.

Invoking the Muse

Bards were said to be "inspired" in that they breathed in the power of the muse or a god to have the authority to tell a tale. As writing re-emerged in the Dark Ages with a new form derived from the Phoenician alphabet, these bardic performances began to be written down. Very few have come down to use, although we have many fragments. The most famous are Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and the works of Hesiod, which date from around 750 to 700 BCE. We see a reflection of the sacred in bardic performance by reading the beginning of Hesiod's *Theogony*, in which he asks the Muses for help in singing his tale.

Hesiod begins (*Theogony*, 1–5):

*Begin our singing with the Helikonian Muses,
Who possess Mount Helikon, high and holy,
And near its violet-stained spring on petalsoft feet
Dance circling the altar of almighty Kronion.*

~Hesiod: *Theogony*, lines 1–5
(Trans. S. Lombardo)

He continues (23–33):

*And they once taught Hesiod the art of singing verse,
While he pastured his lambs on holy Helikon's slopes.
And this was the very first thing they told me,
The Olympian Muses, daughters of Zeus Aegisholder:*

*"Hillbillies and bellies, poor excuses for shepherds:
We know how to tell many believable lies,
But also, when we want to, how to speak the plain truth."*

*So Spoke the daughters of great Zeus, mincing their words.
And they gave me a staff, a branch of good sappy laurel,
Plucking it off, spectacular. And they breathed into me
A voice divine, so I might celebrate past and future.*

~Hesiod: *Theogony*, lines 22–33
(Trans. S. Lombardo)

Epic

As storytelling and the performance of myths developed, so the form became more sophisticated. The reciting of epic poetry, especially stories of the Trojan War, became an important element and a great influence on later Greek drama.

Homer

The most celebrated of all Greek epic poetry is the work of Homer. Scholars are divided as to whether Homer was one creative genius or a collective term to describe a wider oral tradition. Homer may mean something like "the hostage," but in Greek culture a hostage can be a guest from another city and "hostage" exchange was often a way in which different Greek cities ensured that treaties were kept. The works of Homer, known as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, certainly seem to be part of a wider oral tradition. *The Iliad* is one story from the ten-year-long Trojan War—that of the wrath of Achilles. *The Odyssey* tells of the ten-year-long journey home of the hero Odysseus. All the Greek poets borrowed heavily from the works of Homer, which by the fifth century had become standard texts in Athenian schools.

Demodocus

In book eight of Homer's *Odyssey*, we are given a beautiful portrayal of a Greek bard. He is Demodocus, the storyteller of the court of Alcinoüs, the Phaeacian king. This is the last place Odysseus will visit before he returns home. While a guest at the home of the king, in disguise, Odysseus hears a

tale of the Trojan War and is so affected by the bard's performance that he is moved to tears and eventually reveals himself. It is as if Odysseus cannot return home until he deals with his own identity, and it is through the mimetic art of performance that Odysseus undergoes his own personal catharsis.

*Then the herald came up leading Demodocus.
The Muse loved this man, but gave him
Good and evil both, snuffing out the light
Of his eyes as shed opened his heart to sweet song.*

Homer: *Odyssey* 8, lines 62–65
(Trans. S. Lombardo)

Catharsis and Mimesis

Catharsis is a Greek word that means “purging” or “healing.” From its earliest beginnings, the performance of stories was intended to move audiences to new levels of understanding. The bard acts as a kind of shaman, performing societal taboos and taking his stories across the boundary lines of traditional morality. In this way, the audience can experience a mimetic journey. “Mimesis” means the act of imitation and is the origin of the terms “mime” and “pantomime.” When the bard uses the emotional and dramatic power of mimesis to re-create mythological events, the audience is able to experience these emotions themselves without actually suffering the consequences. In this way, they undergo a form of emotional purging through tears, laughter, and new insights. Many Greek theatres were located in or near healing shrines such as the great theatre of Epidaurus, which was part of the shrine of the healing god Aesclepius.

*And Odysseus his great mind teeming:
“My Lord Alcinous, what could be finer
Than listening to a singer of tales
Such as Demodocus, with a voice like a god’s?”*

~Homer: *Odyssey* 9, lines 1–4
(Trans. S. Lombardo)

*But you have a mind to draw out of me
My pain and sorrow, and make me feel it again.
Where should I begin, where to end my story.*

~Homer: *Odyssey* 9, lines 13–15
(Trans. S. Lombardo)

Religion

Greek drama has origins in religious worship and ritual practice. In fact, the Athenians were participating in a religious ritual when they attended the theatre. At the City Dionysia, they entered the sacred precinct of the god, and the theatre was built next to the temple of Dionysos with an altar in the center of the orchestra. The high priest of Dionysos sat in a place of honor in the front row. We know this from the comedy *Frogs* by Aristophanes, when the comic Dionysos becomes so scared in the play he runs across the orchestra and leaps into the lap of the real priest to beg for protection!

Dionysos

His name means the “Son of God,” and he was born from the thigh of Zeus after his mortal mother was consumed by fire. He was depicted in Eastern costume with long, flowing robes, luxurious hair and beard, and often surrounded by his followers, the half man/half animal satyrs and the wild women called the Maenads. Dionysos was the god of wine, revelry, and also the theatre. In myth, he is the god who encourages mankind to cross social boundaries, his anarchic festive spirit was both revered and feared. If the drinking of wine can be said to effect a change of personality, then ritual performance became connected to Dionysos as a god of extreme expression.

The Mask

The mask was a sacred symbol of Dionysos. Vase paintings show us the presence of the god sometimes depicted by a mask hung on a stake. The use of masks goes far back into ritual performance. Often, the participant dons a mask and becomes the thing he most fears, an evil spirit, a fearsome animal he must hunt, and in the case of the Greeks, gods, great kings, and women.

It seems that all drama in ancient Greece was performed in the mask. Men played female roles, and although scholars are divided on this point, women were probably not allowed to attend the theatre and were certainly not allowed to perform on stage. Masking contains the seeds of acting, or “playing the other,” as noted scholar Froma Zeitlin has put it. In wearing a mask, the individual performer morphs into something he is not, and so acting develops. There is also a festive element to masking that we still find in the idea of the masquerade, the Venetian masked ball, Halloween, or Mardi Gras. These elements found their way into the performance of comedy and the Satyr play.

The Dithyramb

This was a choral song in honor of the gods, usually Dionysos. It was performed by groups of male singers in competition, and the songs themselves praised the gods or told mythological stories. The Dithyramb continued as an artistic form well into the fifth century and was even part of the City Dionysia, but this older form also had an influence on Greek drama in placing choral song and dance as a central part of the development of tragedy and comedy. The early plays of Aeschylus are based heavily around the chorus, who play a vitally important role in the center of the drama. By the end of the fifth century, the role of the chorus has diminished, with Euripides using them much more sparingly and the texts of new comedy from the fourth century simply stating “Choral Interlude.”

The First Thespian

The origin of Greek drama has its own myth, that of Thespis. He was an Athenian who was said to have first stepped out of the chorus and become the first “hypocrite,” or “responder,” by answering the chorus. Thespis was said to have made up his face with white lead and wine lees and crowned his head in ivy—a definite reference to the worship of Dionysos. Thespis seems to have actually existed and been active in Athens in the latter part of the sixth century, but nothing of his survives.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why is the bard considered the ancestor of our theatre?
2. How are catharsis and mimesis employed to affect audiences?

Suggested Reading

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Lecture 4: The Tragic Theatre

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Oliver Taplin's *Greek Tragedy in Action*.

In this lecture, we will look specifically at the origins of tragedy and how the particular political situation in Athens had an impact on its development there. We will then imagine what a performance of fifth-century tragedy looked like by describing the physical staging conditions of the Greek theatre and examining theatre architecture, the stage, and masks and costumes.

The Song of the Goats

The term “tragedy” is derived from the Greek word *tragoidia*, which means something like “goat song.” It is unclear where this term comes from, but there are various theories:

There may have been a goat sacrifice connected with the rites of Dionysos and the original Dithyrambic songs sung at this feast.

The male followers of Dionysos, the satyrs, were half man, half animal and had goat-like features (although horses' tails).

The chorus was possibly made up of “Ephebes”—young men undergoing military service. The term could describe their breaking voices (this seems unlikely).

The term is applied to anything overripe, and to be like a goat is to be untamed, or of the country, as opposed to the city. In tragedy, we watch characters overstep the boundaries of usual moral codes and behavior and experience the often horrific consequences. Perhaps the term contains something of the excessiveness of tragedy, which would also connect directly to the nature of the worship of Dionysos.

Satyr Plays

Satyr plays were said to have been invented by a certain Pratinus of Philus. The genre seems to have reached Athens around 520 and was a popular theme in Athenian vase painting, especially on drinking cups.

The Oresteia was followed by the Satyr play *Proteus*, which told of what happened to Menelaus in Egypt while Agamemnon was being murdered by Clytemnestra. His Theban trilogy of *Laius*, *Oedipus*, and *Seven Against Thebes* was followed by a Satyr play called *The Sphinx*.

A lost Sophocles Satyr play called *Trackers* was discovered on the Oxyrinchus Papyrus found in Egypt. This tells the story of the birth of Hermes and how as an infant he stole Apollo's cattle, invented the lyre, and gave it to Apollo to avoid his vengeance. The satyrs, headed by their leader Silenus, are offered a reward by Apollo to find his cattle and set off to track them down. They hear a terrible noise and meet the nymph Cyllene, who is secret-

ly fostering Hermes for his mother Maia. The noise is the sound of the lyre, made from a tortoise shell and the hide of the cattle. The text becomes garbled, but eventually Hermes appears full-grown and awards the lyre to Apollo, and much music and merriment follow.

Athenian Tragedy

Why did tragedy flourish in Athens? The first records of tragic performances come from Athens and date to the end of the sixth century BCE, when the city was developing into a democracy. The population had been divided by the reformer Cleisthenes into ten tribal groups based on equal geographic divisions, and it seems that the performance of the Dithyramb developed into a state-sponsored competition between tribes. Aristotle, writing in the fourth century, thought that tragedy grew spontaneously from Dithyrambic choral performance, whereas the Athenian historian Herodotus thought it had its roots in the Dorian culture of the Peloponnesus, rather than the Ionic Athenians.

We have records carved in stone dating to 501 BCE. Aeschylus was said to have been active just a few years later, and the first tragedy we know of was called *The Capture of Miletus* by Phrynichus in 493 BCE, although there is some evidence that his first play was produced in Athens as early as 511 BCE. We know that *The Capture of Miletus* dealt with a real contemporary disaster, and this seemed to have proved unpopular with the Athenians. In 494, the Persians had destroyed the city of Miletus in Asia Minor, an Athenian ally. Herodotus tells us that the Athenians were so upset at being reminded of a recent terrible event that they fined Phrynichus 1,000 drachmas.

Our earliest surviving complete tragedy is Aeschylus' *The Persians* (472 BCE). It also dealt with a contemporary theme—the return of King Xerxes to Persia after his defeat at the hands of an Athenian-led force. Remarkably, this play dramatized the plight of the enemy, although it did glorify the Athenian victory at Salamis in 480.

In any event, it seems that the Athenians preferred their tragedy depicted as mythology and after *The Persians*, we find no more direct contemporary works, although many of the later tragedies have overt political and social messages woven into the fabric of the myths they tell.

Urban Tragedy

Tragedy has another connection with the countryside in that the great City of Dionysia had its origins in rural village festivals. As the reforms of Cleisthenes took effect, the Athenians and the people of the surrounding Attic countryside and coastal regions were organized into new social groups called *demes*. Our term “democracy” is derived from *demos kratos*, which translates to “power of the demes.”

A function of the new radical democracy in Athens was to centralize government and religion in the city, with the Acropolis as the spiritual heart. So early on in the fifth century, the festival of Dionysos was relocated from the countryside to the city marketplace and then significantly to the southeast slope of the Acropolis.

By the mid fifth century, the theatre of Dionysos could seat from 25,000 to 30,000 people. It was the largest public structure in Athens and the only place

where all the voting members of the Athenian populace—the men of the demes—could gather at the same time in the same place. The political ramifications were enormous and it was no accident that the statesman Themistocles produced plays of Phrynichus and Pericles produced works by Aeschylus. Sophocles himself served as an elected general, and the plays of Euripides and Aristophanes are full of overt political references and metaphors.

The “Seeing-Place”

We have already learned that the Greek term “theatre” means “seeing place.” The visual element of Greek tragedy is hard to ascertain from just reading the texts. To some extent, we can reconstruct the physical staging conditions of the Theatre of Dionysos and learn a great deal about how these plays were received and how the physical space impacted upon the construction of the plays themselves.

Orchestra

This was the focal point of the Greek theatre: a large area of flat, beaten earth with an altar to Dionysos at its center. Most orchestras were circular, but some have been found to be rectangular and trapezoid. There is some conjecture that the origin of the orchestra may have been the circular threshing floors found in the ancient world. These floors were used to thresh the harvest and separate the wheat and the chaff, and it is not hard to imagine that after the harvest, they would have doubled up as dance spaces for communal celebration. As tragedy may have grown out of choral song and dance, and Dionysos is connected with vegetation and the renewal of life forces that produce the annual harvest, this seems plausible.

The orchestra shrunk in importance as the chorus did. The remains of the theatre of Dionysos in Athens are mainly from the Hellenistic period and the orchestra has been reduced to a semi-circle. As the theatre developed in the Roman period, the stage grew bigger at the expense of the orchestra, which became a forestage until today, where the orchestra is a pit below the stage and the term has become the name of a large group of classical musicians.

Skene

The word means “tent,” and the original stage set may have simply been a tent in which the actors changed and then performed in front of. There is evidence that the early theatre of Dionysos contained a large rock that was cut away at some point when the theatre was enlarged and moved up the hill. This rock may have been the Western world’s first stage and set combined, and two early plays of Aeschylus, *The Persians* and *Prometheus Bound* (if indeed it is early), would play well with a rock set.

At some point in the fifth century, a wooden stage building was introduced. *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus, performed in 458 BCE, may have been the first time the skene building was used with its upper level and great central door. Certainly, the opening watchman scene would have been a great coup de theatre if this were indeed the case with the disheveled watchman jumping up and shouting “Gods!” at the top of his voice. In an open-air theatre with no house lights, this would have been a very effective way to grab the attention of the audience.

The skene also contained a central door that was used for entrances and exits and could denote a great house, the entrance to a cave, a gateway. There seems to have been no other scenery in the Athenian theatre—the text created the information needed to create a sense of location. This was theatre of the imagination, the direct descendent of bardic storytelling and choral performance.

The Stage

There is a lot of debate as to whether the Greek theatre was equipped with a stage or not. I think there was a stage—a long, thin wooden platform that sat no more than three or four feet above the orchestra. Having conducted blocking experiments in the theatre of Dionysos, it becomes clear that the audience's view of the actors would be blocked unless they are raised a little above the orchestra. This does not mean that actors could not use the orchestra or play scenes at the altar. But it must be remembered that the audience in the Theatre of Dionysos sat in what is called the "three quarter round," in that they almost fully enveloped the circular orchestra except the upper third. It was here that the skene building and stage was located, upstage center still the strongest point on any stage.

We have scant evidence for a fifth-century stage; wood does not survive 2,500 years. There is just one vase painting showing a raised stage being used in a comic performance and the remains of a fourth-century stage—the idea must have come from somewhere. We can never know for sure. As you read the plays, you might think about this controversy and start to form your own opinion on the matter.

Theatron

This is the "seeing-place"—the seating on three sides of the orchestra up the natural slope of the hillside called a "cavea." Most seats in the fifth century were probably wooden, although there may have been some stone seats for dignitaries on the front rows. The Athenians may have sat in seating wedges according to their *demes*, which would have made the theatre resemble something between an open-air performance of a grand opera, a political convention, and a sporting event. Remember the plays were performed in competition.

Cavea

This was the natural bowl of a hillside that provided the seating area for the theatre. In Athens, the first performances were held in the Agora, but as audience demand grew, it became necessary to find a new site. The southeast slope of the Acropolis provided a natural "rake," or slope, for seating, and archaeological evidence shows that it had been further excavated to provide a steeper *cavea* to accommodate more spectators. The bowl-shaped *cavea* also provided excellent acoustics as long as the masked actor faced the front. It is very true that at the great fourth-century theatre of Epidauros, one of the best surviving examples of a classical Greek theatre, one can hear a pin dropped in the orchestra at the very back row. Performances of ancient plays still take place in Epidauros today.

The Ekkyklema

The earliest piece of stage machinery used in the Greek theatres seems to have been the Ekkyklema, a theatrical truck that was wheeled out from the central doorway to reveal interior scenes. Most famously, Aeschylus used the Ekkyklema in his play *Agamemnon* to reveal the dead bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. The Ekkyklema may have evolved into a theatrical revolve and was also used to great comic effect by Aristophanes.

The Mechane

The term “deus ex machina” (god on a machine) has come to define any act of seemingly divine intervention. The term itself is derived from the Greek’s use of the *mechane*—a large stage crane that lifted actors from backstage behind the *skene* down onto either the roof of the *skene* or the stage. It is my opinion that Aeschylus and Sophocles did not use the *mechane*, but it was an innovation of Euripides, perhaps first used around 440 BCE in his production of *Medea*. Aristophanes has great fun with his stage crane, flying comic actors all over the place, including, famously, Socrates on a drying rack (not a basket as is popularly thought), and a simple hero called Trygaeus on the back of a dung beetle.

The Mask

All the actors wore masks on stage. The tragic mask was a simple whole facemask made of linen, cork, or wood. It had a small mouth aperture, and there is no evidence at all for any kind of megaphone mouth. This was not necessary with the excellent acoustics of the ancient theatre. The mask was attached to the head by means of a *sakkos*, a small fabric skullcap with realistic hair attached. Female masks were often painted in white to denote gender, and the masks themselves were not much larger than the real human head. The Pronomos Vase, depicting the members of a Satyr play, shows masks from every angle, being held, contemplated, and worn.

Costume

Tragic costume was markedly different from everyday Greek dress. It was highly decorated and elaborate, often reflecting Eastern tastes, and this may have been a way of depicting an ancient mythical quality on stage. The actors wore long sleeves and long robes to assist in the masking convention, playing women and doubling in roles. They also wore *cothornoi*, a soft boot that rose to the calf. Later in the Hellenistic period, the *cothornoi* became raised into a platform shoe and a high wig was added to the mask to give the actor more height and stature on stage. Dionysos is often depicted wearing *cothornoi*.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What was the connection between tragedy and rural village festivals?
2. What is the Ekkyklema?

Suggested Reading

Taplin, Oliver. *Greek Tragedy in Action*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

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Webster, T.B.L. *Monuments Illustrating Tragedy and Satyr Play*. London: Phaidon, 1967.

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Lecture 5: Aeschylus

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Aeschylus' *The Persians*, translated by Janet Lembke and C.J. Herington.

Works

There are only seven surviving plays of Aeschylus; altogether, he may have written over ninety. He was said to have won thirteen victories at the Dionysia and competed there nineteen times.

We have seven extant plays by Aeschylus:

The Persians, 472 BCE

Seven Against Thebes, 467 BCE

Suppliant Women, 466-459 BCE

The Oresteia, 458 BCE

Agamemnon, BCE

Libation Bearers, BCE

The Furies, BCE

Prometheus Bound—Most scholars now feel this is probably the work of his son Euphorion from around 430 BCE.

Aeschylus was the great genius of Athenian tragedy, and yet he died abroad, perhaps even in exile on the island of Sicily. The epitaph on the grave marker of one of the world's greatest and most influential dramatists simply states:

"Under this stone lies Aeschylus, the son of Euphorion who died in the wheat fields of Gela. The grove of Marathon and the long haired Persian knew his bravery."

Aeschylus was born in Eleusis in 525 BCE. He may have been descended from Eleusinian priests, who presided over the sacred mystery cult of Demeter and Kore.

In many ways, the life of Aeschylus represents the enormous and rapid growth of Athenian political, military, and cultural power. When Aeschylus was born, Pisistratus—a tyrant and a popular leader who had taken power from the old aristocratic families and set about establishing Athens as a cultural center—ruled Athens. It may have been Pisistratus who instituted the City Dionysia festival and brought it in to the city from the countryside.

In 510, when Aeschylus was fifteen, Pisistratus' son was expelled, effectively putting an end to the rule of the Athenian tyrants.

In 508, the statesman Cleisthenes established reforms that set the wheels in motion for a radical Athenian democracy.

In 499, the Greeks of Asia Minor rose up against their Persian overlords. The Athenians helped their unsuccessful attempts. This was the date of Aeschylus' first production.

In 490, the Persians decided to invade Greece. They were met at the plain of Marathon by an Athenian-led hoplite force. Six thousand Athenian hoplites marched out to meet the superior Persian force. Joined by another 4,000 from Plataea, the Greeks faced a force of at least 25,000 Persians.

After a delay, the Greeks realized the Spartans were not coming to their aid. The democratic Athenians devised a plan of attack in which a highly maneuverable hoplite line enveloped the Persian mass. According to legend, 6,400 Persians were killed, while the Athenians lost only 192 men. These "Men of Marathon" became legendary defenders of Athenian freedom, and Aeschylus counted himself amongst them, having fought in the hoplite line.

Hoplite warfare developed in the Peloponnesus sometime in the late seventh or early sixth century BCE. Previously armed aristocrats undertook warfare, men from wealthy families who could afford weapons, armor, and the time to train. As the Greek world began to thrive in the early Archaic Period, trade routes, colonization, a population boom, and contact with the East and West brought an influx of new technology and raw materials and saw the emergence of a growing middle class. These men were able to afford weapons of their own, and soon Greek communities were fielding much larger fighting forces. This has been called the "Hoplite Revolution" and may have been a major contributing factor in the development of the Greek polis—the city-state.

A typical hoplite was a heavily armed infantryman equipped with a large round shield (the term *hoplite* is from the word for this type of shield), spear, and sword and wearing body armour, greave, and a full-face helmet with a large plume. To be fully effective, hoplites formed up in a long line with each man responsible for covering the man to his left with his shield. This formation was known as the *phalanx* and became the dominant form of ancient warfare, refined to deadly effect by Alexander until the Romans learned how to neutralize it at the battle of Pydna in 168 BCE.

In order for a hoplite phalanx to be effective, troops were required

Aeschylus' Life and Times

525	Birth of Aeschylus
510	Tyrant Hippias expelled from Athens
490	Battle of Marathon, Athens defeats Persia under Darius
484	Aeschylus' first victory at Dionysia
483	Discovery of silver in Athenian mines at Laurion
480	Battle of Salamis, Athens defeats Persia under Xerxes
477	Establishment of the Delian Confederacy led by Athens
472	<i>The Persians</i>
467	<i>Seven Against Thebes</i>
463?	<i>Suppliant Women</i>
462	Ephialtes strips the Aristocratic Aerepogus Council of power
458	<i>Oresteia</i>
457	Athens completed the long walls between the city and the harbor to defend against Spartan aggression
456	Death of Aeschylus in Gela, Sicily

to regularly train together, and the polis needed to be organized for effective recruitment. These socio/military reforms led to a greater political role for the male middle class in many Greek cities. Aeschylus trained as a hoplite and was proud not only of his military service but his role in helping to secure the foundation of a new radical democracy in Athens. Aeschylus won his first victory in 484.

In 480, the Persians invaded again under Xerxes, and Aeschylus probably fought at the sea battle of Salamis and on land at Plataea, where Athenian-led forces again defeated a much larger Persian army.

The Persians

Produced in Athens at the City Dionysia of 472 BCE, this is the only surviving Greek play that deals with a real event in the recent history of Athens—the defeat of the Persian forces at the battle of Salamis and the imagined homecoming of King Xerxes to Susa.

The Persians was presented as a trilogy alongside the lost plays *Phineus* and *Glaucus of Potniae*. The tragic trilogy was followed by a Satyr play called *Prometheus Maker of Fire*.

The play is set in the Persian capital of Susa. The Chorus of Old Persian regents at the royal court tell of the departure of the various regiments and how their country yearns for them.

Queen Atossa enters and tells how she is plagued by terrible dreams. One depicts two women—one in Greek dress, one in Persian. Her son Xerxes tries to yoke them to his chariot. The Persian accepts the yoke, but the Greek will not, and Xerxes is thrown. The ghost of Xerxes' father Darius stands over his felled son and shakes his head in pity.

The queen makes offerings to calm the gods, but sees a falcon tear an eagle apart.

The chorus tells her that her dreams are not ill-omened and she asks about Athens.

Atossa *I'd like to know, dear friends,
Where Athens is.*

Chorus *Far west where the Lord Sun fades out.*

Atossa *My son really wanted to hunt down this city?*

Chorus *Yes, so all Greece would bend beneath a Shah.*

Atossa *Does it field a manhorde of an army?*

Chorus *Such that is has worked evils on the Medes.*

Atossa *Then bowtugging arrows glint in their hands?*

Chorus *No. Spears held steady, and heavy shields.*

Atossa *What else? Wealth in their houses?*

Chorus *Treasure, a fountain of silver lies in their soil.*

Atossa *But who herds the manflock? Who lords the army?*

Chorus *They're not anyone's slaves or subjects.*

~Aeschylus: *The Persians*, lines 233–242
(Trans. Janet Lembke and C.J. Herington)

A messenger of the Persian army tells of the sea battle lost at Salamis and the land battle lost at Plataea.

In Greek culture, the messenger or herald was protected by the gods and allowed to cross borders with impunity. He was watched over by Hermes, himself the messenger of the gods and the god of boundaries. Messengers are a notable aspect of Greek tragedy, bringing with them important news that pushes the action of the play to another place or dramatizing offstage events in speech. In *The Persians*, the messenger delivers the news of the defeat of the Persian army to the court and Susa and paints a vivid picture of the battle of Salamis, the victorious Athenian navy, and the Persian losses.

*Shores and reefs filled up with our dead
And every able ship under Persia's command
Broke order,
 Scrambling to escape.
We might have been tuna or netted fish,
for they kept on, spearing and gutting us
with splintered oars and bits of wreckage,
while moaning and screams drowned out
the noise till
 Night's black face closed it all in.*

~Aeschylus: *The Persians* lines 421–427
(Trans. Janet Lembke and C.J. Herington)

The Chorus and Atossa lament.

Atossa calls up the spirit of her dead husband Darius.

Darius tells of how he was defeated by the Athenians at Marathon.

He warns that Earth herself is an ally of the Greeks.

Darius also warns against reckless pride (hubris) and descends.

Atossa leaves and pledges to accept her son despite his folly.

Xerxes enters a broken man and tells of his defeat. He joins the lament with the chorus.

Seven Against Thebes

Produced at the City Dionysia in 467, *Seven Against Thebes* was originally the final part of a Theban trilogy, along with the plays *Laius* and *Oedipus*. The trilogy was followed by a Satyr play called *Sphinx*.

The trilogy began with Oedipus' killing of his own father, the realization by Oedipus of his guilt, and the civil war that followed his banishment.

Oedipus' son Polynices raises a huge Argive army of seven warriors, including himself, and sets out on a mission to retake the city of Thebes from his estranged brother Eteocles.

Set in the city of Thebes, the chorus is made up of Theban women who appeal to the gods to protect them.

Eteocles enters and accuses them of creating chaos in the city. He tells them that he will raise six Theban warriors to meet the Argives alongside him.

A messenger enters and describes the approaching Argive army, the seven warriors, and their armor.

As each warrior is described, Eteocles sends out a Theban champion to meet them at each of Thebes' seven gates.

The Theban women appeal to Eteocles not to kill his own brother, but appeal to the gods and try to make peace instead.

The messenger returns with the news that the Thebans have been repulsed, but Eteocles and his brother Polynices have killed each other.

The bodies of the two men are brought on stage, accompanied by their sisters Antigone and Ismene, who join the chorus in a lament.

A herald enters and tells the women that the Theban elders have decreed that Eteocles will be buried with full honors as protector of Thebes, but Polynices is an outcast who attacked his home city and is not to be buried.

Antigone resolves to bury Polynices, despite the warnings of the herald.

The women of the chorus are divided on what to do, but agree to attend to the funeral of Eteocles.

The Suppliant Women

The Suppliant Women (463?) is the only remaining play of the trilogy that continued with *The Egyptians* and *The Danaids*.

The trilogy tells the story of the daughters of Danaus and their flight to Argos, where they beg the Argive king Pelasgus to protect them and prevent their marriage to the sons of Aegyptus. Pelasgus is killed and the daughters are forced to marry the sons. But Danaus had instructed his daughters to kill their husbands on their wedding night. They all do so except Hypermnestra, who goes on to found the royal line of Argos with her husband Lynceus.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How did the life of Aeschylus represent the growth of Athenian political, military, and cultural power?
2. How did the “Hoplite Revolution” contribute to the development of the Greek *polis*?

Suggested Reading

Aeschylus. *The Persians*. Trans. Janet Lembke and C.J. Herington. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

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Lecture 6: *The Oresteia*—Our Only Trilogy

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in *The Oresteia*, translated by Peter Meineck.

In 458 BCE, when Aeschylus was sixty-seven years old, he presented one of his greatest works to the demos of Athens seated in the Theatre of Dionysos. This was *The Oresteia*, the epic story of the curse of the House of Atreus in Argos, the death of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and the revenge of Orestes.

The trilogy was made up of three plays:

Agamemnon—The story of the homecoming of King Agamemnon from Troy and his death at the hand of his wife Clytemnestra.

Libation Bearers—Orestes returns years later and kills Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus.

The Furies (or *Eumenides*)—Orestes is pursued by the Furies for spilling the blood of his kin and flees to Athens, where an Athenian jury—presided over by Athena—decide the case.

The trilogy was followed by a Satyr play called *Proteus*. Only around twenty lines survive, and it seems the play deals with Menelaus and Helen in Egypt. Proteus was the name of an Egyptian king and a shape-shifting spirit that told Menelaus to go to Egypt.

Athenian fifth-century drama was funded by the state. One way a wealthy civic leader would pay taxes to the city would be to finance a production. The *Choregos* would pay for the trilogy and Satyr play, up to six months of rehearsal costs, the costumes, props, and masks. This was a huge expense and seems to have had equal prestige value with outfitting an Athenian war ship.

The Athenian statesman Pericles may have acted as the *Choregos* of *The Oresteia*. This would have been an important step in any political career. It is possible to interpret aspects of *The Oresteia* as relating closely to the political view of Pericles and the new radical democracy in Athens.

Agamemnon: Background of Myth

The other gods

*Were assembled in the halls of Olympian Zeus,
And the Father of Gods and Men was speaking.
He couldn't stop thinking about Aegisthus,*

*Whom Agamemnon's son, Orestes, had killed.
"Mortals! They are always blaming the gods
For their troubles, when their own witlessness
Causes them more than they were destined for!"*

~Homer: *Odyssey* 1, lines 33–39
(Trans. Stanley Lombardo)

The story of the house of Atreus was known at least as far back as the *Odyssey*, written down in the eighth century BCE. The myth itself probably dates back to at least the beginning of the Dark Ages and would have circulated via the performance of bards.

The Curse

Atreus, the King of Argos, was locked in a bitter dispute with his brother, Thyestes, over the throne. This resulted in the banishment of Thyestes and his family from Argos. But Atreus was not satisfied and feared revenge. He staged a false religious festival and invited his brother and his family back in an act of mock reconciliation.

Atreus arrives and is seated alone to receive a ritual meal. As he eats, he slowly begins to realize that he is actually eating human flesh, in fact, the remains of his children whom Atreus has had butchered and cooked. Thyestes reels back and curses the House of Atreus and his entire family.

*Their heads and hands and feet were hacked
Into pieces and thrown into a boiling stew,
From which he, in ignorance, ate his fill.
A meal that brought the curses upon this House!
When he discovered the obscene truth, he screamed
Out in horror, reeled back from the table, kicking it over
And, retching, vomited up the butchered flesh.
Then he shouted out his curse on the sons of Pelops,
“Damn to death the clan of Pleisthenes!”*

~Aeschylus: *Agamemnon*, lines 1596–1602
(Trans. P.W. Meineck)

The Sons of Atreus

The two sons of Atreus were Agamemnon and Menelaus. To the south of Argos lay the Kingdom of Sparta, where a man called Tynadareus once ruled. His wife Leda was impregnated by Zeus, disguised as a swan, on the same night she lay with her mortal husband. She then gave birth to two mortal and two immortal children, the sons Castor and Pollux and the daughters Clytemnestra and Helen.

All the best men of Greece wanted to marry the semi-divine and beautiful Helen, and she was eventually married to Menelaus, who went to rule in Sparta, with Clytemnestra going to live with Agamemnon in Argos. The Greeks swore to uphold the marriage of Helen and Menelaus, and so when Paris took her to Troy, they were honor bound to follow Agamemnon and Menelaus into the Trojan War.

The Sacrifice of Iphigenia

Under the leadership of Agamemnon, Menelaus' older and more powerful brother, the Greeks gather their ships at the harbor off Calchis in the bay of Aulis. A terrible storm prevents them from sailing and the prophet Calchas interprets an omen of two eagles tearing at a pregnant hare. The Greek soldiers are becoming weak and are starving, and their commanders demand a sacrifice to mollify Artemis, the goddess of the hunt. Agamemnon understands that this must be his daughter Iphigenia and resigns himself to her death. Fair winds follow and the Greeks sail on to Troy.

The Trojan War

After a siege that lasted over ten years and claimed the lives of many Greek heroes and soldiers, the Greeks sack Troy, smashing sacred shrines and desecrating altars to the gods. As they sail home, the angry gods send a terrible storm, scattering the fleet and isolating Agamemnon's ship.

The Action of the Play

The Watchman

Agamemnon opens at night, when a disheveled watchman pops up on the roof of the house of Atreus and shouts "GODS!" at the top of his voice. This was a superb attention-grabbing device for an audience probably gathered at dawn in an open-air theatre with no house lights.

The watchman locates himself on the roof of the House of Atreus. If, as many scholars think, this was the first time a *skene* had been used, his appearance would have significant dramatic effect.

The watchman then gives us the first important image in the play:

*"How well I've come to know night's congregation of stars,
the blazing monarchs of the sky, those that bring winter,
and those that bring summer to us mortals."*

Here, the watchman articulates the natural order of the stars in the night sky, the male realm of Zeus. Soon he will see Clytemnestra's beacon sent from Troy—a woman-made constellation usurping the natural order. And one of the main themes of the *Oresteia* is firmly established—the conflict between male and female.

The Chorus

The chorus of *Agamemnon* is made up of twelve old men of Argos. Aeschylus is not clear who exactly they are. At times, they seem to act like ministers of state or local leaders. At other times, they represent the stagnation in Argos, the loss of young men, and a sense of powerlessness.

The chorus sings of the expedition against Troy as being a war to preserve the divine laws of hospitality presided over by Zeus. But their vaunted words are tinged with a sense of loss.

They bring up the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and here Aeschylus shows us an Agamemnon wrestling with this grave decision between family and state. Under pressure from the chiefs to avert a terrible storm that is blasting the fleet and starving the troops, he makes the decision to sacrifice his daughter to appease Artemis and calm the winds.

Aeschylus creates extraordinary imagery through his text in all his plays. In *Agamemnon*, the saffron-dyed wedding veil of Iphigenia is compared to a stream of blood, and Aeschylus combines the motifs of marriage, death, and ritual to create an image of what the scholar Froma Zeitlin has described as "corrupted sacrifice."

*“He ordered the beautiful mouth to be gagged
to stifle a cry that would curse the House.
And as the bridle forced her silence,
Steeped saffron poured to the ground.
Her eyes threw a last pitiful glance at her sacrificers,
but like a figure in a painting,
she could not call to them for help.”*

Clytemnestra alludes to the saffron veil, or in Greek, *krokou baphas*, again at line 612, where she says *kalkou baphas*, and in the description of the red carpet Agamemnon will walk on as a *baphas*—an expensive dyed tapestry.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What was the link between taxation and drama in Athens?
2. Why was the opening of *Agamemnon* so effective for the Athenian audience?

Suggested Reading

Aeschylus. *Agamemnon* in *The Oresteia*. Trans. Peter Meineck. Hackett Publishing, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Gagarin, Michael. *Aeschylean Drama*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

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Lecture 7: *Agamemnon* Continued

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is the introduction by Helene Foley in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, translated by Peter Meineck.

The Beacon Speech

Clytemnestra enters through the doorway of the *skene* representing the great doors of the House of Atreus. Note Aeschylus' expert use of entrances and exits. She tells the men of the chorus that Troy has been taken, and they are bewildered. How can she possibly know? She tells them of her chain of beacons that sent a signal fire from Troy. Each stage is imbued with mythological power and geographical probability.

1. Mt. Ida near Troy: The site of the judgement of Paris.
2. The Rock of Hermes at Lemnos: This was the volcanic island where the Lemnian women murdered their husbands. Hermes is here invoked as a guide to the dead.
3. Mount Athos: The third promontory in northern Greece sacred to Zeus the Third, or Zeus the fulfiller. Still a very sacred place today with a monastery that bans women.
4. Macistus' tall tower is unknown.
5. Euripos Stream is the body of water between Chalcis and Aulis, where Iphigenia was killed by Agamemnon.
6. Messapion is a mountain in Boeotia.
7. Asopus was a river in Boeotia, but also the name of a mythological king whose daughter, Aegina, was raped by Zeus.
8. Cithaeron was where Dionysos drove the women of Thebes to frenzy and Pentheus was torn apart by his own mother. The infant Oedipus was exposed there.
9. Gorgopus: The swamp of the Gorgons, mythical female spirits who could turn a man to stone.
10. Aegiplanctus: This means "goat roaming mountain." This may have a connection with Pan, the goat/man god of animalistic behavior. Panic is named for him.
11. Saronic Gulf: The body of water between Attica and the Argolid.
12. Arachnaeus: "Spider Mountain," an ominous peak that has been identified as Mt. Arna to the north of Argos.

Messenger

After another choral ode that tells of Helen and the justice of Zeus, a messenger from the Greek army arrives, bringing the news that Agamemnon has returned. He also tells the chorus that Menelaus is lost at sea, and so far only one ship has returned home. Clytemnestra tells the messenger to go

back to Agamemnon and have him come as quickly as possible to find a “faithful” wife.

The Carpet Scene

Agamemnon arrives in a chariot, breaking up a choral ode. He thanks Zeus for his victory and talks of reestablishing order in Argos. He goes to step from the chariot and enter his house, but his way is blocked by Clytemnestra.

Clytemnestra heaps praise upon her husband and tells of how hard her life has been while he has been away. She orders the women of the house to lay the finest crimson tapestries from the door to his chariot.

Agamemnon knows how bad it will look if he treads on the cloths and at first refuses, but in an expert subtextual duel, Clytemnestra persuades him, and after taking off his boots, he walks up the carpet into his house, his feet never actually touching his native earth, in stark contrast to the arrival of the messenger.

Clytemnestra has a superb command of language, and it is this power over speech that allows her to trap Agamemnon. In just fifteen lines, 930 to 945, she turns her husband from conqueror of Troy perched on his war chariot to a sacrifice. Below is the text from the carpet scene and, in parentheses, an interpretation of Clytemnestra’s subtext.

Agamemnon:

If I can hold to this in all things then I need never fear.

Clytemnestra:

Then trust your judgment and tell me this.
(I want to publicly show that you lack the ability to command.)

Agamemnon:

Don’t worry; my judgment will never be corrupted.

Clytemnestra:

Would you have promised this to the gods in a moment of terror?
(I know what you are capable of; you killed my daughter in fear of the gods at Aulis.)

Agamemnon:

Yes, if a seer told me it would be for the best.
(Calchas the prophet advised me to do it.)

Clytemnestra:

What do you think Priam would have done if he had won?
(I doubt even your greatest enemy would have done such a thing.)

Agamemnon:

I think he would have walked on these embroideries.
(I am a better man than Priam.)

Clytemnestra:

Then do not be ashamed of the disapproval of men.
(No, you are not. You bowed to pressure from the chiefs when you killed my daughter.)

Agamemnon:

The voice of the People carries enormous power.
(I try to do the right thing.)

Clytemnestra:

But the unenvied man is unenviable.
(All you have left is your reputation as the conqueror of Troy.)

Agamemnon:

A woman should not be so fond of argument.
(I am the king and I rule over you.)

Clytemnestra:

It becomes the fortunate man to yield a victory.
(If you want to live in peace, you'll show you can be magnanimous. I'll give you what you want.)

Agamemnon:

You really want your victory in this contest?
(If I do this for you, will I be able to return home?)

Clytemnestra:

Be persuaded, you have the power, surrender of your own free will to me.
(If you do this, you are in my power; you will feel relieved, but I will kill you.)

Agamemnon:

Well, if you want this so much. Here, somebody help me off with my boots.

Before he exits, Agamemnon introduces Cassandra, his Trojan war-prize, and orders her taken into the house to serve him. Cassandra is a daughter of King Priam and a prophetess of Apollo. She carried the curse that no one would ever believe her prophecies.

Cassandra

Cassandra sings terrible prophecies about the death of Agamemnon, but the chorus will not listen. She curses her fate and rejects Apollo. She knows she is going to be killed by Clytemnestra and foresees the return of Orestes, but she walks through the door accepting her death.

*So much for human fortune. When all is well,
a mere shadow can turn it upside down,
in the face of a calamity, the slightest blow destroys,
like a wet sponge blotting out a drawing.
I do not pity myself, I pity mankind.*

—Aeschylus: *Agamemnon*, lines 1326–1330

Several times throughout the play, the chorus calls Clytemnestra man-like. She defies social norms by crossing the threshold of the *oikos*—the house, the traditional realm of women—and entering the political realm of the polis,

the place of men. In fifth-century Athens, women were not involved in the political life of the city and were barred from participation. They could not vote, prosecute in court, or enjoy full citizen rights. In fact, their status was dependent on their nearest male relative, whether this was their father or husband. Wellborn wives were supposed to remain indoors or go about veiled, be modest in public, and not gossip or exchange information. Women could not attend the assembly, the games, and probably the theatre.

Although the female sphere was the house, this meant that they did hold a certain amount of control over finances and management. They also were an important part of religion and ritual and had their own festivals, in which men were barred. Despite the political repression of women in fifth-century Athens, Greek drama is full of dominant, powerful females. But these portrayals were created by men, played by men, and performed for an audience made up of men. Many of the later works of Aristophanes deal directly with the role of women, from the sex strike of the women in *Lysistrata* to the outspoken critics of Euripides in *Women at the Thesmophoria* to the political coup of the assemblywomen. There is some evidence that Aeschylus himself may have played the role of Clytemnestra in *The Oresteia*.

Clytemnestra's Revenge

The chorus's next ode is suddenly interrupted by the terrifying sound of the screams of Agamemnon, who is struck down in the bath at the hands of his own wife. The chorus are confused and break into twelve separate voices, squabbling over the best course of action. When they finally resolve to rush the house, they are too late. The great doors open and Clytemnestra emerges, standing over the dead bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. The chorus is shocked, appalled, and confused. Clytemnestra says she is the spirit of vengeance. The chorus laments their dead king, and Clytemnestra refuses to let them bury him. She invokes the law of justice and claims to be an agent of revenge. She claims she has paid for his crimes "deed for deed."

Aegisthus

Aegisthus enters with several guards (notably, Aeschylus has him come from offstage). He did not participate in the murder, only the conspiracy. This differs from the account found in Homer's *Odyssey* and our records of the mythic tradition. This device on the part of Aeschylus places the blame for Agamemnon's death squarely on the shoulders of Clytemnestra—a mother avenging her slaughtered daughter and defending what's left of her family. Or is she a scheming, faithless wife plotting to take power and overthrow her husband, who never loved her? Aegisthus tells of how Atreus fed his siblings to his father and how he is claiming rightful revenge. He stands at the side of Clytemnestra and is challenged by the chorus. They pray for the return of Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, who has been sent away. Aegisthus' response is to order his henchmen to silence them, but Clytemnestra intervenes and calls for an end to hostilities.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How does Clytemnestra's command of language allow her to trap Agamemnon?
2. In what ways were women able to participate in Athenian society?

Suggested Reading

Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*. Trans. Peter Meineck. Intro. Helen Foley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Foley, Helen P. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

McClure, Laura. *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Sommerstein, Alan H. *Aeschylean Tragedy*. Naples, Italy: Levante, 1996.

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Zeitlin, Froma I. *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Lecture 8: *Libation Bearers*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* in *Oresteia*, translated by Peter Meineck.

In the last lecture, we examined Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in some detail. Here, we will continue our close reading of Aeschylus' masterful trilogy by discussing *Libation Bearers*.

The second play of the *Oresteia* trilogy takes place some years later and deals with the return of Orestes to avenge his father's death. It is possible to see each play in the trilogy as standing for an expression of a different political system. If *Agamemnon* shows us a monarchy, *Libation Bearers* depicts a tyranny. Eventually in *The Furies*, we will encounter democracy in action.

At the Tomb of Agamemnon

Orestes, the exiled son of Agamemnon and Pylades, his friend from Phocis, enter at the tomb of Agamemnon in Argos. This may have been located at the altar to Dionysos in the center of the orchestra. Orestes prays to Hermes as he lays a lock of his hair at his father's tomb.

A chorus of mourning women enters, sent by Clytemnestra to pour water to assuage the restless spirit of Agamemnon. She has been having terrible, unsettling dreams. Orestes and Pylades hide to watch the ritual.

Electra, Orestes' sister, leads the women. She does not know whether to pour the libations or throw them away. The chorus tells her to perform the rites, not for Clytemnestra, but in the name of those loyal to her father.

Electra sees the lock of hair and imagines that it could be her exiled brother's. She sees footprints that seem like hers. She becomes increasingly excited, until Orestes reveals himself and proves that he is her brother by producing a piece of woven tapestry that was placed in his crib when he was an infant.

Orestes tells his sister that Apollo has sent him to claim his birthright and avenge the death of his father. He speaks of being afflicted with terrible ailments if he does not do the god's will.

The chorus sings a funeral lament and is joined by Electra and Orestes. This type of keening would have grown from a mournful dirge to a disturbing, aggressive chant designed to provoke action, in this case, revenge for the murdered man. There is strong historical evidence that these kind of women-led funerals had been recently banned in Athens. This may have been a result of controlling women's voices when Athenian men had been killed in battle serving the state. This epic concentric song pushes Orestes and Electra into action.

Orestes learns of Clytemnestra's dream. It seems like a prophecy affirming what he is about to do. She dreamt that a serpent was suckling at her breast

and that her milk was infused with blood.

Orestes devises a plan to disguise him and Pylades as strangers looking for shelter from the night. A covert, nighttime attack is typical for a young male initiate, and here we are reminded that what Orestes intends to do is a mythological metaphor for the rite of passage from boy to man.

Many Greek tragedies contain the motif of male initiation. In Greek culture, the training and initiation of boys was vitally important to the survival of the state. In Athens, young men were initiated into tribal groups called *demes* that organized them for military and political service and provided their voting rights.

In Sparta, young men around the age of seventeen were cast out of society for two years in the initiation rite of *krypteia*, in which they lived by hunting, killing, and learning to hone their survival skills. When the *krypteia* was completed, they were inducted into the army as full Spartans and regarded as men.

The myths surrounding the fall of Troy contain this motif. Troy falls because of the presence of the son of Achilles named Neoptolemus (“New Warrior”), and one mythic tradition places young initiates called *ephebes* inside the wooden horse, ready to launch their covert night attack.

Sophocles tells a story of conflicted initiation in his play *Philoctetes*, in which Neoptolemus must choose between the simple heroic conduct of the wounded Philoctetes, who has been left stranded on the island of Lemnos, and the machinations of the ever-political Odysseus.

Euripides tackles the myth of the initiation of Orestes in his play *Orestes*.

Aristophanes frequently lampoons initiation rites in his comedies. In *Wasps*, a son must reinitiate his elderly father to get him to change his ways, and in *Clouds*, an old man is initiated into the “cult” of Socrates.

Orestes goes to the great door of the house of Atreus and asks the doorman to fetch the head of the household. Aeschylus still creates a sense of gender conflict in the trilogy by having Clytemnestra, not Aegisthus, appear. Orestes claims to be a traveler seeking shelter, and Clytemnestra speaks of the excellent hospitality of the house. He tells his mother that her son is dead and that he has been given the ashes to return to Argos. Clytemnestra is distraught at the news of the death of her son and retires into the house, inviting her “guests” inside.

The nurse Cilissa appears and tells how she nursed and raised the young Odysseus, and that she has been dispatched to fetch Aegisthus.

Aegisthus is delighted to hear the news of the death of Orestes. He believes that now there will be no one left to avenge Agamemnon. He goes inside to hear the news directly from Clytemnestra.

The great doors close. Soon enough, we hear his screams from the house as he is killed offstage in a reflection of the killing of Agamemnon. The doors open and Clytemnestra emerges, calling for her “man-killing ax.”

Orestes confronts his mother and makes her face the fact that he has killed Aegisthus. He says that she is next. Clytemnestra desperately appeals to him

for mercy. In stark contrast to what we had previously heard from the nurse, she talks of a mother's love and bares the breast she claims to have weaned him on.

Orestes falters and asks his hitherto silent comrade Pylades what he should do. Pylades suddenly speaks, in one of the earliest uses of the third actor, and reminds Orestes of the Oracle of Apollo. He must avenge his father and kills his mother or suffer terrible consequences. Orestes steels himself to the grizzly task and leads his mother back into the house.

When the doors open again, Orestes enters on the *ekkyklema* with the dead body of his mother, again reflecting *Agamemnon*. Orestes spreads out the net that trapped his father and justifies his actions as rightful vengeance against those who killed his father.

Suddenly, Orestes sees the Furies, terrifying underworld female spirits that pursue all those who have shed their own blood. He flees in terror and resolves to go to Apollo's shrine at Delphi to seek the god's help.

The Curse of the House of Atreus continues down through yet another generation, and the chorus asks when it will all end.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. How is each play in the *Oresteia* trilogy an expression of a different political system?
2. What were the two kinds of sacrifice in Greek religion?

Suggested Reading

Aeschylus. *Libation Bearers* in *The Oresteia*. Trans. Peter Meineck. Intro. Helen Foley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

Goldhill, Simon. *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: The Oresteia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

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Lebeck, Anne. *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.

Lecture 9: *The Furies*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Aeschylus' *The Furies* in *The Oresteia*, translated by Peter Meineck.

The final play of the *Oresteia* trilogy opens with a dramatic shift in location. The doors of the *skene* open and the priestess of Apollo at Delphi, the Pythia, enters. She begins her sacred ritual by detailing the genealogy of the sanctuary, beginning with Gaia, the earth, down through a secession of powerful female spirits to her master, the god Apollo, who now presides over the shrine.

She solemnly enters the doorway, which has now been described as the temple of Apollo at Delphi, only to reenter suddenly on all fours, screaming and howling in terror. She has seen Orestes at the center-stone of Delphi, covered in blood surrounded by the sleeping Furies. She calls for the god Apollo to come and purge his house of this foul *miasma*—a stain, something impious and unclean. Orestes enters and is met by Apollo, who tells him to flee to Athens and beg Athena to help him.

The ghost of Clytemnestra rises up and wakes the sleeping Furies, reminding them of their sacred duty to hound Orestes to the end of the earth for his blood crime. The Furies spill out of the doorway, a terrifying site that according to later commentators led to “men fainting and women miscarrying”—as women were most likely not allowed to attend the theatre at this time, this seems unlikely, but captures the dramatic effect of the arrival of the chorus of Furies.

Apollo and the Furies argue over the rights of the case, and their respective arguments are laid out. The Furies punish crimes against kindred blood and so must pursue Orestes. They do not recognize the relationship between a husband and a wife. This is a *nomos*, a man-made custom and not a *physis*—a natural law of the universe. It is then the *themis* of the Furies to pursue Orestes—their rightful place in the scheme of things.

Apollo reacts angrily that the Furies dishonor and demean the whole basis of the Olympian gods, the marriage of Zeus, sky god with Hera, earth goddess. The Furies reject this view, stating “you young gods ride roughshod over the old ways! This creates a cosmic crisis on the very nature of justice.”

Apollo's Argument

*You demean and dishonor
the marriage vows of Hera Fulfiller
and Zeus,*

*Your statement discards Aphrodite
to disgrace,*

*she who seals the most cherished of
mortal bonds.*

*The marriage of a man and woman is
set by Destiny,
it is mightier than the oath and defended by Justice.*

~*The Furies*, lines 213–219
(Trans. Peter Meineck)

The Furies' Argument

*We are forced on by the shedding of mother blood,
and Justice is best served by hunting the killer down.*

~*The Furies*, lines 230–231
(Trans. Peter Meineck)

The scene now moves again, this time to the heart of the city of Athens—the statue of Athena before her temple on the Acropolis. This is significant, as the Acropolis had been completely destroyed by the Persians in 480, including the Temple of Athena Polias. The Athenians had vowed never to rebuild the site as a memory to the war, but in the late 460s, a huge decorated statue to Athena was erected, called Athena Promachos. This statue stood over twenty-six feet tall. Dominating the Athenian skyline, it was a precursor to the great building program of the mid fifth century that would produce the Parthenon. Orestes clings to the base of this statue (probably the altar in the center of the orchestra) and begs for Athena's help.

The Furies enter and sing their “binding song,” an incantation that was meant to freeze their quarry in abject terror:

*What mortal man is not terrified,
gripped in fear and horror
to hear our sacred law
determined by Destiny's decree?
The gods yield this right.
It is our age-old prerogative,
and though we dwell in sunless depths
our underworld power stands respected.*

~*The Furies*, lines 389–396
(Trans. Peter Meineck)

Athena enters directly from Troy, where she has claimed the land for Greece. She hears from both the Furies and Orestes and decides that the case is far too important to be settled by either one mortal man or even herself. She knows that she must mollify the Furies or Athens will incur their wrath. She must also be fair to Orestes, and so she resolves to hold the first-ever jury trial, appointing “the exemplary men of my city as magistrates over murder, bound by a solemn oath, for now and for ever to serve this sacred court.”

This new law court is founded on the “Hill of Ares,” the Areopagus, the site of the camp of the Amazon warrior women when they attacked Athens. This also has a profound political connotation. The democratic reformer Ephialtes had recently reduced the power of the Council of the Areopagus from an

aristocratic upper house of government to a homicide court. This controversial move helped to stoke the fires of near civil war in Athens between aristocratic and democratic factions, and Ephialtes himself was murdered.

Apollo enters to defend Orestes and makes the claim that it is the father's seed that produces the child, not the mother's. Here is Aeschylus presenting the Olympian gods as supporting the idea of patriarchy. He claims that a woman is merely a vessel for fostering the male seed and cites Athena as an example of how a child can be produced without a mother. Here the many themes of *The Oresteia* come together: male versus female, the new ways usurping the old, Chthonic against Olympian, *oikos* (household) versus *polis* (city-state), and familial justice versus state law.

Athena calls for the votes to be cast and then counted. In the first ever courtroom drama, the vote is split, and so Athena, citing her loyalty to her father, casts in favor of Orestes, who is released and pledges thereafter Argive loyalty to Athens.

The Furies are incensed and threaten to blight the land of Athens in revenge. Athens tries to persuade them to accept the verdict, but also to be welcomed to a new home. She offers them a revered place in Athens, where they will take up residence in the earth and be worshipped by the Athenians. Initially, the Furies reject this compromise, but eventually they are persuaded, after Athena goes so far as to threaten them with Zeus' thunderbolts if they cannot control their rage.

The trilogy ends with a great procession through the theatre. The Furies are renamed *Eumenides*, or "kindly ones," wrapped in red cloaks and led by the procession to their new home in Athens. This scene is reminiscent of the great Panatheniac procession, which took place once every four years in Athens when the people of the city would process onto the Acropolis to dress the ancient wooden cult statue of Athena. Involved in this procession were resident aliens of Athens, foreign-born men who worked in the city and paid taxes, but could not vote. These were called *metics*, and this arrangement in Athenian society allowed the city to accommodate skilled artists and craftsmen from all over the Greek world.

The Last Days of Aeschylus

The Oresteia was Aeschylus' last production in Athens. He returned to Sicily and died at Gela in 456 BCE. His sons, Euphorion and Euaeon became dramatists, as did his nephew Philocles. This founded a family of playwrights that lasted well over 100 years.

There are some ancient commentators who maintain that Aeschylus was prosecuted for revealing the Eleusinian mysteries in his plays and was banished, although we have no evidence that this ever happened. The fact that after his death it was decreed that his plays could be restaged was an indication of his popularity. In Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs*, staged in 405 BCE, the god Dionysos goes to Hades to bring back Euripides to save the city of Athens with great drama. After a battle of tragedy, it is Aeschylus who is brought back to life to teach the citizens of Athens how to save their city.

*Spirits of the darkness,
Speed him on his way;
Safely may he journey
To the light of day.*

*To the City's counsels
May he wisdom lend;
Then of war and suffering
There shall be an end.*

~Aristophanes: *Frogs*, lines 1525–1531
(Trans. David Barrett)

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. According to Greek mythology, why is Delphi the center of the world?
2. What is Athena characteristically associated with?

Suggested Reading

Aeschylus. *The Furies in The Oresteia*. Trans. Peter Meineck. Intro. Helen Foley. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1998.

Other Books of Interest

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Lecture 10: Sophocles

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Sophocles' *Ajax* in *Sophocles' Plays: Two*, translated by Robert Cannon.

Life and Times

Sophocles was born in a small village just north of Athens, called Colonus at the beginning of the fifth century BCE. His first known performance was in 468 BCE, where he defeated Aeschylus at the City Dionysia.

He was said to have created over 120 works and won twenty victories, eighteen at the City Dionysia. Sophocles dominated the fifth century in a spectacular career that did not end with his death in 406. His last play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, was produced in 401 BCE by his grandson, also called Sophocles.

Like most dramatists of his day, he was also an actor, but he retired early because of poor vocal range. He then wrote for an actor named Tlepolemus and created many of his most famous roles for him.

Ancient writers called Sophocles "The Bee" for his honeyed words. He was praised for his excellent use of dramatic timing and theatrical innovations such as the third actor, use of the chorus, a focus on the human condition, and the use of intricate language.

Aristotle championed Sophocles as the finest example of a tragic dramatist and held up *Oedipus Tyrannus* as the very finest of all Greek tragedies.

Sophocles' Life and Times

500	Birth of Sophocles
490	Battle of Marathon
480	Battle of Salamis
468	First victory at Dionysia at age 32 with <i>Triptolemus</i> (lost)
461	Democratic reforms of Ephialtes
447	Parthenon begun in Athens
443	Head of the Athenian Treasury
442	<i>Antigone</i>
440	Held Athenian Generalship
440s	<i>Ajax</i>
431	Start of Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta
430	<i>Oedipus Tyrannus</i>
429	Death of Pericles
420–10	<i>Electra</i>
425	<i>Trachinian Women</i> (might be earlier: ca. 450)
415	Athenian Expedition to Sicily
413	Special Government Commissioner
409	<i>Philoctetes</i>
406	Death of Sophocles
405	Defeat of Athens by Sparta
404–3	Rule of Thirty Tyrants in Athens
401	<i>Oedipus at Colonus</i>

One tantalizing legend surrounding Sophocles says that he was responsible for instituting the cult of the healer god Aesclepius at Athens and that in death he became the hero Dexion as a reward.

Sophocles was also politically active, serving as head of the Athenian treasury, an elected general, and a special commissioner after the failure of the Sicilian expedition in 413.

Only seven plays by Sophocles survive:

The Women of Trachis, 450 BCE

Antigone, 442 BCE

Ajax, 440s BCE

Oedipus Tyrannus, 430 BCE

Electra, 420–410 BCE

Philoctetes, 409 BCE

Oedipus at Colonus, 401 BCE

The Women of Trachis

This play tells the story of Deianeira, the wife of Heracles, who attempts to win back the love of her husband after she learns that he has taken a lover. She sends him a gift of a robe infused with what she believes is a harmless love charm, but too late she realizes that, instead, it is really a man-killing poison. As Heracles writhes in pain after he puts on the robe, his son Hylus storms home to accuse his mother of murder, but she has already committed suicide. In what will become a characteristic feature of Sophocles' work, tragic irony, Heracles realizes the prophecy of the centaur Nessos was true: that he would be killed by the dead. Finally, Heracles orders his son to set his funeral pyre, and the play closes as he prepares for death.

A theme of self-realization through personal tragedy runs through the works of Sophocles and has been called "a flash of perfect clarity." Sophoclean characters are truth seekers searching for meaning and only reaching understanding at the very moment of his destruction.

Here is the Sophoclean hero, who lives large and accepts his destiny, though his sufferings are many. Heracles, through his apotheoses, will go on to earn his place in heaven.

Antigone

Antigone is now perhaps Sophocles' most widely read play. After the war of the Seven Against Thebes, Antigone vows to bury both her brothers, her duty as their nearest kin. However, their uncle Creon, Thebes' ruler, has banned the funeral of Polynices as an enemy of the state. His body is to lie exposed and unburied outside the city walls as a warning to all others who would turn traitor against their city. Antigone defies the laws of Creon, citing an older familial right, and forces her uncle to bring down the laws of the state upon her. Forced to show his hand, Creon entombs Antigone, even though she is betrothed to his son. But Creon relents when bad omens make him realize that the unburied corpse is polluting the city. When he opens the tomb, it is already too late, and Antigone is dead, having hung herself rather than starve to death. Creon's son kills himself in pain at the loss of his love, and Creon's

wife takes her own life, cursing her husband as a child-killer. Creon preserves the rule of law, but loses his loved ones in doing so.

Creon:

*And yet you dared to violate
these laws?*

Antigone:

*What laws? I never heard it was Zeus
Who made the announcement.*

*And it wasn't justice either. The
gods below*

*Didn't lay down this law for
human use.*

*And I never thought your
announcements*

*Could give you—a mere
human being—*

Power trample the god's unfailing,

*Unwritten laws. These laws weren't
made now*

Or yesterday. They live for all time,

And no one knows when they came into the light.

*No man could frighten me into
taking on*

*The god's penalty for breaking such
a law.*

I'll die in any case, of course I will,

Whether you announce my execution or not.

*~Antigone, lines 450–463
(Trans. Paul Woodruff)*

Ajax

The play is located at the hut of Ajax at the Greek encampment on the shore at Troy. Ajax is known from Homer's *Iliad* as a great strong warrior with a huge shield. He is the bulwark of the Greek army who heroically held the Trojans at bay when they tried to burn the Greek ships at Troy.

It is nighttime, and we see Odysseus following tracks outside of Ajax's hut. Athena meets him, and she informs him that Ajax was furious with the Greek commanders because they did not award him the arms of Achilles. Because of this great dishonor, Ajax had resolved to kill the Greek commanders in a night attack.

Athena tells Odysseus that she has deluded Ajax and blinded him to reality. Instead of the commanders, he has slaughtered the camp cattle and has even dragged back several animals, thinking he is torturing men.

Athena calls out the crazed Ajax, who emerges, perhaps on the wheeled platform, the *ekklyklema*, surrounded by carcasses, or on foot, dragging the animals behind him. Athena renders Odysseus invisible, and he watches Ajax rant and rave and exalt in the killing and mutilation of the Greeks, including Odysseus.

Odysseus is dumfounded at the sight of Ajax and afraid of the power of Athena, which can totally delude such a man. Ajax goes back into his hut, thanking Athena for her help, and Odysseus returns unseen to the Greek camp.

The chorus of *Ajax* is made up of soldiers from Salamis, the island home of Ajax. They arrive the next morning, alarmed at the rumors spreading through the Greek camp.

Tecmessa enters from the tent of Ajax. She is the war bride of Ajax, a captive woman who has been given to Ajax as a war prize. Together, they have had a son, Eurysaces, and her and her son's fortunes are dependent on Ajax. Tecmessa informs the chorus of the mental state of Ajax and what he has done. Ajax is conflicted, angry that he has not achieved his aim of killing the Greek commanders, ashamed of his present state and unable to bear the mockery of the Greeks. He calls out for his son, Eurysaces, and his brother, Teucer.

Ajax leaves his hut, and the chorus meets a broken man covered in animal gore. He tells them that his only option is suicide, and Tecmessa begs him to stay alive and remember his duty to her and their son. He calls again for his son, and Tecmessa fears what he might do.

Eurysaces enters, a young boy of around five years of age. Ajax speaks to his son and gives him his famous shield, telling him to remember his noble father. Then he tells Tecmessa to take him inside the hut.

As the chorus articulates their own fears that they are tied to Ajax and will suffer his loss, Tecmessa rushes out of the hut and tells them that Ajax has had a change of heart and he wants to go to a quiet grove to purify him.

Ajax seems to have changed his mind and says he will go to a grove and purify himself.

The chorus is elated as Ajax emerges clearheaded from the hut and announces that he has changed his mind.

Ajax:

*Time shows up everything
and swallows it again.*

*There is nothing that a man
Can know for sure.*

Anything is possible.

*Iron bent and shattered
after all.*

*I was sharp and mettled as this sword
and now a woman's words
have softened me*

*with pity for her and my child
an orphan and a widow left alone.*

*I am going to the sea's edge
I shall wash and purge myself
And pray Athena's anger
Has been satisfied.*

~Ajax, lines 645–655
(Trans. Robert Cannon)

The chorus sings and dances for joy as Ajax goes to cleanse himself. Suddenly, a messenger appears with the news that Teucer has arrived at the Greek camp and learned the news of his brother. He says that the Greeks confronted him and that he sent a message that, according to the prophet Calchas, Athena's anger will only last one day, and so Ajax must stay inside until the day passes. He is too late. Ajax has already left. Tecmessa tells the chorus to split up. Some should search for Teucer, and the others should track down Ajax.

Now Sophocles empties the stage in a bold, dramatic move. The *ekkyklema* emerges again. Ajax enters, kneeling beside his sword, buried blade up in the ground. He bids farewell to the world and the light of the sun and falls on his sword, committing suicide.

The chorus enters from left and right, searching for their commander. Suddenly, Tecmessa screams and reveals the dead corpse of her husband.

Teucer arrives, cries over his dead brother, and then immediately sets about making sure Eurysaces is safe, knowing that the Greeks will want to take advantage of Ajax's demise to wipe out his heirs and prevent any future revenge. He knows that Ajax must be properly buried, but his plans are interrupted by the arrival of Menelaus, the brother of Agamemnon.

Menelaus announces that Ajax was an enemy and shall not be buried, as an example to the Greek army. Teucer argues with Menelaus, and the two men trade insults until Menelaus storms off back to the Greeks.

Tecmessa and Eurysaces arrive to perform the burial rites, while Teucer goes to prepare the gravesite.

Teucer returns just in time to see Agamemnon coming. Agamemnon faces off with Teucer, angry that such a man would dare to defy his authority. He calls Teucer a slave, as his mother was not Greek. Teucer counters by reminding Agamemnon that his ancestors acted like barbarians. The two men are poised to fight.

Odysseus enters and takes the middle ground to diffuse the situation. He makes the point that to know when one is wrong is to win a great victory, and his respect for Ajax as a great warrior is worth more than his hatred toward him as an enemy. Odysseus takes full responsibility for the decision to bury Ajax and allows Agamemnon to leave, saving face.

Teucer thanks Odysseus for his good judgment, but asks him to leave the burial rites to his family, as is the custom. Odysseus agrees, and finally Ajax is laid to rest.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What themes run through the works of Sophocles?
2. What is the role of the arms of Achilles in Greek mythology?

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Lecture 11: Sophocles' Oedipus Plays

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus* in *Sophocles: Theban Plays*, translated by Peter Meineck and Paul Woodruff.

In the last lecture, we examined the life of Sophocles, became familiar with some of his surviving plays, and read Ajax in some detail. In this lecture, we will continue our exploration of the works of Sophocles by concentrating on the "Oedipus Plays," *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*.

It is a common misconception that *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* formed a trilogy, but there are more than forty years separating the three works. They do share a common theme, that of the house of Oedipus in Thebes.

Oedipus Tyrannus

This was perhaps the most famous of all Greek tragedies, primarily because in the fourth century BCE it was held by Aristotle in his *Poetics* to be a paragon of tragedy, and then in the twentieth century CE to have entered the psychoanalytical vocabulary of Sigmund Freud in his *Interpretation of Dreams*.

The Title of the Play

The play's title has caused confusion over the years and sometimes led to a misreading of the work. In Latin, it has been called *Oedipus Rex*, which has become translated as *Oedipus the King*. But Oedipus is not a king in the Greek sense, and the term "tyrant" did not necessarily have the same kind of negative connotations that it does today. In ancient Greece, a *Tyrannus* was a sole leader who ruled by popular consent. For much of the sixth century BCE, Athens had been ruled by the tyrant Pisistratus and his sons, and many Greek city-states in the fifth century were still led by tyrants.

The Historical Background

We cannot be certain of the exact date of *Oedipus Tyrannus*. It is usually dated sometime between 430 and 425 BCE. In 431 BCE, the Peloponnesian War broke out between Athens and Sparta, rival powers for hegemony over the Greeks. The Spartans had by far the best infantry fighting force in the Greek world, and the prominent Athenian leader at that time, Pericles, knew he could not defeat them on land. But Athens possessed a great navy, whereas Sparta did not, and so Pericles derived a radical defensive policy designed to survive a Spartan invasion.

Two parallel walls running between the city of Athens and her port of Piraeus seven miles away were constructed, forming a defensive shield around the city and her all-important harbor. These "Long Walls" were designed to keep the Spartans from taking the city or interfering with Athens' naval operations. During the summer campaigning season, Pericles called for the entire population of Attica to live between the walls in what must have been a vast Athenian

shantytown. For a while, the policy seemed to work. The Spartans came and went and the Athenian fleet could raid with impunity. But in 430, a plague broke out in Athens because of the overcrowding and decimated the population. Pericles was removed from office in 429, but was restored soon after, only to die of the plague himself.

The Main Events of the Play

It cannot be a coincidence that *Oedipus Tyrannus* opens with the news that the people of Thebes are suffering a terrible plague. Everyone in the audience at that time would have firsthand experience of the devastating effect of such a pestilence. Some scholars have even seen a reflection of Pericles in the role of Oedipus.

The play opens outside the great doors of the house of Oedipus at Thebes. A crowd has gathered and is begging their leader Oedipus to come to their aid. He defeated a plague once before when the Sphinx besieged the city. He is just the man to solve this terrible problem again.

Oedipus enters and promises to solve the problem. He has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to Delphi to ask advice of Apollo's sacred oracle. Creon arrives and tells Oedipus that the oracle has decreed that the plague has come because the city is harboring the man who murdered the former ruler, Laius. Oedipus swears that he will seek out the defiler and drive him from the city, even if he should reside within his own house. Nothing will stop his manhunt.

Oedipus questions the chorus of Theban elders about who this murderer could be, and then he furthers his promise by cursing the unknown killer to a life of misery. They tell Oedipus to ask the old blind prophet, Tiresias, for help. Oedipus replies that he has already summoned him.

Tiresias enters, but will not reveal what he knows. Oedipus becomes infuriated with the intransigent old man and accuses him of conspiring with Creon against him. Tiresias calls Oedipus blind and says, "Your ears and your mind are as blind as your eyes." He spits out the truth at Oedipus and tells him that he has married his mother and foretells that he too will be blind and wander as an exile. Tiresias makes his exit and Oedipus storms back into his house.

The old men are confused and frightened, but they resolve to have proof before they accept the rantings of Tiresias. Creon enters, having heard that Oedipus thinks him a conspirator. Oedipus emerges and the two men angrily argue until Oedipus' wife, Jocasta, intervenes and forces peace between her brother and husband.

Jocasta tells Oedipus that Laius received a prophecy that he would be killed by his son, but instead was murdered by a band of thieves at a place where three roads met. She tells Oedipus that Laius had ordered their son exposed to die on a hillside and that the way he died proved that oracles are not to be believed. But Oedipus becomes frightened; he killed a man at a place where three roads met, a man who seemed very like Jocasta's description of Laius. Oedipus asks his wife if any of Laius' men survived. Jocasta says she will have the one survivor summoned.

Oedipus then tells Jocasta that when he was a young man in Corinth, a stranger came to the house of his father, the Corinthian ruler Polybus, and

after getting drunk, blurted out that Oedipus was not Polybus and Merope's true son. Oedipus' parents denied the claim, but he went to Delphi, driven to find the truth. The oracle foretold that Oedipus would marry his mother and kill his father, and in response he fled from Corinth.

On his journey, he came to a place where three roads met and was nearly rundown by a noble man in a chariot and his entourage. Oedipus admits that he killed the man in recompense for the insult, and now he fears that this was Laius. The old men beg Oedipus not to be too hasty and wait to hear from the survivor.

Jocasta prepares an offering to Apollo, and as she does so a messenger from Corinth arrives with the news that Polybus has died and the people want Oedipus to return and take power. Oedipus hears the news and is elated, but he fears returning home, because it was told that he would marry his mother. The messenger intervenes with the news that it would be fine for Oedipus to return to Corinth, as Polybus and Merope were not his real parents. It turns out that he was once a shepherd in the employ of Polybus and received the infant Oedipus from a shepherd from Thebes. Oedipus asks if the chorus know this shepherd, and they think it is the same man whom Jocasta has already summoned.

Jocasta pleads with Oedipus not to go further and to leave the investigation alone. But Oedipus will not be diverted from finding out the truth, and Jocasta flees inside the house, distressed and anxious.

The old servant of Laius arrives and the Corinthian messenger recognizes him. The old Theban at first denies all knowledge, but after being threatened with torture, he reveals that he did in fact receive an infant from Jocasta with orders to expose him, but he took pity on the child and gave him instead to the Corinthian.

Oedipus finally realizes the truth and is mortified. He rushes inside, leaving the chorus to sing of how Oedipus once solved the riddle of the Sphinx and saved Thebes, and is now struck down. A messenger tells the chorus that Jocasta has hanged herself and that Oedipus took the brooches from her gown and gouged out his own eyes with the long golden pins.

Oedipus enters, blinded and in terrible pain. He says he could not bear to look on his children, who are also his siblings. Oedipus begs to be banished from the city, but Creon intervenes and tells Oedipus to go back inside the house. Oedipus' daughters, Antigone and Ismene, are allowed a brief moment to see their father before he is forced back inside by Creon.

Oedipus exits and the chorus tell the Thebans to mark Oedipus, who was once envied and is now reviled.

Electra

The date of Sophocles' *Electra* is uncertain, but it probably comes from around 418 BCE, about the same time that Euripides produced his own stage version of the myth. Both plays are to a certain extent a response to Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, the second play of his *Oresteia* trilogy, which Electra, the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, is reunited with her exiled brother and helps to drive him toward the killing of Aegisthus and their mother.

In Sophocles' version, Electra is the protagonist, not Orestes, and she is portrayed as a strong, dominant young woman in a permanent state of mourning for her dear father. She is at odds with her mother, arguing vehemently with her and refusing to toe the line in the household of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. In contrast, Sophocles introduces a sister, Chrysothemis, who has accepted the death of her father and chosen to come to terms with the situation. Chrysothemis is taking offerings to Agamemnon's grave (in the Aeschylus play *Electra* does this), as Clytemnestra has dreamed that Agamemnon has been reborn. Electra persuades her sister to throw away the libations.

Orestes returns home with Pylades, led by his old Argive tutor, and they create the lie that Orestes has been killed in a chariot race at Delphi. He arrives, pretending to be a traveler from Phocis, bringing the ashes of Orestes back to Argos. Once Orestes sees his sister's abject grief at holding the urn containing the remains of what she believes is her dead brother, he reveals himself to his sister, who is at first skeptical and unable to equate the idea of the funerary urn with that of the man standing before her.

Electra seems far more militant than Orestes in the notion of killing their mother, and she actively pushes her brother deeper into the plan. Electra keeps watch for Aegisthus, who is not at home, and unlike the Aeschylean version that depicts the confrontation between mother and son, Sophocles places the killing of Clytemnestra inside and unseen. Our only contact with the deed is the reaction of Electra standing outside.

Finally, Aegisthus arrives, wanting proof that Orestes is dead. He sees Pylades and Orestes standing over a covered corpse but does not recognize them. He assumes that the body is Orestes and asks them where Clytemnestra is. Orestes shows him the dead Clytemnestra and, in a moment of clarity, Aegisthus realizes what has happened. Electra calls for Aegisthus' death and Orestes leads him into the house to meet his end.

Philoctetes

Philoctetes is set on the barren volcanic island of Lemnos, where Odysseus and the son of Achilles, Neoptolemus, have just landed. Odysseus sets a mission for the young warrior: to recover the bow of Heracles that is in the possession of Philoctetes. The Greeks have received a prophecy that Troy can only be taken with the help of this bow. Odysseus tells Neoptolemus that ten years earlier the Greeks had abandoned the ailing Philoctetes on the uninhabited Lemnos after he had been bitten by a snake on a mission. His wounds grew so putrid and his fits of pain so insufferable that they marooned their former comrade. Philoctetes hates the Greeks, and so it is up to Neoptolemus to recover the bow.

Sophocles creates a triangle of morality around the young man, who is effectively undertaking an initiation rite of passage from boy to man. Philoctetes represents the old ways: a simple man burning with rightful resentment toward his former comrades. He refuses to relent and will not help the Greeks. Odysseus represents the new ways, politics, compromise, and realism. Neoptolemus sees the value in each ideal and is torn between the two father figures.

Neoptolemus is befriended by Philoctetes and made his *philoï*, or “guest-friend,” one of the strongest bonds in Homeric warrior culture. Philoctetes tells the boy how Heracles himself gave him the bow in reward for helping him to light his funeral pyre and ascend to heaven. Neoptolemus steals the bow, as Philoctetes suffers a terrible fit of pain, but he cannot go through with the deception and returns it to the cantankerous old hermit.

Odysseus intervenes, and when Philoctetes realizes that his most hated enemy has tricked him, he rejects the friendship of Neoptolemus and makes him his enemy. He tries to kill Odysseus, but he retreats and Neoptolemus returns the bow. Philoctetes tries to shoot Odysseus, but Neoptolemus stands in the way and Philoctetes cannot bring himself to kill the boy.

Neoptolemus agrees to rescue Philoctetes and take him home, but as they go to leave, Heracles arrives and commands Philoctetes to go to Troy, kill Paris with the bow, and let Troy fall. He adds that Neoptolemus must help him, and as the god leaves, they agree to go to Troy.

Oedipus at Colonus

Sophocles’ last play was produced five years after he died by his son. This deeply moving play deals with the last moments of the life of Oedipus, now a blind old beggar, wandering Greece with the help of his daughter, Antigone. The play begins as Oedipus and Antigone enter, and Oedipus somehow knows that he has arrived in a special place, where it was told that he would be buried. Oedipus sits down on a rock and asks his daughter to describe their surroundings.

A local man enters and is shocked to see people in the sacred grove of the Furies. He tells them they are in Colonus, a village just north of Athens, and that they are treading on very sacred ground and must leave. Oedipus declares himself a suppliant, meaning that he places himself under the protection of the gods. The local goes to seek help.

The chorus of elders arrives and at first promises the old man that he will not be forced away, but once they learn he is Oedipus, they recoil in horror and order him to leave. The chorus calls for their leader, Theseus, and as Oedipus waits, his other daughter Ismene arrives with news from Thebes. Oedipus’ sons Eteocles and Polynices war against each other. Eteocles rules Thebes while Polynices is raising an army in Argos. There has been an oracle that wherever Oedipus lies will bring good fortune, and Creon is coming to bring Oedipus back to Thebes.

Theseus arrives and pledges to keep Oedipus safe, even if it means war with Thebes. The chorus sings, honoring Athens, her natural bounty, and the blessings of Athena.

*And here is a miracle like nothing else
In all of Asia or the Land of Pelops.
Growing wild,
Self-perpetuating,
Terrorizing all our enemies,
It thrives in our soil, eternal,
The Nurturing, gray-green olive.
Neither young nor old*

*Can blight its sacred crop,
Watched by the all-seeing
Gaze of Zeus
And Athena's olive-eyes.*

~*Oedipus at Colonus*, lines 694–705
(Trans. Peter Meineck)

Creon arrives and tries to convince Oedipus to return to Thebes. Oedipus refuses, and Creon tells him that his men have taken Ismene, who had left to perform purification rites for her father, and they then invaded the shrine and took Antigone. Theseus dispatches his cavalry to head off the Thebans and rescues the girls.

Now Eteocles arrives, a suppliant, to beg his father to bless his invasion of Thebes (the mission that Aeschylus called *The Seven Against Thebes*). Oedipus is furious at his son for allowing him to be banished and forgotten, and after exchanging angry words, he refuses to help. Eteocles knows this will mean certain death and asks Antigone to swear to bury him (the action of Sophocles' *Antigone*).

Finally, Oedipus hears a crack of thunder and knows it is time for him to die. Theseus leads him to a secret sacred place, and we hear from a messenger the mystical way in which Oedipus left the living world.

Messenger:

*Theseus is the only man on earth who can explain
How Oedipus passed away. We saw no thunderbolts,
There were no great waves surging in the sea
That could have swelled up and engulfed him.
Something else, not human, came down from above
And led him up high into heaven, or else the ground
Opened up and received him deep down in the earth.
Whatever happened, he is at peace. There was no pain,
No suffering, we have no reason to mourn.
For a mere mortal, his death was truly wondrous.*

~*Oedipus at Colonus*, lines 1656–1664
(Trans. Peter Meineck)

Colonus was a small district of Attica about eleven miles to the north of Athens. It was famous for its natural beauty and abundance of shrines and holy places. In 411 BCE, a group of *hippeis*—members of the well-to-do Athenian cavalry class, or “knights,” met in secret at Colonus to plot the overthrow of the Athenian government. In either 410 or 407 BCE, a Spartan-led force, including cavalry from the region around Thebes, was defeated near Colonus. Colonus was named for a mythological horseman and was the birthplace of Sophocles.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. Why is *Oedipus Tyrannus* perhaps the most famous of all Greek tragedies?
2. How is Electra portrayed in Sophocles' version of the play?

Suggested Reading

Sophocles. *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus* in *The Theban Plays*. Trans. Peter Meineck and Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2003.

Other Books of Interest

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Lecture 12: Euripides

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Euripides' *Medea*, translated by Nicholas Ruddell.

In the last lecture, we completed our survey of the works of Sophocles right down to the end of the fifth century BCE. Euripides was also active at this time, bringing a new concentration on dramatic realism, a cynical approach to mythology, and a revisionist view of tragedy. Like Sophocles and Aeschylus before him, Euripides was a dramatic innovator, investing his characters with deeper psychological insights and questioning social and political mores.

Life and Times

Euripides was born sometime in the 480s in the eastern part of Athens. We know little of his life. He is sometimes lampooned as the son of a greengrocer, but he also may have been from an upper middle-class family, from evidence of his boyhood participation in important cult practices in his *deme* of Phyla.

His first play was produced a year after the death of Aeschylus in 455 BCE, and he came third and last. He won his first victory in 441 BCE. He was said to have completed over ninety plays, and nineteen plays have come down to us today. The play *Rhesus* may not be his. The last time he competed in Athens was in 408 with *Orestes*. He then left for Macedon to the court of king Archelaus and wrote a play named for the king. Euripides died there in 406 while he was working on the *Bacchae*.

Two important collections of plays by Euripides have come down to us. The first is a set of ten, a kind of dramatic greatest hits collection arranged chronologically that includes *Alcestis*, *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Andromache*, *Hecuba*, *Trojan Women*, *Phoenician Women*, *Orestes*, *Bacchae*, and the spurious *Rhesus*.

The other manuscript dates back to a pair of fourteenth-century texts that contain nine plays in alphabetical order that may be part of a collection of "complete" works that has since been lost. These are *Helen*, *Electra*, *Children of Herakles*, *Herakles*, *Suppliant Women*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Iphigenia in Taurus*, *Ion*, and *Cyclops*.

Medea: The Mythic Background

Medea was one of the most infamous female characters in Greek mythology. She was primarily known from two mythic stories, Jason and the Argonauts and the arrival of Theseus in Athens.

In the Jason myth, she is the daughter of Aeetes, the king of Colchis, a region on the northern Black Sea coast. Jason comes in search of the legendary Golden Fleece, and under the spell of Aphrodite, Medea falls in love with him. She helps Jason to retrieve the fleece, defying her father, and flees with him on board the *Argo*. She even goes so far as to kill and dismember

her brother and drop his remains over the side, so her father's ships will be forced to slow down to retrieve them.

After the events described in Euripides' play, Medea flees to Athens, where she marries the king, Aegeus. When his long-lost son Theseus returns, Medea fears her son will be usurped and that her position is tenuous, so she convinces Aegeus that Theseus is an imposter and plans to murder him. Just as Aegeus hands him a bowl of poisoned wine, he sees that Theseus is wearing the old sword he had buried years ago. He knocks the bowl out of his hands, and father and son are reunited. Medea flees back to Colchis.

Euripides' *Medea*

Euripides presented *Medea* in 431 BCE, a time of rapid political activity in Athens, as conflict between Athens and Sparta intensified and resulted in the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War. Corinth, where *Medea* is set, was an ally of Sparta and had clashed with Athenian forces defending the island of Corycyra (Corfu) in 433, propelling Greece to war and drawing the Spartans to take a position against Athens.

Jason and Medea settled in Corinth after their journeys. A nurse opens the play and retells the myth of the Golden Fleece. She then says that Jason has decided to marry the daughter of the local ruler, Creon, and the nurse fears what Medea might do.

The tutor enters with Medea's two children and tells the nurse that Creon plans to banish Medea and the children.

The chorus of Corinthian women arrive, having heard the anguished cries of Medea coming from the house. They fear she will commit suicide and hope that she will be calmed.

Euripides' Life and Times

485–	
480	Birth of Euripides
480	Battle of Salamis
455	<i>Peliades</i> , Euripides' first play (lost)
451	Pericles passes decree requiring Athenian citizens to have Athenian parents on both sides
441	Euripides' first victory
438	<i>Alcestis</i>
431	Outbreak of Peloponnesian War
431	<i>Medea</i>
430	<i>Children of Heracles</i>
428	<i>Hippolytus</i>
427	Athenians attach Mytilene
425	<i>Andromache</i>
424	<i>Hecuba</i>
423	<i>The Suppliant Women</i>
417	<i>Electra</i> , <i>Heracles</i>
416	The Athenians sack the city-state of Melos
414	<i>Ion</i>
415	<i>Trojan Women</i>
413	Defeat of Athenian forces at Syracuse
414	<i>Iphigenia in Tauris</i>
412	<i>Helen</i>
411	Oligarchic coup in Athens
409	<i>Phoenician Women</i> , <i>Cyclops</i>
408	<i>Orestes</i>
406	Death of Euripides
405	<i>Bacchae</i> produced in Athens

Medea enters and talks to the chorus about the hardships faced by women at the hands of men. She makes them swear they will not reveal what she plans to do to take revenge on Jason.

Medea:

*We women are the most unfortunate creatures.
Firstly, with an excess of wealth it is required
For us to buy a husband and take for our bodies
A master; for not to take one is even worse.
And now the question is serious whether we take
A good or bad one; for there is no easy escape
For a woman, nor can she say no to her marriage.
What they say of us is that we have a peaceful time
Living at home, while they do the fighting in war.
How wrong they are! I would very much rather stand
Three times in the front of battle than bear one child.*

~Medea, lines 231–357 and lines 248–251
(Trans. Rex Warner)

Creon enters to personally supervise her immediate banishment, but Medea persuades him to let her stay for just one more day. Once he leaves, Medea tells the chorus that she wants to kill Jason, Creon, and his daughter.

Now Jason arrives and chastises her for speaking against his new bride and father-in-law. He says that he will ensure that she and the children always have enough, but Medea rejects his offers, naming him a coward and a turncoat, listing all the trials she undertook on his behalf. Jason maintains that she should be glad that he took her from barbarian lands and brought her to Greece. She should be happy he is marrying a high-born woman, for then his children will always be provided for.

After a choral ode that muses on the enormous power of Aphrodite, the Athenian king Aegeus arrives. He is on his way home from Delphi after asking the oracle how he might come by an heir. Medea promises to help Aegeus, but only if she will give her sanctuary in Athens. Aegeus agrees.

Medea gives her children wedding presents to deliver to the new bride: a poisoned robe and diadem. A messenger arrives to tell of the death of Jason's bride and Creon, who tried to save her and was also poisoned.

Jason storms on stage and bangs on the door of the *skene* for Medea to "reveal" herself. The audience might fully expect the doors to open and the *ekkyklema* to roll out, but instead, in a stunning *coup de theatre*, Euripides flies Medea above the stage in the snake chariot of her grandfather, Helios, the sun.

Medea has done the unthinkable. She has killed her own children and refuses to even allow Jason to mourn or bury them. She predicts Jason's death and flies off to Athens, her escape route assured by Aegeus. Jason is beyond despair as Medea and the bodies of his children escape him.

Hecuba

Set in the Greek camp after the sack of Troy, *Hecuba* (also known as *Hecabe*) deals with the treatment of the captive women of Troy at the hands

of the Greeks and the murder of Polydorus, the son of Hecuba and Priam and one of the last hopes for the survival of Troy. Hecuba, the queen of Troy, is informed that the Greeks have decided that her daughter Polyxena is to be sacrificed to the dead spirit of Achilles. Agamemnon opposed the plan, but the Greeks were convinced by the sons of Theseus and Odysseus. The corpse of Hecuba's son Polydorus has been washed ashore, and Hecuba learns that the Thracian king, Polymestor, had murdered him. Polydorus had been sent to Thrace with Trojan gold to preserve the wealth of the city. Hecuba appeals to Agamemnon, out of his love for her daughter Cassandra, to allow her to revenge herself on Polymestor. Agamemnon refuses to get involved, but also will not intervene. When Hecuba meets Polymestor, he lies and tells her that her son is alive and well. She entices him and his children into her tent with the promise of more gold, and there she blinds Polymestor and kills his two sons. Agamemnon is called to judge the actions of Hecuba. He banishes Polymestor to a deserted island, but not before he curses Hecuba by telling her that she will fall from the mast of Odysseus' ship and be transformed into a dog, and that Agamemnon and Cassandra will be killed by Clytemnestra.

Hecuba was produced around 424 BCE, and this story of the treatment of captives would have resonated with the Athenian audience at that time. With the Peloponnesian War raging, the Athenians had acted firmly to protect their interests, including the often severe repression of their former allies, who had since become a de facto Athenian empire. In 427, the Island of Mytilene (Lesbos), with active encouragement from Sparta, tried to leave the league of states loyal to Athens. The Athenians attacked the island, rooted out the Spartan envoy, and then voted to condemn the whole adult male population to death and enslave the women and children.

The Athenians dispatched a fast ship to instruct their commander to carry out their order, but the next morning, they repented their actions and, in a fierce debate in the assembly, reversed their former decision. Another ship was dispatched with the hope that it might beat the original message. According to the Athenian historian Thucydides, the commander Paches was reading the original decree and was just about to carry out the order when the second ship arrived and stopped him in the nick of time. Euripides' audience might have felt a chill when they learned in the play that it is the Athenian sons of Theseus who have been most vociferous in demanding the sacrifice of Polyxena.

Also in 425, the Spartan general Brasidas led a force through Thrace, encouraging the cities there to revolt against Athens, and in the winter of that year, the important Thracian city of Amphipolus fell to the Spartans, causing great alarm in Athens. The duplicitous actions of the Thracian king Polymestor would also strike a contemporary note with the Athenian audience.

Trojan Women

In 415 BCE, Euripides produced his *Trojan Women* (*Troades*) alongside the lost tragedies, *Alexander*, *Palamedes*, and the Satyr play *Sisyphus*. Like *Hecuba*, the play is set in the Greek camp after the fall of Troy and deals with the enslavement of several famous mythological Trojan women: Hecuba,

Cassandra, Andromache, and Helen. At the beginning of the play, Poseidon, the god of the sea, and Athena, the goddess of wisdom, conspire to punish the Greeks for their sack of Troy and the acts of sacrilege committed against the gods by defiling the Trojan shrines. Each woman brings a different aspect to her destiny: the pain of Hecuba at the loss of her home and family, the destructive mocking prophecies of Cassandra, the difficulties of trying to be a good wife and mother only to learn that her child, Astyanax, the son of Hector, is to be murdered by the Greeks to prevent him from growing up and seeking revenge.

When Menelaus enters, threatening to kill his wife Helen for causing the war, the audience are primed for an explosive showdown. Menelaus is captivated by the beauty of Helen and despite Hecuba's powerful objections that she should not speak, Menelaus is manipulated into allowing her to return with him to Sparta. The *agon* (debate) between Helen and Hecuba is superb, allowing Helen to use all her rhetorical skills to convince her husband that she was an innocent party. The play ends with Hecuba having to perform the burial rites for her grandson, Astyanax, as Andromache has already been taken by Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles. The remains of Troy are set on fire by the Greeks, and despite Hecuba's attempts to die in the flames, the Greek herald, Talthybius, informs her that she must leave to become the slave of Odysseus.

Like *Hecuba*, it is hard to ignore contemporary events occurring around 415, when *Trojan Women* was produced. In 416, Athens again retaliated against the island of Melos, a former colony of Sparta that had hitherto remained neutral in the Peloponnesian War. The Athenians feared Melos would go over to the enemy and so invaded the island. Before hostilities broke out, the Athenian ambassadors tried to negotiate with the leading citizens of Melos. This was dramatized by Thucydides in what has become known as the "Melian Dialogue," a vivid description of how a strong state will act against a weaker one to protect its own interests.

The Sicilian Expedition

In the winter of 416–415, the Athenians were planning their most audacious action yet, a massive attack on the city of Syracuse in Sicily, a prominent ally to the Spartans and a great supplier of an all-important grain supply. Syracuse was a democratic state, and the Athenians assumed that they would win support from the people if they overthrew the existing government. However, as future events were to prove, they overestimated the level of Athenian support and embarked upon a costly and ultimately crippling military adventure that, according to Isocrates, cost the lives of around 40,000 allied forces and hastened their ultimate loss to the Spartans in the Peloponnesian War. Athenian losses totaled some 3,000 Hoplites and 9,000 Thetes (working-class Athenians). Athens had a force of 13,000 Hoplites at the outbreak of war in 431, and the total membership of the *demos* (voting males) was probably around 40,000. The loss of 12,000 Athenian citizens would have been devastating.

After the negotiations concluded in stalemate, the Athenians attacked. By the winter of 416, the Melians surrendered. This time, all the men of Melos were executed, and the women and children were sold into slavery.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What are the two mythic stories for which Medea is primarily known?
2. Why would *Hecuba* have resonated with the Athenian audience of its time?

Suggested Reading

Euripides. *Medea*. Trans. Nicholas Rudall. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000.

Other Books of Interest

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Thucydides. *On Justice, Power and Human Nature. Selections from the History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated with notes by Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1993.

Lecture 13:
Euripides' *The Bacchae* and Aristophanes' *Clouds*

The Suggested Reading for this lecture is Euripides' *The Bacchae*, translated by Paul Woodruff, and Aristophanes' *Clouds* in *Aristophanes 1: Clouds, Wasps, and Birds*, translated by Peter Meineck.

In our last lecture, we looked at three plays by Euripides, *Medea*, *Hecuba*, and *Trojan Women*, examined how the plays could have been a reflection of contemporary events, and also delved into the subject of the portrayal of women in Euripidean drama. Here we will look closely at the last play of Euripides, *The Bacchae*, produced five years after his death in 401 BCE. We will then consider the work of Euripides' contemporary, the comic dramatist Aristophanes.

The Bacchae

Dionysos comes home to Thebes, the land of his birth, to found a new center of worship and take revenge on those who still refuse to recognize that he is a god.

Dionysos' mother was the Theban queen Semele, the wife of the Theban king Cadmus. Zeus had an affair with her by disguising himself as her husband, and she became pregnant with Dionysos (his name means "son of Zeus"). But Zeus' wife, the goddess Hera, also disguised herself as an old nurse and tricked Semele into asking Zeus to appear to her in his true form, the way Hera sees him.

Zeus tried to refuse, but in the throes of passion he had promised to do anything for Semele and was bound by an oath. As Zeus takes on his true form, the mortal Semele is burned to a crisp at his divine countenance. Her unborn son, Dionysos, is rescued by Hermes and placed into the thigh of Zeus, where he comes to term and is born a god. The Theban family of Cadmus cover up the affair and have it that Semele was struck by lightning. They refuse to have anything to do with the new god and say that the child died with her.

Dionysos returns disguised as one of his own priests, with a band of followers from the East, the ecstatic revelers called the Bacchantes. Pentheus, the young grandson of Cadmus, is now king, and he refuses to accept the ways of the new god. Both Cadmus and the seer Tiresias have joined the followers of Dionysos, and we see them trying to perform the wild dances in a scene that is both comic and humiliating. Semele's sisters, including Pentheus' own mother, Agave, have joined the cult and gathered on the slopes of Mount Cithaeron, where they engage in secret rites to their new god.

Pentheus sees the danger of this new orgiastic cult and orders his troops to break up the reveling and arrest the strange priest. Dionysos allows himself to be captured. Pentheus soon realizes that it is impossible to keep this stranger in chains or inflict any harm on him. He tries to bind him, but instead ties up a bull. He tries to run him through, but finds not flesh but air. There is an earthquake and the palace bursts into flames.

Dionysos then tries to persuade Pentheus to join his new cult, but Pentheus refuses. A herdsman arrives and tells how he saw the women and their strange, compelling rites, but when they saw him and his companions, who tried to capture them, they chased them, set upon his cattle, and ripped them apart. He barely escaped with his life. He tells Pentheus that he saw his mother Agave with these frenzied women.

*By chance, Agave's leaping brought her next to me
and I sprang out—I meant to capture her—
and I gave up the ambush where we were hiding.
She raised a shout, "Oh you running dogs of mine
these men are hunting us! No follow me,
follow! A thyrsus is a weapon in your hands,"
So we were the ones who ran away to escape
being torn apart by the Bacchae. And they attacked
our livestock as they were grazing on new grass.
No sharp weapons, but you'd have seen one woman
tear apart a young cow with her bare hands—
it was bellowing, its udder was swollen with milk. Others
ripped grown cows to pieces. You'd see ribs and feet
hurled every which way, hooves flying, pieces hanging
in the pine trees, smeared with blood and dripping.*

~*The Bacchae*, lines 728–743
(Trans. Paul Woodruff)

Pentheus is shocked, but also titillated and just at the point of sending his army to round up the Bacchae; Dionysos offers Pentheus the chance to witness the rites in secret, so nobody would ever know. The young king cannot resist his curiosity and agrees to be dressed as a woman and go to Mount Cithaeron. Another comic and disturbing scene follows, in which Pentheus is helped by Dionysos into his women's clothes.

A messenger arrives and tells the chorus that Pentheus is dead. He tells them that as Pentheus approached the Bacchae, Dionysos encouraged him to climb a tree to get a better vantage point. The Bacchae spot Pentheus and Dionysos tells them to attack the creature in the tree. The women beat him down and drag him to the ground. Pentheus calls out in vain to his mother, who joins the women tearing, kicking, and punching, along with his aunts Ino and Autonoe.

Agave returns home to her palace, still under the spell of Dionysos and bearing the head of Pentheus. She thinks she has killed a mountain lion, but Cadmus sees what she has really done and talks her gently down from her frenzy. When Agave realizes what she has done, she breaks down.

Dionysos appears, probably on the mechane (there are around fifty lines lost here). In all his glory, he banishes Agave and says he will turn Cadmus and his wife Harmonia into serpents. Eventually, they will be reprieved by Ares, who will take them to the Isles of the Blessed.

Paul Woodruff's seven schools of thought on interpreting *The Bacchae*:

Recantation: Euripides turns in favor of religion; something akin to Nietzsche's reading of the opposition between Apollo (control and individualism) and Dionysos (irrationality).

Morality: Euripides inveighs against myth on moral grounds. Dionysos is dangerous, though beautiful and seductive.

Rationalism: Euripides refutes magic-religion. Perhaps this is not Dionysos, but a priest who stages these events.

Irrationalism: The play warns against the danger of trying to suppress the irrational.

Tragic Truth: The play honestly represents unresolved tensions in human life.

Ritual: Tragedies enact ritual sacrifice and initiation in a perverse form to ease social tensions at their source, re-creating fluidity and promoting the acceptance of change.

Political interpretations: The play may reflect the tensions between warring city-states and the destruction that results. Woodruff feels that the *Bacchae* could be articulating the tension between religion and the new learning of the Sophists and other philosophers, which resulted in the execution of Socrates just two years later.

Aristophanes

In many ways, Aristophanes and Euripides are closely linked, although Euripides was some thirty-five years his senior. Aristophanes frequently referred to the tragedian, and he was an actual character in two of his plays (*Thesmophoriazousae* and *Frogs*). When Aristophanes chose to lampoon contemporary tragedy, it was invariably a work of Euripides, who was at the height of his influence when Aristophanes burst onto the scene with his first play *Banqueters* in 427, around the time Euripides was producing *Hippolytus* and *Andromache*. In this part of the lecture, we will pick up the theme of the development on the "New Learning" touched on in Woodruff's interpretations and consider Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a comedy about Socrates, rhetoric, stupidity, and debt.

Athenian Old Comedy

Comedy was derived from the *kommos*, a masked revel in honor of Dionysos involving drinking, song and dance, and unbridled behavior. As tragedy was incorporated into the life of the polis, so was comedy, although at a later date. By the mid fifth century BCE, comic performances were a regular part of the dramatic festivals of Athens, and we have evidence of plays produced by comic playwrights before Aristophanes, such as Eupolis and Cratinus.

The actors in what is commonly called Attic "Old Comedy" (as opposed to the "New Comedy" of Menander that developed in the fourth century) were distinctively dressed with large bulbous whole-head masks, a tight body stocking stuffed with padded buttocks and belly and the phallus—a large false penis that hung from a belt and was an old feature of the worship of Dionysos and his fertility rites. Comedy tended to employ four actors and a

chorus and took full advantage of developments in theatre technology with the use of the *ekkyklema*, mechane, and three doorways. The use of three doorways, first seen in the plays of Aristophanes, can be traced through Menander, the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terrence, down into Shakespeare and on into French and English farce and television situation comedies.

One important aspect of Old Comedy was its use of obscene humor. It seems nothing was sacred. Even the gods were attacked with joyful scatological references, sexual double entendres, rude puns, and all manner of obscene words and gestures. Out of this sense of freedom of expression in comedy came a new form of theatre—political and social satire, and it was in this area that Aristophanes excelled.

Clouds

Aristophanes' *Clouds* is a simple story that places on the comic stage a new and potentially dangerous philosophical device—the art of rhetoric, or in Aristophanic terms, the ability to defeat a right argument with a wrong one. Teachers of rhetoric had been arriving in Athens, setting up shop, and charging fees to instruct the young, affluent Athenians in the rhetorical arts.

But why did rhetoric become so popular? Greece was a culture driven by the spoken word, no more so than Athens, where the business of the radical democracy in the assembly, the courts, and the markets was conducted through speech. A command of speech, the ability to persuade, was a great asset, as demonstrated by Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon*. In Greek mythology, persuasion was encapsulated by Peitho, the spirit of persuasion born from either Aphrodite or, appropriately, Ate, the spirit of destruction.

Aristophanes' Life and Times

- 455 Aristophanes born in the *deme* of Cydathanaeum in the city of Athens
- 427 First play *Banqueters* (lost) came in second place
- 426 *Babylonians* (lost); Aristophanes possibly sued for slander by Creon
- 425 *Acharnians*
- 424 *Knights*
- 423 *Clouds*
- 422 *Wasps*
- 422 Cleon is killed at Amphipolis
- 421 Peace of Nikias between Athens and Sparta
- 415 Sicilian expedition
- 414 *Birds*
- 411 *Lysistrata, Thesmophoriazousae*
- 411 Oligarchic coup in Athens
- 410 Democracy restored
- 407-6 Death of Euripides
- 406-5 Death of Sophocles
- 405 *Frogs*
- 404 Athens surrenders to Sparta; rule of the thirty in Athens
- 399 Execution of Socrates
- 391: *Ecclesiasaezousae (Assemblywomen)*
- 388: *Wealth*
- 385 Last production either, *Cocalus* or *Aeolosicon* (both lost)
- 385–380 Death of Aristophanes

In *Clouds*, we meet an old man *Strepsiades* (Twister), saddled with the debts from his son's exorbitant lifestyle as a horseman, an aspiring knight. Strepsiades has heard of the School of Socrates, where a man can learn the Wrong Argument and defeat the Right Argument. If his son is armed with this Wrong (or Inferior) Argument, they can argue their debts away. But the son refuses to go, and so the old man must go and re-educate himself in the New Learning of Socrates Thinkery.

After meeting some students, Strepsiades encounters Socrates suspended above the stage on a drying rack, as if he were a tragic god. Aristophanes goes on to create a hilarious parody of many of the new ideas that were circulating in Athens at that time. The chorus of *Clouds*, with their ever-shifting shape, seems to represent both the promise and the woolly emptiness of these notions:

Strepsiades (having just seen the Clouds):

Good Earth! What vocals! Wondrous, sacred, marvelous!

Socrates:

You see, these are the only true gods, everything else is utter nonsense.

Strepsiades:

What about Zeus? How can Olympian Zeus not be a god?

Socrates:

Zeus? Don't be absurd! Zeus doesn't exist.

Strepsiades:

What are you saying? Who is it that makes rain, then?

Socrates:

Why the Clouds of course! Does it ever rain without Clouds? No and you would have thought that Zeus could have made rain on his own if he so desired, without the help of the Clouds.

Strepsiades:

And I always thought it was Zeus pissing through a sieve!

~*Clouds*, lines 363–372
(Trans. Peter Meineck)

But Strepsiades cannot remember all that he has been taught, and in frustration, Socrates expels him from his school. Finally, the son agrees to attend, but only after a hilarious *agon* between the Right (Superior) Argument and the Wrong (Inferior) Argument. Wrong wins by using rhetoric to destroy Right's arguments, and the son enrolls. But Strepsiades should be careful what he wishes for. After rudely dispatching his creditors with the faulty but incredibly funny application of rhetorical skill, the son returns home a changed man. Now he is rebellious and pompous. He challenges the authority of his own father by making a very good argument that he is allowed to beat his father. Strepsiades can take no more, and when the Clouds tell him not to be so stupid as to believe in something so insubstantial, he heads to the Thinkery and burns it down.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. What are Paul Woodruff's seven schools of thought on interpreting *The Bacchae*?
2. In what ways are Aristophanes and Euripides linked?

Suggested Reading

Aristophanes. *Clouds* in *Aristophanes 1: Clouds, Wasps, and Birds*. Trans. Peter Meineck. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1998.

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Lecture 14: Aristophanes 2

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Aristophanes' *Wasps* and *Birds* in *Aristophanes 1: Clouds, Wasps, and Birds* translated by Peter Meineck.

Aristophanes took the old ritual form of the *kommos*, the masked revel, and, influenced by the works of Eupolis and Cratinus and the atmosphere of the Athenian radical democracy on the late fifth century, he created a form of comedy that found a place for serious political comment and social satire. In the last lecture, we read *Clouds* and found a biting domestic farce that created a comic world of deluded make-believe based around the simple notion of the faulty reception of a new idea—the teaching of rhetoric.

That more than twenty years later this play had the power to influence the Athenian populace in their opinion of Socrates is truly remarkable and a testimony, albeit a negative one, to the lasting influence of true comic genius. We cannot know what Aristophanes himself thought about the trial of Socrates. Plato places him in the *Symposium*, telling a humorous but also touching story of the origin of love. It would not be hard to imagine that the two men moved in the same circles and certainly knew each other. Aristophanes also used his comic pulpit to constantly attack demagogic politicians, whom he felt were dangerous rabble-rousers.

Wasps

This was certainly the case with *Wasps*, produced in 420 BCE, a play that dealt with the lunacy of the Athenian legal system and once again pitched father against son in a domestic drama in which *toikos* became a parallel comic universe for polis.

An old man named Procleon is locked up in his own home by his son Contraceleon. He is told that it is for his own good, as Procleon has become addicted to serving on juries and a pawn of the demagogue Cleon. His son wants him to change his ways and live a more refined life. Contraceleon enjoys going to symposia, dressing in the latest Eastern fashions, and partaking in the fine things in life. Aristophanes sets up not only a generational, but a class, conflict, as well.

A chorus of old jurors arrives, dressed like wasps, each man using his phallus as a wasp sting, and the sexual double entendres abound. After a fierce battle between the chorus and the household slaves that re-creates the famous battle of Marathon, Contraceleon begs to be heard and tells his father that if he agrees that he is being manipulated by Cleon, he will remain at home. Procleon is so confident in his social standing as a juror that he agrees and is roundly defeated in the *agon*, where Contraceleon uses clever rhetorical techniques to break down each of his father's vaunted claims. Ultimately, Procleon can't believe how much the state earns and how little he personally gets.

Procleon sets up a makeshift court in his yard, so his father can judge cases at home. Two dogs are brought up on trial. A certain Labes had circled the large mortar in the center of the kitchen, then jumped up and stolen some cheese. He refused to share it with the other dog from Cydathaneum, who is loudly prosecuting the case and calling for the death penalty. The trial of the dogs is a lampoon of a real trial in which a general called Laches was accused by Cleon (who was from Cydathaneum and was said to bark with a very loud voice) of sailing around Sicily and receiving gold from the allies.

Procleon, who has never convicted an enemy of Cleon in his life, is tricked into dropping his pebble into the not-guilty urn and finds himself at his wit's end. His son promises him a new life of luxury if he allows himself to be educated in the new ways. In a series of hilarious scenes, Procleon is re-dressed, taught how to behave at a symposium, and taught how to sing and participate in witty banter and intellectual games. They set off for a night on the town.

Of course, this all goes horribly wrong. Xanthius the slave tells us that his master got horribly drunk and made a complete fool of himself at the Symposium. He then fled with a dancing girl, causing all manner of damage on the way home. The injured parties arrive, threatening lawsuits, and Procleon dispatches them with violence, prompting more lawsuits. Finally, Contractoleon can take no more and locks his father back up inside.

But this old Athenian will not be held down and comes out of the house to lead the *kommos*, the ribald finale, in a rendition of an old-time dance that sends the audience dancing out of the theatre.

Birds

Birds is a remarkable work in that it tells the story of two Athenians, Pisthetairos (Makemedo) and Euelpides (Goodhope), who decide to flee the hustle and bustle of Athens and create their own new city in the sky called Cloudcuckooland. Scholars are divided on the political nature of the play and it has been described as an escapist fantasy, a distraction from the ongoing war and the daily grind of life in Athens. But in not being overtly political, Aristophanes creates possibly his most political work at a time of great stress in the life of Athens and a turning point of history.

Birds was produced in 414 BCE. The huge Sicilian expedition had been dispatched. The joint commander Alcibiades had been convicted of crimes in absence and fled to Sparta, where he colluded with the enemy. A huge force of around 50,000, many of them from Athens, were away, leaving the remaining population to wonder what was happening far away to the west. One method the Greeks used to try to gain information was divination, reading signs in the sky from the flight of birds and from examining the entrails of animals, particularly birds, to get omens from the gods. In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the chorus relates the omen of the eagles:

*(Two eagles) one black, the other white-tailed, appeared
on the lucky spear armed side of the palace.
They perched there clutching a pregnant hare
who never had the chance for one last run,
and in full view feasted on the unborn young.*

~*Agamemnon*, lines 116–120
(Trans. Peter Meineck)

This omen indicated that the two sons of Atreus, represented by the eagles, would be victorious, but not until nine years had passed (the hare had nine babies). As birds could travel between the earth and the sky, they were considered divine messengers of sorts.

Pisthetairos convinces the birds that they should reign supreme by cleverly twisting the traditional view of creation (as is found in Hesiod's *Theogony*) to show that as Eros—the spirit of love—was a winged creature and that a great egg was involved in the creation (an Orphic view), the birds should rule, and Cloudcuckooland is founded. In this new city in the sky, a blockade is established. The sacrifices of the mortals will not reach the gods, and the gods are barred from coming to earth. Eulpides is quietly got rid of and Pisthetairos reigns supreme.

The new city is beset by a plague of freeloaders, bureaucrats, and low-lifes from Athens, all of whom are thrown off the cloud city with great violence. Eventually, the gods send a delegation to negotiate, and Pisthetairos gets to marry the “Divine Princess,” the daughter of Zeus and a barely concealed stand-in for Athena. Pisthetairos’ abandoning of Athens, and seeking total escapism, has resulted in a kind of surreal comic nihilism—Pisthetairos has become his own god.

As we have learned in this course, the Sicilian Expedition proved a disaster for Athens, and the Athenians lost the war with Sparta. *Birds* reflects a city on tenterhooks, divided, tenuous, waiting for news. The play treads its course very carefully, but its various analogies to current events must have been profound.

Aristophanes and Athens

Aristophanes went on to produce a number of excellent comedies, including his famous *Lysistrata*, which has become one of the most accessible of his works in modern times. Here the women of Athens, joined by Spartans and other Greek women, seize the Acropolis and mount a sex strike until the Athenians and Spartans agree to make peace. In *Thesmophoriazusae* (*Women at the Thesmophoria*), the women of Athens conspire to do away with Euripides for slandering them in his plays, and in *Ecclesiazusae* (*Assemblywomen*), the women dress as men and take over the assembly, establishing a quasi-socialist state.

In the last plays of Aristophanes, such as *Wealth*, there is a change in style. The kind of ribald, scathing political attacks found in his earlier work was not possible in the new climate of the early fourth century, after Athens had lost the Peloponnesian War. Artistic concerns moved away from the political to the personal, and in the development of New Comedy, we see the flourishing of domestic situation comedy with stock character types. But the influence of Aristophanes’ earlier works is clear in the plays of Menander, who was writing New Comedies in Athens in the fourth century. These plays also had a universal quality, as they were not focused on the contemporary social and political events of just one city. As Greek culture spread through the Hellenic colonies and the conquests of Alexander, so New Comedy became the pre-eminent comic form.

We see this influence in the plays of the Roman comic dramatists Plautus and Terrence, writing in the third and second century BCE. New Latin works were created from old Greek originals, and it was the comic plays of Rome that had such an influence on Shakespeare. His *Comedy of Errors* is almost an English version of a Roman Comedy, which in turn was created from a Greek play. Shakespearean comedy owes a great debt to Aristophanes, and we can see this in plays such as *Comedy of Errors*, with its three doorways, its Greek setting, use of slapstick and physical comedy, and themes of identity, family, and domestic drama.

Tragic Influence

One literary anecdote from the Athenian disaster in Sicily shed important light on the far-reaching influence of Athenian tragedy throughout the Greek world. Plutarch, in his *Life of Nicias*, writes that the Athenian survivors were made slaves in the Syracusan quarries. The only men who escaped were those who could recite passages from Euripides, as the Syracusians loved his work.

This anecdote shows that Athenian drama proved a great export, and in the fourth and third centuries, traveling companies fanned out across the Hellenic world, performing revivals of the great works. Every city of any import possessed a theatre, and attending a tragic performance was viewed as an act of cultural importance. One of the few times the Macedonian conqueror Phillip II walked in public without his bodyguard was when he invited an Athenian touring company to perform a tragedy to celebrate the wedding of his daughter at the theatre in Aegae. He was struck down by an assassin as he walked across the orchestra to take his seat in full view of the audience.

After the Hellenistic periods, Athenian tragedy was preserved not as a performance art, but in collection of texts. Although Roman writers such as Seneca worked in the form, Greek tragedy did not reemerge as performance until the Renaissance, when new translations began to appear, including a performance of *Ajax* at the court of Queen Elizabeth I in 1564 (apparently, she was too tired to see the show). Greek tragedy grew in popularity throughout the Enlightenment, where the reading of ancient drama was part of a good classical education, and Aristotle's *Poetics* became a standard text for the construction of well-made tragedies.

Greek Drama Today

In the twentieth century, Greek tragedy began to regain its political form with productions such as Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, produced in Paris in 1942 when the city was under Nazi control, having been taken by the Germans, and Athol Fugard's *The Island*, written in South Africa in 1973 and telling the story of political prisoners who stage Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Greek tragedy and comedy has undergone something of a renaissance in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, with productions all over the world. Artists restage, translate, interpret, and deconstruct these works, often finding striking modern parallels or new ways to create on-stage ritual. While there is certainly no one way to stage a Greek play for a modern audience, we are constantly drawn to these great works that stand at the beginning of

Western drama and still seem to articulate so much about the human condition.

I hope this journey through Greek drama and a reading of some of the plays created enthusiasm for you to read, see, understand, and appreciate some of the greatest works of drama we possess.

FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



Questions

1. In what ways was *Wasps* an attack on the Athenian legal system?
2. In what ways is *Birds* an escapist fantasy?

Suggested Reading

Aristophanes. *Wasps and Birds in Aristophanes 1: Clouds, Wasps, and Birds*. Trans. Peter Meineck. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1998.

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APPENDIX
The Extant Greek Dramas

Aeschylus

The Persians
Seven Against Thebes
The Suppliant Women
The Oresteia
 Agamemnon
 The Libation Bearers
 The Eumenides
Prometheus Bound
(may not be by Aeschylus)

Sophocles

Trachiniae
Antigone
Ajax
Oedipus Tyrannus
Electra
Philoctetes
Oedipus at Colonus

Euripides

Alcestis
Medea
Hippolytus
The Children of Heracles
Andromache
Hecuba

Euripides (continued)

The Suppliant Women
Electra
Heracles
The Trojan Women
Ion
Iphigenia in Tauris
Helen
The Phoenician Women
Orestes
Cyclops
The Bacchae
Iphigenia at Aulis
Rhesus (possibly not by Euripides)

Aristophanes

The Acharnians
 The Knights
 The Clouds
 The Wasps
 Peace
 The Birds
 Lysistrata
 The Thesmophoriazusae
 The Frogs
 The Ecclesiazusae
 Plutus

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