

Uncommon reads. Honors course.

Syllabus

Tragedy and Ecstasy in Ancient Athens

Selected plays of the great tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides

Text:

Greek Tragedies 1, 2, and 3 (three books)

Edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, Third Edition edited by Mark Griffith and Glenn W. Most. Note that two plays that will be covered, Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Ajax*, are not in the text. The instructor will provide pdf versions of those plays.

The philosophers and poet/playwrights of classical Athens had an enormous impact on the development of western thought and culture. The plays performed at the great festival of Dionysus challenged the citizens of democratic Athens to consider the relationship between humans and their gods at a time when their world was progressing from the devastations wrought by the recent wars with the Persian Empire into an era of previously unimaginable prosperity, only to then have their world shattered again by new wars and plague within their city walls. The works of the great tragedians Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are some of the greatest literary treasures that have come down to us from ancient times. The 32 surviving plays represent approximately one tenth of those produced by the three playwrights between 472 and 408 BCE. Aeschylus, who fought in the Persian wars, was a member of what the Athenians might have considered their "greatest generation", while Euripides, born at the end of the wars was the Greek equivalent of "baby boomer", with Sophocles squarely in between, so that each of the three writers brought a unique perspective as their plays dealt with the myths and legends of the Trojan war and the age of heroes that preceded it.

We will go through twelve tragedies that cover the fate of Oedipus and his family, some of the experiences and aftermath of the Trojan war, and the madness that came to Greece with worship of Dionysus.

The instructor is well schooled in the classics and makes regular pilgrimages to the theater of Dionysus in Athens, where the plays were first produced. In the class, we will discuss the historical and social context for each of the plays in sequence. Students will participate in leading the discussion and selecting excerpts from the play to be read and discussed in detail.

Plays that will be covered:

Aeschylus: *Prometheus Bound*

Sophocles: *Oedipus Rex*

Sophocles: *Oedipus at Colonus*

Sophocles: *Antigone*

Euripides: *Medea*

Sophocles: *Ajax*

Euripides: *The Trojan Women*

Aeschylus: *Agamemnon*

Aeschylus: *Choephoroi (Libation bearers)*

Aeschylus: *Furies (Eumenides)*.

Euripides: *Electra*

Euripides: *Iphigenia among the Taurians*

Euripides: *The Bacchae*

Course design: The class will meet in thirteen one-hour sessions. After an introductory session with a presentation on historical background by the instructor, we will go through twelve plays selected by the instructor, one play each week. A discussion leader will be appointed for each class session. After a brief prolog by the instructor, the discussion leader will make a brief introduction about the play and then read a selected passage from the play. This will be followed by a group discussion on questions provided by the instructor and by the session leader. Following the group discussion, the instructor will present images submitted by the students gleaned from the internet considered relevant to the play or its historical background.

Student assignments:

Students will in turn serve as discussion leaders.

Student discussion leaders will:

Submit two additional discussion questions on the play a week in advance.

Present a brief introduction to the play.

Chose and present a brief reading from the play.

Lead the discussion on the play.

All students will:

Read the assigned plays in advance.

Submit brief comments in writing to the instructor on the discussion questions for each week.

Students will also be expected to participate during the in-class discussions, but submission of written comments will guarantee credit for participation.

Find two images each week from the internet that are relevant to the play or its historical background and **submit them to the instructor by 5:00 P.M on the day before class** so that they can be assembled for presentation and discussion in class. Please try to submit images of reasonably high resolution so that they will look good in a PowerPoint presentation, and be prepared to explain why you chose them.

Grading:

- 50% Participation as discussion leaders and assistants
- 25% Participation in discussions and submission of written comments
- 25% Image submission and discussion

A minimum grade of B is required to earn Academic points towards your Honors Completion Requirements. (Exception: Honors Quest I and II sections require a C). Once you have earned your final grade in this course, please upload the course information and final grade from your Unofficial Transcript into your Honors Canvas Cohort: Honors Completion module to earn Honors Completion credit.

Honors Program contact information:

Honors Program, 201 Walker Hall, 352-392-1519

Quick questions for an Honors advisor? Email advisor@honors.ufl.edu

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Course outline

August 24 Introduction (Papke)

August 31

Aeschylus: *Prometheus Bound*

Discussion questions:

- 1) Hephaestus makes the statement "he that can relieve it has not yet been born." So, it is somehow foreseen that Heracles will free him. What does this say about the Greek idea of fate and destiny?
- 2) At the time the play is set, Zeus's rule is new and hence harsh. It seems to anticipate a time when Zeus will soften. How do you think the Athenians in the audience viewed Zeus, who at the time of the play seems to be hated by the other gods?
- 3) Does Hades also suffer at the hands of Zeus? Do ordinary people have to live in fear of him?
- 4) If this is only one of three, what do you imagine the other two plays would have covered?
- 5) Prometheus does not give details on who will overthrow Zeus, and since to the Athenians Zeus still ruled the gods, do you think this means that it is a prophesy that will still be fulfilled?

September 7

Sophocles: *Oedipus Rex*

Discussion questions:

- 1) Are the gods good or the source of evil? Did they create his fate or only have knowledge of it?
- 2) "Mine was no knowledge got from birds." What does this mean?
- 3) 'In what sense, if in any, does the Oedipus Rex attempt to justify the ways of God to man?'
See essay by E.R. Dodds.

September 14

Sophocles: *Oedipus at Colonus*

Discussion questions:

- 1) How is the oracle mentioned here qualitatively different from those in the first play?
- 2) Is not the fate of Oedipus also a curse visited on Antigone?
- 3) Oedipus states, "But those who wronged me knew, and ruined me." Who in fact wronged him?

September 21

Sophocles: *Antigone*

Discussion questions:

- 1) Who of the family is cursed, and who suffered the worst?
- 2) Do you think Creon had just cause to grant burial rights to one brother but deny them to the other?
- 3) How could any man decide whose laws are greater, the kings or their sense of what the laws of god might be?
- 4) Why does Ismene want to share the blame after she first tried to dissuade her sister?
- 5) What are the varying roles of oracles, curses, human action, and divine agency in the various Theban plays?

September 28

Euripides: *Medea*

Discussion questions:

- 1) Why should Medea curse her own children?
- 2) Who does this refer to? "O Zeus, don't overlook who bears the blame for all this evil."
- 3) Why are the gods indifferent to the fate of Medea's victims?
- 4) Why would the chorus be a sympathetic audience?
- 5) Is Jason's remarriage so unreasonable for the time?

October 5

Sophocles: *Ajax*

Discussion questions:

- 1) Would his fellow Greeks ever have forgiven Ajax for his acts? How does Athena's role increase or diminish his culpability?
- 2) Honor and pride, turned to shame and helplessness; does Ajax ever consider himself less than the "best man"?
- 3) At what point, if ever, could Ajax just have gone home?
- 4) Athena notwithstanding, what might have been the source of Ajax's madness?

October 12

Euripides: *The Trojan Women*

Discussion questions:

- 1) What is the lineage of Helen?
- 2) What is the irony of Cassandra's song? Have the Greeks truly won the war?
- 3) What will become of Andromache?
- 4) What will become of Hecuba?

October 19

Aeschylus: *Agamemnon*

Discussion questions:

- 1) Clytemnestra refers to a "second sacrifice"; who was the first, and who could be considered the second?
- 2) Was the "abduction" of Helen a cause or an excuse for the war?
- 3) Who should really be held to fault for the death of Agamemnon? Agamemnon himself, Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Thyestes, Atreus, Pelops, Tantalus, Apollo, Zeus?
- 4) Omitting the gods or the divine agency of curses and oracles, who should really be held to fault?

October 26

Aeschylus: *Choephoroi* (Libation bearers)

Discussion questions:

- 1) Who are the women of the chorus, and why should they be sympathetic to Electra?
- 2) Who are the "pair of women"?
- 3) Do the siblings ever consider the moral rectitude of killing their mother?
- 4) What do you think Orestes would have done without having had what he thought was Apollo's blessing?

November 2

Aeschylus: *Furies* (*Eumenides*).

Discussion questions:

- 1) Why does the ghost of Clytemnestra not rest?
- 2) Killing a spouse does not spill "kindred blood" but violates a sacred oath, so we have Apollo and the Furies taking opposite perspectives on these crimes. How would modern law judge these people?
- 3) The Furies are full of threat and bluster; is bite beyond their bark?
- 4) Does it seem odd that Athena should not already know the story?
- 5) Could the Greeks really believe Apollo's travesty of genetics?
- 6) What converts the Furies to the Eumenides?

November 9

Euripides: *Electra*

Note that within this play are brief synopses of two other plays in this cycle that we will not specifically be covering in class. Lines 1020-1030 describes key events of Iphigenia at Aulis. Lines 1278-1285 outline the rather unconventional story told in Euripides' play, *Helen*. The source for this story was Herodotus, not Homer.

Discussion questions:

- 1) How much of Electra's anger is about her present circumstances?
- 2) If Orestes is sincere in his praise of the poor man, is he portraying a man from the time of Homer or a more modern person? Is Euripides advocating for democracy?
- 3) Did Orestes perhaps endanger himself by profaning a sacrifice and violating the guest privileges offered by Aegisthus?
- 4) Was he right to see his mother's murder as the greater offense?
- 5) How is it that the slaves from Troy who were Electra's sympathetic chorus in Aeschylus's play be the special servants of the queen here?
- 6) Is Orestes more or less guilty than his sister? Why do the Furies not pursue Electra?

November 16**Euripides: *Iphigenia among the Taurians***

Discussion questions:

- 1) Why do you think that with this play, and his version of Helen, Euripides wanted to seemingly rewrite history?
- 2) Why would killing Iphigenia amount to "offering up the finest fruit"?
- 3) Did Apollo and Artemis plan this whole thing ahead of time?
- 4) How old must Iphigenia be?
- 5) Is it altogether a happy ending?

November 30.**Euripides: *The Bacchae***

Discussion questions:

- 1) What is the significance that Dionysus has a journey to Thebes from Asia?
- 2) What are the concepts that underlie the terms "enthusiasm" and "ecstasy", and how far away are they from madness?
- 3) Knowing that this is the last play of Euripides, do you think he imagines himself one of the old men who dances with Dionysus, and that he might amend his veneration of Apollo and Athena?
- 4) What are some of the ways in which this play is unlike the other plays we have studied?
- 5) Why must Pentheus be punished?