Masterpieces of Ancient Greek Literature
Part I
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Professor Schenker’s primary area of research interest is Greek literature of the 5th and early 4th centuries B.C.E., with a special focus on Plato and the tragedians, especially Aeschylus. He has published articles on these subjects in several academic journals, such as *Classical Journal*, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, and the *American Journal of Philology*. From 1999–2005, Professor Schenker served as coeditor of the journal *Classical and Modern Literature*. 
# Table of Contents

**Masterpieces of Ancient Greek Literature**  
**Part I**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor Biography</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Scope</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Notes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture One</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitions, Boundaries, and Goals</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Two</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer I—Introduction to Epic and <em>Iliad</em></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Three</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer II—<em>Iliad</em>, The Wrath of Achilles</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Four</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer III—<em>Iliad</em>, The Return of Achilles</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Five</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer IV—<em>Odyssey</em>, Introduction and Prelude</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Six</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer V—<em>Odyssey</em>, The Adventures</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Seven</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homer VI—<em>Odyssey</em>, Reintegration</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Eight</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hesiod—<em>Theogony</em> and <em>Works and Days</em></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Nine</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeric Hymns</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Ten</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyric Poetry I—Archilochus and Solon</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Eleven</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyric Poetry II—Sappho and Alcaeus</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twelve</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tragedy—Contexts and Conventions</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical Notes</td>
<td>Part II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>Part III</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Masterpieces of Ancient Greek Literature

Scope:

The best of ancient Greek literature retains a freshness and immediacy that reaches far beyond its time and place of creation and speaks to readers and audience members today. In these 36 lectures, we discuss selections from that group of masterpieces, starting in every case with the cultural and historical background of each, then focusing on close readings of the works themselves. A guiding principle throughout is that these are not museum pieces to be venerated because of their age, but works of great literature that remain compelling, meaningful, and enjoyable. The organization of the course is largely chronological; in a few places, we break from that order to bring together works of similar genre.

We begin with definitions of the key words in the title of the course—ancient, Greek, and literary masterpieces—then move into six lectures on Homer’s two epics: Lectures Two through Four on the Iliad and Lectures Five through Seven on the Odyssey. We briefly consider the method of their composition, then move through the epics book by book, highlighting the primary themes and poetic devices of each. The Iliad is indeed a moving war story, and the Odyssey is full of adventure and intrigue, and that narrative force is enough to qualify these epics as masterpieces. Beyond that, though, they both confront timeless questions and problems that define our human condition. For us, as for the ancient Greeks, these two poems serve as foundation for all that follows.

Lectures Eight and Nine focus on works contemporary, or nearly so, with the Homeric poems: Hesiod’s didactic epics Theogony and Works and Days and the poems, authorship unknown, collectively called the Homeric Hymns. These works are central to our understanding of early Greek myth but can also stand on their own for their literary and artistic value.

In Lectures Ten and Eleven, we cover considerable ground, geographically and chronologically, with a discussion of the large and varied collection referred to as lyric poetry. The richness of this corpus makes generalization difficult: These poems are metrically varied, often reflective rather than narrative, typically fairly short, and intended for a wide variety of purposes and contexts. Representative authors include Archilochus, Solon, Sappho, and Alcaeus.

A large section of the course, Lectures Twelve through Twenty-Four, covers the drama of 5th- and early 4th-century Athens, both tragedy and comedy. We survey the historical and dramaturgical context of the plays in Lecture Twelve, then devote three lectures to each of the four major playwrights of the period. For Aeschylus, we look at The Persians in Lecture Thirteen, then discuss his trilogy, the Oresteia, in Lectures Fourteen and Fifteen. For Sophocles, Lecture Sixteen introduces two plays, Ajax and Philoctetes; then, we go into greater depth with the three plays that center on the story of Oedipus: Oedipus the King in Lecture Seventeen and Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone in Lecture Eighteen. The corpus of extant tragedies by Euripides is larger. We look briefly at Electra, Orestes, and Trojan Women in Lecture Nineteen, then, choosing depth over breadth, we focus on three more of his works: Medea, Hippolytus, and The Bacchae in Lectures Twenty and Twenty-One. Our sole representative of Old Comedy, Aristophanes, takes us into the early 4th century. We discuss the genre in Lecture Twenty-Two, then, in Lectures Twenty-Three and Twenty-Four, look at several of the extant comedies as illustrations of his technique.

We turn next to two historians, with no apologies for including their works as literary masterpieces. Herodotus’s Histories (Lectures Twenty-Five and Twenty-Six) is, in fact, much more than that. Using the Greek-Persian conflict as an organizing principle, Herodotus gives us an account of his world that is stamped both by Homeric models and by his own particular vision. Thucydides’s masterpiece The History of the Peloponnesian War does indeed give us a straightforward narrative of the events of that war but also stands, as the author himself claims, as a possession for all time. In Lectures Twenty-Seven through Twenty-Nine, we consider passages from The History that illustrate Thucydides’s views of the effects of war, international politics, and human nature more generally.

The next three lectures (Thirty through Thirty-Two) bring us into contact with an author who would seem to reject the whole idea of studying literary masterpieces. Plato’s characters often speak of the shortcomings of the poets and storytellers, yet the artistry of his own dialogues belies that attitude toward literature. Lecture Thirty introduces the idea of Plato as a literary author, rather than simply a philosopher, with examples drawn from throughout his corpus. We then look in greater detail at two of the most polished of his literary creations, Symposium (Lecture Thirty-One) and Phaedrus (Lecture Thirty-Two).
Moving into a genre often maligned in Plato’s dialogues, we consider, in Lecture Thirty-Three, the literary merits of some of the greatest orators of the 5th and 4th centuries, drawing examples from the speeches of Lysias and Demosthenes.

Thanks in large part to the conquests of Alexander the Great, literary production in the 4th century shifts away from the Greek mainland to the city of Alexandria in northern Africa. In Lectures Thirty-Four and Thirty-Five, we discuss the work of three poets of the Hellenistic Age: one of Callimachus’s hymns, Theocritus’s pastoral poetry, and the epic of Apollonius.

The final lecture (Thirty-Six) gives us an opportunity to look back at the primary themes and developments raised in the course of the lectures and forward to the influence of these masterpieces, most immediately on the Romans and, through them, on much of the Western world.
Course Notes

All dates in the course are B.C.E. unless otherwise indicated.

All Essential Readings listed after the lectures in this booklet are primary sources. If no Essential Readings are listed for a particular lecture, then no primary sources are required reading for that lecture.
Lecture One
Definitions, Boundaries, and Goals

Scope: This lecture serves as an introduction to this three-part course. First, we set out some of the principles of the course and explain why we are reading these works. We then discuss what we will be talking about by defining basic terms: ancient, Greek, and literary masterpiece. Because no two people would define these terms in quite the same way, it is important that we all understand, at the outset, the criteria for inclusion or exclusion of works. Our starting point is the Homeric epics, written down in or around the 8th century, and we finish with some of the Hellenistic poets of the 3rd century. Geographically, the Greek world we will consider stretches east to the limit of the Mediterranean and, in some cases, beyond; south into North Africa; and west into Italy and Sicily. Our definition of literature here is broad, encompassing history, philosophy, and rhetoric, but all of these works are masterpieces in that they still, hundreds of years after they were written, continue to grip us as readers, listeners, or spectators. With that in mind, our approach as to how we will study each work becomes self-explanatory: We will let the works speak for themselves.

Outline

I. We begin by laying out some of the guiding principles of the course, namely, why we are talking about these works, what we are talking about, and how we will approach these works.

II. In response to our first question: We will discuss these works of literature because they are meaningful, enjoyable, and worthwhile in a variety of ways.

A. We will necessarily discuss many aspects of Greek history and culture, knowing that such background information can enrich the experience, not replace it.

B. Our primary focus, however, will be on the works themselves. These are not museum pieces to be venerated because of their age, but works of great literature that remain alive, meaningful, enjoyable, and compelling.
   1. Greek tragedy is enjoying a real renaissance on the stage and in film.
   2. References to these ancient masterpieces arise in discussions of public affairs and books of all sorts.
   3. Translations of ancient Greek literature continue to be published.

C. All great literature addresses questions that are universal, familiar, and meaningful—questions centered on the role of the individual within a society, within a family, and in relation to the gods.
   1. We focus on the Greeks because they happen to have left behind a large quantity of extraordinarily high-quality work.
   2. Another of the attractions of this material is its mix of the familiar and the exotic.
      a. Western culture owes much to the Greeks in such areas as language, law, medicine, and philosophy, in addition to literature.
      b. To study the Greeks is a valuable lesson in what we can call cultural literacy.
   3. Yet no matter which Greeks we are considering (and we will, indeed, encounter a wide diversity of people and call them all by that name), that familiarity is always tempered by distance and differences in ways that we cannot ignore.
      a. Their systems of belief, some of their social behaviors, and their understanding of the workings of the physical world may seem strange to us.
      b. Theirs was a society that condoned slavery and denied women political voice—behaviors that were typical of the times.
      c. Most Greeks were closer to the farm than many of us and much closer to warfare.

III. We answer our second question, what we will discuss, by defining some of the terms in the title of this course. Chronologically, we start with the earliest Greek literature, the epics of Homer, and end with works from the Hellenistic Period in the 3rd–2nd centuries. In the following historical overview, most dates are rough, and all are B.C.E.

A. We can trace the oral origins of the Homeric poems back into the Bronze Age, 2000–1100, a period known to us almost entirely through archaeology.
1. Excavations reveal that sophisticated palace-based cultures existed during this time, both on the Greek mainland and on Crete.
2. Those are the sorts of cultures described in the Homeric epics.
3. Artifacts and examples of writing from this period exist.

B. There followed a period from 1100–800, called the **Dark Age**, because relatively few material remains survive. Indeed, the knowledge of writing seems to have been lost during this period.

C. The **Archaic Period**, 800–490, saw the reemergence of trade, the rediscovery of writing, and the beginning of the rise of the *polis*, the Greek city-state. The Homeric epics were probably written in this period, along with the poems of Hesiod, many of the Homeric Hymns, and Greek lyric poetry.

D. From the **Classical Period**, 490–323, comes most of the material we will discuss in this course, including representatives from the genres of tragedy, comedy, history, philosophy, and oratory.
   1. The Classical Period begins with the Greek defeat of the Persian invasions and ends with the death of Alexander.
   2. The period is marked by a tremendous flowering of art, culture, and literature and by almost ceaseless warfare.

E. We close with the **Hellenistic Period**, 323–31.
   1. After Alexander’s death in 323, his vast empire broke into four sections; we look at the literature from one of those, Egypt.
   2. The *ancient* designation could take us much farther, but I use as a convenient stopping point the completion of the Roman conquest of Egypt in 31.
   3. We study the works of three writers from the Hellenistic Period: Callimachus, Theocritus, and Apollonius.

IV. Geographically, we cover considerable ground around the Mediterranean, far beyond the current boundaries of Greece itself. We will consider an area that stretches east to the limit of the Mediterranean and, in some cases, beyond; south into North Africa; and west into Italy and Sicily.

A. The early emphasis is on areas east of Greece proper and on the Aegean islands.
B. For the Classical Period, almost all of our material comes from Athens.
C. Finally, in the Hellenistic Period, our focus becomes broader again, with special emphasis on Alexandria in North Africa.

V. Of course, there is much debate about what constitutes a literary masterpiece, and we should keep in mind that most of what we call literature in this course was created by the Greeks for public performance, not for private study.

A. While we should trust our own reactions to works of art, the opinion of generations of readers serves as a more objective measure of what we might consider a masterpiece.
B. I include works that have more than historical or antiquarian value and that continue to grip us as readers, listeners, or spectators.
C. I exclude some possible candidates (such as the works of Aristotle, Xenophon, and Menander) because, by my subjective evaluation, their informational value is not matched by an equal literary value.
   1. Aristotle’s works survive in what seem to be notes or unpolished drafts.
   2. The admirable clarity of style of the Greek historian Xenophon suffers in comparison with the brilliance of his peers Thucydides and Plato.
   3. Menander, the comic playwright of the Hellenistic Period, was tremendously popular in his day, but I do not think his works measure up to those of some of the other playwrights we will study.

VI. Finally, we come to our third question: *how* we will approach these works.

A. As I’ve noted, some background work in culture and history will be necessary.
   1. More than two millennia have passed since the composition of these works.
   2. Their survival and transmission owes much to the tastes of those who preserved them and much to luck.
B. It is nevertheless useful to discuss the particular context of the works to the extent we can. That background should help us understand the generic conventions, as well as the historical and mythical references, that might otherwise impede our appreciation.

VII. After first explaining something of their language, their culture, and their literary and generic conventions, our approach is to let the works speak for themselves.
   A. We will move chronologically through the period, a process that will allow us, for the most part, to consider major genres sequentially.
   B. Each lecture will be centered on a particular literary masterpiece or group of masterpieces. Twice (in Lectures Ten and Thirteen), we pull back to consider more broadly the context of a genre and of a time period.
   C. We will rarely if ever arrive at grand conclusions about the theme or meaning of each work, because such conclusions are so often overly reductive.

Supplementary Reading:
Taplin, Literature in the Greek and Roman Worlds, introduction.
Whitmarsh, Ancient Greek Literature, part I.

Questions to Consider:
1. Literature is a subset of all that is written, but how exactly do we define it? And would that definition change from culture to culture?
2. What makes a work of literature a masterpiece?
Lecture Two

Homer I—Introduction to Epic and *Iliad*

Scope: This lecture introduces the two Homeric epics, with special focus on the theory that they were composed orally and how that theory might influence our reading. In that discussion, we encounter some of the striking poetic features of the epics, such as their meter, dialect, style, and frequent use of simile. Turning then to the narrative in these poems, we begin with a summary of the mythological background; then, after an overview of the entire epic, we discuss Book 1 of the *Iliad*. The quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon sets in motion all the events of the epic and contains within it an introduction to many of the primary themes of the epic: the motivations for heroic behavior, the relationship of an individual to his society, the place of cooperation in a situation fraught with conflict, the standards for interaction between humans and gods, and most generally, how best to live one’s life.

Outline

I. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are epic poems attributed to a poet called Homer.
   A. They are long narrative accounts—24 books for each—of the actions of gods and heroes.
   B. They are composed in dactylic hexameter.

II. There has been considerable debate on the group of issues referred to as the *Homeric question*. Who, in fact, composed these poems; when; in what context; and in what form?
   A. So-called *unitarians* have argued (or assumed) that the two poems are the creation of single poetic genius, Homer.
   B. Analysts countered that the poems contain too many discrepancies and a lack of unity and must reflect the joining together of a variety of poems by different authors.
   C. The theory of *oral-formulaic composition*, developed in the 20th century, takes a different approach, suggesting that the poems we have now are the result of generations of oral composition and transmission, with additions, deletions, and modifications appearing in every retelling. Key points lead to this theory.
      1. The poetic dialect includes forms from a variety of places and periods, all layered together to create a language that exists nowhere outside the epics.
      2. Epithets, such as “swift-footed” for Achilles or “grey-eyed” for Athena, appear repeatedly, often in the same metrical position of a line, serving as a building block in oral composition and recitation.
      3. Repetition extends beyond the epithet to entire speeches, as when Zeus gives his divine messenger a long speech to relay to a mortal, and later, we hear the same speech repeated after the messenger swoops down to Earth. Likewise, Agamemnon outlines an offer to Achilles in Book 9, and Agamemnon’s emissary, Odysseus, repeats that speech to Achilles almost word for word.
      4. Entire scenes follow a set pattern that is varied for special effect. Examples include the arming scenes before a battle and preparations for a feast.
      5. This oral-formulaic theory of composition thus offers a middle road, of a sort, between the unitarians and analysts. It does not, however, answer the Homeric question but casts it in a new light.
   D. Even so, what we have is a text, and it is appropriate to treat that text in many ways as we do works not composed orally.
      1. The obvious care and expertise in their creation invite us to treat each epic as a sophisticated whole, well planned and carefully executed.
      2. For example, the overall structure of the *Iliad* reveals a careful, large-scale plan and suggests that we should consider the epic as a completed whole rather than as a series of disconnected episodes.
      3. These epics deserve our careful attention.

III. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are both set against the mythical background of the Trojan War.
   A. After judging Aphrodite the winner in a beauty contest, the Trojan prince Paris, at Aphrodite’s prompting, abducts Helen from Greece and from her husband, Menelaus, and takes her back to Troy.
B. The Greeks, organized under the leadership of Menelaus’s brother Agamemnon, sail to Troy to retrieve Helen.

C. During the 10 years of fighting, heroes distinguish themselves on both sides: For the Greeks, Achilles is the greatest warrior, and other central figures include Ajax, Diomedes, and Odysseus. On the Trojan side, King Priam’s greatest defense is his son Hector.

D. After 10 years of fighting, the Greeks use the trick of the Trojan horse to take Troy.

E. Many of the Greeks, especially Odysseus, encounter considerable difficulties both on their return travels and once they reach their homes in Greece.

F. Since at least the 19th century C.E., attempts have been made to assess the historical basis of these stories.
  1. The German businessman Heinrich Schliemann (1822–1890 C.E.) conducted archaeological digs both on the Greek mainland and at the site of Troy in an attempt to prove that the Trojan War did take place as Homer’s poems describe.
  2. Those excavations continue and reveal that there were thriving civilizations that could have been involved in prolonged warfare, but our discussion will rely very little on a close connection between these poems and objects on the ground.

IV. The *Iliad* narrates the events of a short period of time near the end of the Trojan War.

A. The focus is on the Greek hero Achilles, his anger at Agamemnon, and the consequences of that anger for himself and for all those fighting at Troy.

B. In Book 1, Agamemnon takes Achilles’s war prize, Briseis, thereby angering Achilles and causing him to leave the fighting.

C. Trojan successes follow Achilles’s departure and prompt several Greek responses.
   1. In Book 9, Agamemnon asks Achilles to return to battle, but Achilles refuses.
   2. In Book 16, Achilles’s friend Patroclus enters battle in Achilles’s armor, temporarily turning the Trojans back, but then dies at Hector’s hands.

D. In Book 20, Achilles returns to battle, driven to avenge his dead friend, and kills Hector.

E. In Book 24, Priam ransoms the body of Hector from Achilles, and the epic ends with the funeral of Hector.

V. In the course of the story, we encounter a number of universal themes that transcend time and place:

A. What motivates heroic behavior?

B. What does an individual owe to his society?

C. Is there room for cooperation in a situation fraught with conflict?

D. How should humans and gods interact?

E. How best should we mortals live our lives, especially in the face of imminent death?

VI. *Iliad* Book 1 throws us immediately into the thick of the action, as the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon reveals the intricacies of Homeric heroism.

A. The opening lines introduce the theme, the mood, and the central characters of the epic.

B. We are quickly in the midst of a heated conflict that almost leads Achilles to kill Agamemnon.

C. The conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon has a specific cause—the distribution of the spoils of war—but more generally introduces the values that motivate the heroes in this epic.
   1. Honor (*timē*) and glory (*kleos*) are of primary importance as heroic values.
   2. Honor (*timē*) was the recognition given to a hero during his lifetime.
   3. Glory (*kleos*), even more important, is what lives on after a hero’s death.
   4. The behavior of Achilles and Agamemnon can be properly understood only in the context of those values.

D. After the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, Achilles vows to leave the fighting and asks his mother, the goddess Thetis, to ensure that the Greeks suffer in battle during his absence.

E. Thetis asks Zeus, king of the gods, to fulfill Achilles’s request.
1. Hera, Zeus’s consort, sees them in conversation, becomes suspicious, and confronts Zeus.
2. This introduction of the gods, especially the quarreling between Zeus and Hera, reveals that the gods parallel the mortals in some ways.
3. But the gods, immune to death, have much less at stake, and as the book ends, the conflict dissipates in laughter all around.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
Griffin and Hammond, “Critical Appreciation: Iliad 1.1–52.”
Knox, “Introduction.”
Morris and Powell, *A New Companion to Homer*, part I.
Silk, *Homer: The Iliad*.
Willcock, “The Search for the Poet Homer.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Does the poet lead the reader to sympathize with either Achilles or Agamemnon in the quarrel? Which passages support your response?
2. It is not difficult to summarize the action of Book 1 briefly. What are Homer’s methods of presenting that action and how do they add to its effect?
Lecture Three

Homer II—Iliad, The Wrath of Achilles

Scope: This lecture explores the themes and action of Books 2–9 of the Iliad. Once the poet has introduced the primary conflict (not between Greeks and Trojans but between Achilles and Agamemnon!), he turns, in Books 2–5, to paint more broadly the context of the war in which that conflict takes place. The poet artfully introduces here, in the final year of fighting, events that would normally take place much earlier. Book 6 is remarkable for its concentration of scenes that explore the possibility of peace or cooperation in the midst of the war. After two books of Trojan successes on the battlefield, in Book 9, Agamemnon agrees to send an embassy of Greek leaders to Achilles, offering gifts and pleading with him to return. Remarkably, Achilles refuses, thereby calling into question the entire structure of values that seems to be driving this epic.

Outline

I. As Achilles sits out of the fighting, the poet fills in necessary background, even as the narrative moves forward in Books 2–5.
   A. The catalogue of ships in Book 2 lists all of the contingents, both Greek (in great detail) and Trojan (to a lesser degree), fighting at Troy.
   B. In Book 3, Helen appears on the wall of Troy and describes for the Trojan elders some of the principal Greek warriors, Agamemnon, Odysseus, and Ajax.
   C. Also in Book 3, Paris and Menelaus, the two contestants for Helen, meet in single combat, but Aphrodite saves Paris from certain defeat and returns him to his proper place in the bedroom with Helen.
   D. The battle between Greeks and Trojans resumes in Book 4.
      1. In most cases, the fighting is individualized; we see hand-to-hand combat between heroes rather than massed charges of the anonymous ranks.
      2. Deaths are disturbingly particularized, both anatomically and in the characterization of the dead combatant. A good example is the death of Simoisius at the hands of Ajax.
      3. The fighting tends to be dominated by different heroes in succession, each of whom has his moment of particular success, his aristeia.
      4. The aristeia of the Greek Diomedes leads even to the wounding of Aphrodite and Ares on the battlefield.

II. We also find in this section of the epic, especially in Book 6, several moments of respite from the violence, with glimpses, however brief, of peace and cooperation.
   A. Homeric similes often make comparisons to the world of those at peace, such as farmers, hunters, and shepherds, and thereby serve as reminders that there is life outside of battle. For example, in Book 4, the clash of the two armies sounds like a flash flood in a gorge, heard from afar by a shepherd.
   B. The meeting on the battlefield between Glaucus and Diomedes in Book 6 shows us that xenia, the hereditary relationship between guest and host, can transcend even the enmity between Greek and Trojan.
   C. With Hector back inside the walls of Troy, we see interaction among family members and the effects of the war on women and children.
      1. Hector’s wife, Andromache, pleads with Hector to protect himself for the sake of his family, but his allegiance to the heroic values prevails.
      2. Hector’s interaction with his son Astyanax makes concrete and immediate his attitude toward the heroic values of honor and glory.

III. Hard-pressed by the Trojans throughout Books 7 and 8, Agamemnon sends an embassy to Achilles (Book 9) in an attempt to coax him back into the fighting.
   A. Odysseus relays word for word (almost) the long list of what Agamemnon will offer if Achilles will only return.
   B. Achilles rejects the offer in the longest and most surprising speech in the epic.
1. This rejection, in effect, calls into question the very foundation of the heroic values that motivate every other soldier at Troy.

2. Achilles now speaks of the destiny his mother has foretold for him: Either he can die at Troy, winning undying glory, or return home to a long, uneventful, and quickly forgotten life of peace.

C. Phoenix, a father figure to Achilles, argues more effectively and softens Achilles’s resolve to sail home.

D. Finally, Ajax, speaking briefly and bluntly as a comrade, persuades Achilles to stay at Troy and return to the fighting if fire reaches the Greek ships.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
Lateiner, “The Iliad: An Unpredictable Classic.”
Schein, “The Iliad: Structure and Interpretation.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Is there a consistent attitude toward warfare that emerges from these books of the *Iliad*?
2. Compare the two great speeches in this section: Hector’s response to Andromache and Achilles’s response to Odysseus. In what ways are these two heroes similar and in what ways different?
Lecture Four

Homer III—*Iliad*, The Return of Achilles

Scope: This lecture takes us through the remainder of the *Iliad*, focusing on Achilles’s return to battle and the aftermath of that return. In Book 16, Achilles sends his friend Patroclus into battle in his place. When Patroclus, wearing Achilles’s armor, falls at the hands of Hector, Achilles finally returns to battle, not motivated by desire for honor or glory but bloodily and single-mindedly seeking revenge. Achilles’s inhuman rage leads him to kill Hector and desecrate his enemy’s dead body. Achilles begins to moderate that rage only in Book 23, during the funeral games for Patroclus, and then in Book 24, when he agrees to return Hector’s body to his father, Priam. Homer’s Achilles is much more than the greatest warrior of the Greeks; he is a man struggling not only with the values shared by those around him but also with the awareness of his own mortality.

Outline

I. We pick up the story with Achilles remaining out of the fighting and the Trojans driving the Greeks back to their ships.
   A. We pass over sections in Books 10–16 devoted to the cunning of Odysseus and the *aristeia* of Agamemnon. Above all in these books, we see the successes of Hector and the Trojans.
   B. Led by their champion, Hector, the Trojans breach a defensive wall hastily constructed by the Greeks to protect their ships. Several of the Greek warriors are wounded in the fighting.
   C. At the same time, the struggle also continues among the gods, as Zeus is unable to keep them from supporting their favorites. Once again, Olympus provides both a parallel to human action and a foil, reminding us how much more is at stake for mortals.

II. At a critical moment, in Book 16, Achilles reconsiders a return to battle and agrees to send his friend Patroclus in his place, wearing Achilles’s own armor.
   A. Achilles’s instructions to Patroclus, as he sends him into battle, reveal his ambivalence about the value of honor and glory.
      1. Patroclus is to drive the Trojans back but then return, lest he win for himself the glory that Achilles deserves.
      2. Achilles goes so far as wishing that only he and his friend would survive the destruction of Troy.
   B. Patroclus, carried away by his success on the battlefield, forgets Achilles’s advice and goes too far. Hector kills him and strips him of Achilles’s armor.

III. Grief-stricken and desperate to avenge the death of Patroclus, Achilles decides to return to battle.
   A. Here, we might recall Achilles’s two destinies, mentioned in Lecture Two.
      1. If he fights at Troy, he’ll win glory but die young.
      2. Achilles returns to battle, not for glory, honor, prizes, or the acclaim of his comrades, but for revenge.
   B. In Book 18, on the brink of Achilles’s return to battle, the poet forces us to pause and look away from the battlefield with the description of Achilles’s new shield, forged by the craftsman god, Hephaestus.
      1. *This ekphrasis*, a detailed description of an object embedded within a literary text, effectively slows the action and widens the horizon of the poem just as it is coming to a climax.
      2. On the shield, Hephaestus designs the world and all that is in it. We are reminded that there is a place for war but also for peace and much more.
   C. Despite his renewed interest in returning to battle, Achilles rejects food and companionship with other Greeks and has no interest in material rewards.
   D. At the end of Book 19, Achilles speaks to his two horses, and one miraculously responds and reminds him of his imminent doom.

IV. Finally back in battle, Achilles becomes an inhuman killing machine, unstoppable and showing no mercy.
A. Individual encounters of this new Achilles, as with the Trojan Lycaon and again with the river god, reveal the sort of man he has become.

B. In a climactic encounter, Achilles kills Hector in Book 22, as we knew he would.
   1. Hector’s pleas for proper treatment after his death fall on deaf ears, as Achilles proceeds not only to kill Hector but to mutilate his corpse.
   2. The death of Hector implies much more, both the eventual fall of Troy and the imminent death of Achilles.

V. The final two books of the epic reveal Achilles in a new light, overseeing the funeral games in honor of Patroclus and, finally, in Book 24, ransoming the body of Hector to his father.
   A. The funeral games in Book 23 show us a different type of conflict and competition, all of which is resolved in constructive fashion.
      1. The chariot race in particular reenacts the argument between Achilles and Agamemnon in Book 1, but the resolution is far different here. Achilles defuses all the tensions, and the contestants resolve their differences with mutual compliments.
      2. At the end of the book, in the aborted spear-throwing contest, the roles of Achilles and Agamemnon are reversed from Book 1, again with a less destructive resolution.
   B. In Book 24, Priam, Hector’s father, aided by Hermes, enters Achilles’s tent and asks for the body of his son.
      1. The two men cry together, Priam for his dead son Hector, Achilles for his own father and for Patroclus.
      2. It is the emotional connection between the two that finally wins Achilles over, and Achilles returns the body.

VI. This epic about honor, glory, and battlefield exploits thus ends with a focus on pity, tears, the courage of an old man, and the burial of Hector, breaker of horses. What do we make of that?
   A. Some see here a rehabilitation of Achilles, a sign that he has returned to the norm of humanity after his wild forays.
   B. Homer has made Achilles much more than the greatest warrior of the Greeks. He is a man struggling with the values shared by those around him, aware of his imminent death and trying, in the best way he knows, to make the most of the time he is given.
   C. Achilles thus embodies that universal human problem, the curse of awareness—awareness of our own mortality—and the gods, with their immortality, prove the point by contrast.

VII. This epic was revered by the ancient Greeks and served as a model for later epics by Vergil, Dante, and Milton, although a more immediate influence was on Greek tragedy.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Taplin, “The Shield of Achilles within *The Iliad.*”
Vernant, “A ‘Beautiful Death’ and the Disfigured Corpse in Homeric Epic.”

Questions to Consider:
1. What, if anything, would be lost if the epic ended just after the climactic battle between Hector and Achilles?
2. What allows this poem to resonate so deeply with so many different people over such a long period of time? Consider here both themes and the poetic presentation of them.
Lecture Five
Homer IV—Odyssey, Introduction and Prelude

Scope: Moving to the second of the great Homeric epics, we begin this lecture with some comparative remarks about the Iliad and the Odyssey. After a brief overview of the Odyssey, considering its structure as a traditional nostos, or return story, we turn to the Odyssey itself and the striking absence of the hero for the first four books. The poet uses those books to establish the reputation of our hero and the critical nature of the situation back at home. We hear so much about the exploits of Odysseus, and we see his family so endangered by the presence of the suitors, that when we finally encounter Odysseus in Book 5, stuck on Calypso’s island paradise, we understand his longing for home. After leaving Calypso’s island, the final stop for Odysseus is among the Phaeacians, where he encounters one more potential obstacle in his quest for Ithaca, the marriage-minded princess Nausicaa.

Outline

I. The relationship between the Iliad and the Odyssey is complex, the many similarities in form and mythical world serving to highlight the differences of them.
   A. The most common view in antiquity was that a single poet composed the two epics.
      1. In his Poetics, Aristotle assumes single authorship while noting the differences in plot and tone between the two.
      2. Another view was that the Odyssey was a work of Homer’s old age, while the Iliad was the poet’s more youthful product.
      3. Samuel Butler, a 19th-century British novelist, famously argued that the Iliad was composed by a man; the Odyssey, by a woman.
   B. In light of the oral theory of composition, most people think that the question of single authorship is misguided and that the two poems emerge from a similar oral tradition, that is, the repeated recitation of stories through generations.
   C. Beyond the details of style and form that link the two epics, there are clear indications that the poet of the Odyssey knows the Iliad and is building upon it.
      1. They are both long narrative poems in dactylic hexameter, with similar diction, syntax, and poetic devices, and each of them focuses on a single portion of the longer Trojan War story.
      2. Within the narrative of the Odyssey, there is no overlap with the Iliad, even as the story of the Iliad has become a subject for singers in the Odyssey, hearkening back to the war and its aftermath.
      3. But many of the central figures from the Iliad are accounted for in the Odyssey.
   D. Given all of these similarities, the differences between the two epics are all the more striking.
      1. We move from a poem of war to a poem of peace: Odysseus’s goal is to return to his family and become reintegrated into his prewar life.
      2. In place of Achilles, a hotheaded young warrior, the hero Odysseus is a careful planner and strategist.
      3. The concentrated focus of the Iliad becomes more diffuse, both temporally and geographically, as we follow Odysseus around the Mediterranean for 10 years.

II. In its overall structure, the Odyssey is a traditional nostos, or return story.
   A. Hundreds of examples of this type of story have been recorded, found throughout the world, all of them following the same basic storyline.
   B. The essential elements of the nostos begin with the absence of the hero, causing devastation for the hero and/or those left back at home; the hero returns, enacts some form of retribution on those who have been causing trouble, and is then united with the woman left behind.
   C. Application of this pattern to the Odyssey is clear but is far from mechanistic or limiting.

III. The Odyssey tells the story of Odysseus’s 10-year journey from Troy to his home on Ithaca and what happens after he arrives home.
A. The first four books, the so-called *Telemacheia*, focus on the problems at home caused by Odysseus’s long absence. Here, we meet Odysseus’s son, Telemachus; his wife, Penelope; and the suitors in his palace.

B. We first meet Odysseus in Book 5 near the end of his travels, longing for home.

C. Books 6–8 narrate Odysseus’s final stop, among the Phaeacians.

D. In Books 9–12, Odysseus tells the Phaeacians about his many adventures since leaving Troy.

E. Odysseus arrives on Ithaca in Book 13, and the remainder of the epic recounts his attempts, after 20 years of absence, to return to his former position within his family and society.

IV. The epic starts on Ithaca, with a view of the problems and possibilities that await Odysseus back home.

A. Odysseus’s home is overrun by importunate and impolite suitors for the hand of his wife, Penelope, and even the gods recognize that their behavior is wrong.

B. Penelope herself is holding out, showing herself as a faithful and suitable wife for a man such as Odysseus.

1. She had promised to choose a husband after weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, Laertes.
2. At night, she tore out all she had woven each day, deceiving the suitors for almost four years and putting off the need to choose one until one of her serving women gave her away.
3. As the epic starts, the shroud is finished, and a crisis is at hand.

C. But the primary focus is on Odysseus’s son, Telemachus—hence, the reference to these four books as the *Telemacheia*—and his process of maturing.

1. Athena, disguised as a mortal, visits Telemachus and encourages him to find out about his father from some of his Trojan War comrades.
2. Telemachus travels a mini-*Odyssey* of his own, astounding everyone by sailing off to learn of his father.
3. He first visits old King Nestor, who fondly recalls the brilliance of Odysseus at Troy.
4. Then, he travels to visit Menelaus, who also gives him an aural reenactment of parts of the Trojan War.
5. During these travels, we see some of the *nostos* structure—a view of what awaits Telemachus at home, for back at Ithaca, the suitors are plotting his death, lying in wait for his ship offshore.
6. With Athena’s help, Telemachus easily escapes them, but that sense of danger contributes to making this little voyage more like Odysseus’s.
7. In Telemachus’s journey, we see a son worthy of his father, and we hear and learn about Odysseus before we see him.
8. As well, we see in the households of both Nestor and Menelaus models of proper hospitality—*xenia*—which is lacking in Odysseus’s palace because of the intolerable suitors.

V. The introduction of Odysseus himself comes only in Book 5, where we see him with the goddess Calypso, longing for home.

A. The poet emphasizes the attractions of Calypso’s island.

1. The island itself is enough to make the god Hermes marvel.
2. Calypso offers Odysseus an immortal life of pleasure and beauty, but even those attractions cannot replace Ithaca and Penelope for Odysseus.
3. Odysseus’s desire to give up this life reveals just how determined he is to return home.

B. Prompted by Hermes, and much against her will, Calypso sends Odysseus on his way.

C. On the open sea, Odysseus is at the mercy of the gods. Buffeted violently by Poseidon, then saved by a sea nymph, he finally drags himself ashore at the island of the Phaeacians.

VI. The poet marks Odysseus’s arrival at Phaeacia as a new beginning for him, a significant step in his reentry back into a normal world.

A. But here, we see one final test for Odysseus among the Phaeacians.

B. There are threats to his return in the attractions of Phaeacia and the princess Nausicaa.

1. Nausicaa has marriage very much on her mind.
2. She is a self-possessed young woman, willing to help even the naked and bedraggled stranger washed up on her shore.
3. Both she and her father see Odysseus as a desirable match.
4. Phaeacia is not as divinely magical as Calypso’s island but seems a form of perfection within the reach of the real world.
5. The Phaeacians are the model of hospitality, welcoming Odysseus, offering him food, drink, and passage home.

**Essential Reading:**

**Supplementary Reading:**
Griffin, *Homer: The Odyssey*.
Rutherford, “From *The Iliad* to *The Odyssey*.”
Tracy, *The Story of the Odyssey*, chapters 1 and 2.

**Questions to Consider:**
1. What is the role of the gods in these five books? Do they behave as they did in the *Iliad*?
2. *Xenia*, and its perversion, is one of the central themes of this epic. Why is it so important, and how is it developed here?
Lecture Six
Homer V—Odyssey, The Adventures

Scope: In this lecture, we discuss the most familiar parts of the Odyssey, the journey itself from Troy to Ithaca, most of it narrated by Odysseus in Books 9–12. He tells his hosts the story of his travels and adventures during the nine years since he left Troy, a story famously full of monsters, witches, magic, and intrigue. We consider all of the adventures here but discuss in more detail two of them: Odysseus’s encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus and his trip to the Underworld. The adventures take Odysseus and his men all through the Mediterranean but also tell us much about the distance Odysseus has traveled psychically and emotionally from Troy as he prepares to return to a life of peace at home.

Outline
I. In return for their considerable hospitality, Odysseus tells the Phaeacians of his travels and adventures. We soon see that Odysseus has come far from Troy, not only geographically but also psychologically.
   A. His storytelling begins with a simile that takes him back to Troy and reveals his new attitude toward the war with the Trojans.
      1. When he hears a song about the fall of Troy, he cries, as the poet says, like a woman whose city has fallen and sees her husband dying, even as she feels the enemy spears prodding her toward slavery.
      2. The suggestion is that Odysseus, taken back to the memory of the fall of Troy, now recognizes the suffering that he and the Greeks caused.
   B. The first adventure Odysseus relates, the encounter with Trojan allies, the Cicones, just after he leaves Troy, serves as a final real-world experience before he is, so to speak, blown off the map.
   C. The brief episode with the Lotus Eaters introduces the subtle nature of some of the threats to Odysseus’s return: not all are necessarily dangerous.
   D. Odysseus’s adventures with the Cyclops Polyphemus reveal much about the character of Odysseus and the complexities facing a hero leaving the Trojan War for home.
      1. On the one hand, Odysseus’s cleverness and forethought in outsmarting the Cyclops save himself and most of his men.
      2. On the other hand, unable to distance himself completely from the values dear to Iliadic heroes, he finally identifies himself to the Cyclops and pays a price for that.
   E. Odysseus and his men arrive on the island of Aeolus, master of the winds, who ties up all adverse winds in a bag, allowing Odysseus to sail within sight of Ithaca, but his men then let the winds escape.
   F. By the time Odysseus encounters the Laestrygonians, similar in some ways to the Cyclopes, his strategic approach shows that he has already begun to learn from his experiences.
   G. Odysseus then saves himself from Circe in un-Iliadic fashion, but his lengthy stay with her works against his ultimate goal of returning home.

II. Circe tells Odysseus that a visit to the prophet Teiresias in the Underworld is a necessary step on his journey home.
   A. There is a certain expectation that heroes will visit the Underworld; after all, if death is the defining human characteristic, then survival of death is a mark of someone truly exceptional.
   B. Odysseus’s trip to the Underworld serves as a watershed event in his return home, marking a break with his recent past at Troy and a new focus on his future.
   C. Teiresias warns Odysseus of dangers that lie ahead.
   D. Odysseus sees his mother, Anticleia, who has died of grief at her son’s absence. From her, he hears news of home.
   E. Among the dead, he meets the shades of some of his former comrades at Troy.
      1. Agamemnon, killed by his wife, Clytemnestra, as soon as he returned home, warns Odysseus about faithless wives.
2. Achilles laments his own death, no matter how glorious, wishing instead for even the most ignoble of lives.

III. Back from the Underworld, Odysseus uses Teiresias’s advice to survive his remaining trials.
   A. He is able not only to survive the song of the Sirens but actually to experience it, as well.
   B. When sailing the narrow strait between Scylla and Charybdis, Odysseus loses more men.
   C. Finally, on the island of Thrinakia, Odysseus follows Teiresias’s advice not to kill the cattle of the Sun god, Helios, but his men disobey and soon pay the price. All are killed at sea except for Odysseus.

IV. Odysseus arrives alone on Calypso’s island, bringing us to the point in the story where we first met him. Now, though, we know what he has experienced, how he has lost all his men, and how far he has come from the war itself.

Essential Reading:
Homer, The Odyssey, Books 8–12.

Supplementary Reading:
Reinhardt, “The Adventures in the Odyssey.”
Shapiro, “Coming of Age in Phaiakia: The Meeting of Odysseus and Nausikaa.”
Tracy, The Story of the Odyssey, chapters 2 and 3.

Questions to Consider:
1. What difference does it make, if any, that Odysseus narrates his adventures?
2. Odysseus reveals qualities in these adventures that differentiate him from Achilles and other heroes of the Iliad. What are they, and why is the poet at pains to emphasize them?
Lecture Seven
Homer VI—Odyssey, Reintegration

Scope: This lecture covers the second half of the epic, Books 13–24, following the adventures of Odysseus on Ithaca as he completes his return. First, he must avenge himself on the suitors, then reuni...
1. The description of the death emphasizes the setting in the dining hall, reminding us of the suitors’ terrible breach of xenia.
2. With the help of his son and a few loyal servants, Odysseus slays the rest of the unarmed suitors.
3. The brutality of the scene takes us back momentarily to the world of the Iliad, but most readers find themselves cheering on the killers.

III. After killing the suitors, Odysseus’s next obstacle is Penelope’s suspicion.

A. In the context of other recognitions, her stubbornness is particularly notable.
   1. Telemachus needed no proof.
   2. The old dog Argus, in an unusually poignant scene, saw right through the disguise, then died of joy.
   3. The serving woman Eurycleia recognized the scar on Odysseus’s thigh.

B. But Penelope’s reluctance allows the poet to set up the final test, one that reveals much about Penelope and her relation with Odysseus.
   1. She tests Odysseus by asking the serving woman to move Odysseus’s own bed into the hall for him. Only she and Odysseus know that the bed is immovable, built around the trunk of an olive tree.
   2. His enraged response reveals that he is indeed Odysseus and that Penelope, alone in the epic, has tricked him.
   3. Penelope’s reference to the bed draws attention to its immovability, thereby underlining her own faithfulness during Odysseus’s absence.
   4. Once she has revealed her treachery and the two retire to bed, the reunion—and Odysseus’s return—seems complete.
   5. In the final book, considered spurious by some readers since antiquity, Odysseus is reunited with his father and makes peace with the families of those he slaughtered in his palace.

IV. The Homeric epics were central to the ancient Greeks, serving as a foundation for all education, and have remained influential in Western literature ever since.

A. The Homeric poems were for the Greeks a primary source of myth, religion, and morality.
   1. Papyrus finds from the period of Greek occupation of Egypt show the extent of interest in the Iliad and the Odyssey. By far, the greatest number of literary papyri are copies of Homer’s poems.
   2. Quotations of Homer appear in widely different genres, and the poems could be turned to for information on a wide variety of subjects.
   3. Direct Homeric influence is apparent in the tragedy and comedy of 5th-century Athens. The tragedian Aeschylus claimed that all of his plays were slices from Homer’s banquet.

B. Latin literature began with a translation of the Odyssey into Latin, and since then, we have a continuous stream of works that respond to the Homeric epics.
   1. The epic poetry of Dante and Milton clearly shows its indebtedness to Homeric epic, even if through the intermediary of Vergil’s Aeneid.
   2. More generally, in authors as varied as Tennyson, Kazantzakis, Joyce, and Walcott, Homeric themes continue to appear throughout literature.

Essential Reading:
Homer, The Odyssey, Books 13–24.

Supplementary Reading:
Emlyn-Jones, “The Reunion of Penelope and Odysseus.”
Tracy, The Story of the Odyssey, chapters 4–6.
Winkler, The Constraints of Desire, chapter 5.

Questions to Consider:
1. After moving so far from the Iliad in Odysseus’s attitude and behavior, the epic ends with considerable bloodshed. Have we returned to Iliadic values here?
2. In what ways do later versions of the Odyssey (as by Tennyson, Joyce, and many others) adapt and transform aspects of the poem?
Lecture Eight  
**Hesiod—Theogony and Works and Days**

**Scope:** The *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, by Hesiod, share much with the Homeric poems in the form and manner of their composition, but differences are considerable. The *Theogony* traces for us the origin of the universe, the birth of the gods, and the establishment of a hierarchy among them. Amid the welter of names, genealogies, and power struggles, Hesiod conveys a clear message about the stability of the world order and the untouchable supremacy of Zeus. The *Works and Days*, on the other hand, is a more clearly didactic poem. At one level, it is an almanac of practical daily advice, but beyond that, in its comments on the proper interactions among humans and between humans and gods, it serves as a more comprehensive guide to life.

**Outline**

I. The *Theogony* and *Works and Days* of Hesiod share much with the Homeric poems.  
   A. Greek authors of the Classical period, such as Aristophanes, Herodotus, and Plato, all spoke of Homer and Hesiod together as the originators of Greek literature.  
   B. *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, like the Homeric poems, seem to have been orally composed and first written down in the 8th century.  
   C. Other similarities to the Homeric poems include meter, dialect, and vocabulary.  
   D. As in the Homeric poems, we encounter in *Theogony* and *Works and Days* epithets and invocations of the muse, as well as formulaic phrases and scenes.

II. However, differences between the works of the two are important, as well.  
   A. Hesiod’s poems are much shorter.  
   B. Instead of narratives about war and its aftermath, here we find the origins of the gods (*Theogony*) and a manual for rural life (*Works and Days*).  
      1. They are both didactic poems and, thus, show the influence of the long tradition of creation stories and wisdom literature in Egypt and Mesopotamia.  
      2. But these works are so far removed from pure didacticism that they are more compelling as aesthetic objects than useful as teaching manuals.  
   C. Also, the poet reveals information about himself, thereby calling attention to the existence and role of the poet in his work.  
      1. In the *Theogony*, he tells of an inspirational visit from the muses, who taught him how to sing.  
      2. In *Works and Days*, we get further details about the poet’s travels and the difficulty of his rural life.  
      3. In all cases, we should approach authorial biography with healthy skepticism.

III. The *Theogony* is a gold mine of mythological detail about the birth of the gods and their organization of the world, complete with more than 300 names. Lurking within the abundant minutiae is a compelling narrative about Zeus’s rise to power as king of the gods.  
   A. The poem begins with a hymn to the muses, an extension into some 115 lines of the typical Homeric request for divine assistance. By narrating his personal encounter with the muses, the poet introduces the idea of poetic inspiration and establishes his credibility in singing of such a grandiose subject.  
   B. The world originates from Chaos—nothingness—and thanks to the early presence of Eros, the personification of erotic desire, the divine population increases, largely through the very human mechanism of sexual intercourse.  
   C. The original first couple is the Earth and the Sky, Gaia and Ouranos.  
      1. Their children include three Cyclopes, three monsters with 100 hands each (the 100-Handers), and the group of Titans, including Kronos. Fearing that these children might unseat him, Ouranos stuffs them back inside the womb of their mother, Gaia, preventing their appearance in the world.
2. Conspiring with his mother, Kronos castrates his father, Ouranos, thereby severing Earth from Sky, releasing his Titan siblings from their bondage, and placing himself in charge.

D. In the second generation, Kronos marries his sister Rheia, and the two Titans have many offspring, who will eventually be our Olympian gods.
   1. Having learned a lesson from his father, Kronos swallows down all of his children himself.
   2. Rheia conspires with Gaia to save the youngest, Zeus, by giving Kronos a stone to swallow in his place. Zeus is raised far from Kronos, on the island of Crete.

E. When he comes of age, Zeus somehow manages to have his siblings vomited forth, and a universal battle ensues, the so-called Titanomachy, with Zeus and his sibling Olympians pitted against Kronos and the other Titans of his generation.
   1. Zeus and the other Olympians win the battle, using diplomacy and persuasion to win necessary allies.
   2. Zeus is then challenged personally by Typhoios, a monster who would have destroyed life on Earth if Zeus had not defeated him.
   3. But the greatest danger, as we know from preceding generations, comes from the ruler’s own first consort, Metis.
      a. Zeus does his predecessors one better by swallowing the pregnant Metis, the personification of wisdom, and giving birth himself (from his head) to her child, Athena.
      b. Thus, Zeus has ingested feminine cunning in the person of Metis and has even appropriated for himself the single greatest power that women have: the power to give birth.

F. Hesiod thus gives us a succession myth that ensures the ongoing and unshakable power of Zeus.

IV. With the Works and Days, we move from the birth and genealogy of the gods to a more purely didactic subject: advice and wisdom for living properly in a hard world, with particular reference to running a farm.

A. The poem is set up as advice to the poet’s brother, Perses, telling him to get to work because life is hard.
   1. Life was not always hard, the poet explains, but ever since Prometheus helped mortals, against the wishes of Zeus, the gods have hidden away the riches of the world and we have to work for everything.
      a. Hesiod gives us two versions of the story about Prometheus and Pandora, both of which point to women as the cause of all trouble in the world.
      b. Women are rarely seen favorably in much of Greek literature, but this negative attitude toward women goes beyond the norm.
   2. A second story reinforces the first: Humankind has descended in stages from a state of perfection and closeness to the gods, a golden age. We now live in a miserable age of iron, and things will probably get even worse.

B. The almanac of advice in the second half of the poem covers both the specifics of daily farm life and more general precepts for living a good life.
   1. The poet’s general advice often focuses on the need for constant and unremitting hard work.
   2. The more specific advice often has to do with which days are lucky or unlucky for certain activities.

V. The narrative flow of these two poems cannot equal, and is not intended to equal, what we found in Homer. For many, it is only on the second or third reading that the integrity of the whole emerges from the mass of detail. Even on first reading, though, the power of certain sections is unmistakable.

A. In Theogony, the Titanomachy involves the entire universe. We feel the heat, see the flashing thunder, and hear broad heaven crashing down to Earth.

B. The Works and Days, despite its overall tone of admonition, does include some beautifully pastoral moments, as in the description of summer.

Essential Reading:
Hesiod, Works and Days and Theogony.

Supplementary Reading:
Clay, Hesiod’s Cosmos.
Lamberton, *Hesiod*.  
Rosen, “Homer and Hesiod.”

**Questions to Consider:**

1. In Hesiod’s version of creation, the chief god comes to power only gradually. How does that differ from other creation stories you might know, and what does that difference suggest about the Greeks?

2. In *Works and Days*, we see life from the perspective of the struggling laborer; in the Homeric epics, we saw usually through the eyes of the wealthy and powerful. Granted these different vantage points, do the two poets present the same world?
Lecture Nine
Homeric Hymns

Scope: There is much we do not know about the poems referred to collectively as Homeric Hymns: who composed them, when, or for what purpose. We do know that they were composed in dactylic hexameter (the meter of epic), each one in honor of a god, and that several of them are first-rate poems. The hymns all share certain formal features, including essential information about the cult names and places of the deity, but they vary considerably in their length (from a few lines to several hundred) and tone. In this lecture, we begin with a brief introduction to the genre, then look at the two longer hymns that are lightest in tone: the Hymn to Aphrodite and the Hymn to Hermes. Because each of these hymns features at its center a well-developed narrative, a story about the deity addressed, these hymns reveal much about the complex Greek attitudes toward the divine.

Outline

I. The 34 Homeric Hymns constitute a genre that shares features of both Homeric and Hesiodic poetry.
   A. They use the same meter and dialect as the poems we have already considered, and the earliest among them probably date to the same period. Some are much later than that, however, dating to the 5th century and even later.
   B. Like Hesiod’s Theogony, they explore the complex roles of the gods; like the Homeric poems, the longer hymns contain extended narrative driven by direct speech.
   C. Unlike the poems of Homer and Hesiod, however, there is little notice of these poems by ancient authors.
      1. Thucydides refers to them as preludes to the performance of longer epic recitations.
      2. The manuscript tradition is tenuous—the poems survive in relatively few copies—and suggests that the hymns might not have been as widely known as the other works we have discussed.
   D. These works also differ in form from the poems of Homer and Hesiod. The hymn form, both here and as it appears in other works, is fairly fixed and consistent.
      1. The hymns begin by naming the deity at the start, often with the first word.
      2. The deity is further specified and located with a listing of cult names and places of special importance.
      3. The hallmark of the four longer hymns is a narrative, a story that fixes the place of the deity within the pantheon of the gods and with relation to mortals.
      4. Finally, the hymns close with a direct address and a formal farewell.

II. The Hymn to Aphrodite presents us with a goddess who is powerful and potentially dangerous, but her association with the very human business of love invites a light, if not humorous, treatment.
   A. The hymn begins with a request to the muse for help in singing about the goddess.
      1. We learn from three mini-hymns within the hymn that only Artemis, Athena, and Hestia are immune to Aphrodite’s charms.
      2. Even Zeus has been the victim of Aphrodite.
   B. Zeus, peeved that Aphrodite can so easily manipulate almost all other deities, decides to make Aphrodite herself fall in love with a mortal, the Trojan Anchises.
   C. The affair between Aphrodite and Anchises is, on the one hand, an amusingly unconventional love story.
      1. To prepare for her shepherd, Aphrodite bathes and puts on perfume and her finest clothes.
      2. At her approach, the woodland animals start mating.
      3. When she appears in all her splendor before Anchises, he treats her as a goddess, offering to build her an altar and sacrifice to her.
      4. She convinces him that she is mortal and has been sent to become his wife.
      5. Anchises responds as we might expect, and the affair is consummated.
   D. But the presence of the divine infuses this love story with a sense of danger.
      1. When he learns her true identity, Anchises’s fear is real, and prompts a lengthy reassurance from Aphrodite.
2. From now on, Aphrodite will have to bear the disgrace of having slept with a mortal man, and she’ll have the further burden of bearing a child.
3. But she warns Anchises never to reveal the true mother of the child.

E. This story is an engaging reflection on the interaction of gods and humans.
F. The hymn also presents a view that polytheism has its complications.

III. The *Hymn to Hermes*, probably one of the latest of these hymns, is the lightest in tone and the most comic in action.
A. The baby Hermes, only hours old, leaves his cradle for a spree of adventures.
   1. First, he invents the lyre from a turtle shell.
   2. Then, after taking precautions to hide his tracks, he steals some of Apollo’s cattle and returns to his cradle.
B. The remainder of the hymn is about Hermes’s attempts to make up for the mischief he has caused.
   1. He lies first to his mother, assuring her that he will bring her renown through his cleverness.
   2. He next lies to Apollo and plays the baby, complete with undisciplined bodily functions to elude his grasp.
   3. Finally, he lies to Zeus, and Zeus is pleased with the wit of his new son.
C. To make up for the theft, Hermes gives Apollo the lyre he invented, and all ends happily.
D. Hermes’s inventiveness, thievery, and lying are all established here as part of his divine nature.
E. Hermes’s ultimate success—winning Zeus’s approval and bribing Apollo with the lyre—reveals much about the Greek attitude toward the gods or, at least, toward this one.

IV. Other Homeric Hymns are far more serious in tone.
A. The *Hymn to Demeter*, for example, is serious throughout and tells of the founding of the rites in honor of Demeter at Eleusis, near Athens.
B. In this case, the hymn leads to an appreciation of the unique function and nature of the deity addressed.

**Essential Reading:**
The *Homeric Hymns*, *Hymn to Aphrodite* (#5, pp. 47–55) and *Hymn to Hermes*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Clay, “The Homeric Hymns.”
Taplin, “The Spring of the Muses: Homer and Related Poetry.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. What do these hymns suggest about the connection between moral behavior and worship of the gods?
2. Compare the treatment of the gods here to what we saw in Homer and Hesiod.
Lecture Ten
Lyric Poetry I—Archilochus and Solon

Scope: This is the first of two lectures on a varied group of poems that were composed from approximately the mid-7th through the mid-5th centuries. They are relatively short, composed in a variety of meters, and cover a broad range of subject matter. These ancient poems, like those of the European lyric tradition, are often personal, erotic, and confessional, but they can also be strikingly public and political in their themes. After an introduction to the genre, we look briefly at the historical context of the production and performance of these poems. In this lecture and the next, we then consider the work of several poets, treating them in roughly chronological order. Archilochus, ranked by the ancients as an equal of Homer and Hesiod, is best known for his scurrilous invective, but he can also be more reflective in tone. Solon, an early Athenian statesman, includes both political and more generally moral themes in his elegiac verse.

Outline

I. The name lyric poetry is conventionally given to a diverse group of poems composed between the mid-7th and mid-5th centuries.
   A. While diverse, these poems do share some similarities: They are relatively short, metrically varied, and reflective or personal, rather than narrative.
   B. We should start by clearing up some misconceptions about the term lyric poetry and about these poems more generally.
      1. Despite the name, only some of these poems were composed for accompaniment by the lyre. Some were accompanied by the aulos, an instrument akin to our oboe, and some had no accompaniment at all.
      2. In their content, these ancient lyric poems are often personal, erotic, and confessional, but they can also be quite public and political in their themes.
      3. The poems we will read date from the period after the epics, but we should not think of an Age of Epic giving way to an Age of Lyric. Passages from the Homeric epics, for example, suggest that lyric poetry was alive and well during the time the epics were being composed.
      4. Many of these poems include first-person references, but we should be wary of equating the poetic “I” with the historical poet. In many cases, the poet is adopting a poetic persona.
   C. No single organizational technique does full justice to the array of poets and poetry included under the heading lyric. Following a roughly chronological order, we will highlight a very few of the poets, paying some attention to the particular subtype of lyric represented by each.
   D. Making the situation even more complicated for us is the fragmentary nature of most of these poems.
      1. Their popularity in antiquity is attested by their presence in great quantities in the Hellenistic Library at Alexandria.
      2. What we have now is largely patched together from scraps of papyrus and quotations by later authors.

II. These poems arose from a context of increasing wealth and political innovation throughout the Mediterranean.
   A. Trade and colonization enlarged the world of many Greeks in the 8th and 7th centuries and expanded the body of the elite beyond the traditional hereditary power bases.
   B. The social life of these elites centered on the symposium, a semi-formalized male gathering for eating and drinking. This was also the venue for the performance of much of our lyric poetry.
   C. The other performance context, especially for the choral songs, was the more widely inclusive civic festival.

III. From Archilochus, who lived on the island of Paros in the 7th century, we have fragments of a wide variety of poems on a wide variety of themes.
   A. We start with an elegiac poem.
      1. We should note that elegiac poetry need not connote anything mournful or funereal. It is simply poetry written in elegiac couplets.
2. In these two couplets, a soldier prides himself on his survival, even though he had to abandon his shield on the battlefield.

3. We might take this as a questioning of the heroic value that a soldier should leave battle with his shield or on it (that is, dead).

B. Most of Archilochus’s fragments come from the iambic tradition, poems that are often (but not always) in iambic meter, marked by erotic themes and sometimes harsh invective.

1. Several fragments refer to a certain Neobule and her father, Lycambes. Tradition had it that Lycambes broke off an engagement between Neobule and Archilochus. The poet wrote such harsh verses in response that Lycambes, possibly along with his daughter, committed suicide.

2. Another of Archilochus’s iambic poems, from a papyrus first published in the 1970s, is a seduction scene that seems to involve the poet and Neobule’s younger sister.

IV. The Athenians called upon Solon (c. 638–558) early in the 6th century to save them from civil strife by reforming their laws. His poetry is sometimes generally contemplative, but he also reflects on his political activity and Athenian responses to it.

A. In his elegiac prayer to the muses, Solon incorporates the sort of traditional and moderate values we expect of this champion of moderation.

1. The speaker asks for prosperity, but only the sort of prosperity that he can get honestly. He continues with more on the penalties for injustice, then turns to thoughts about human limitations.

2. The register is Hesiodic in its piety and serves as a nice contrast to the recklessness of Archilochus.

B. We might be more appreciative of that moderation when we encounter it in the context of the political difficulties Solon was facing.

1. He refers to his debt-relief legislation and the fact that he forged a compromise that pleased no one but averted outright civil war. All the while, he refused to use his power to his own economic or political advantage.

2. Matters of public policy become personal and poignant in Solon’s account of his own struggles to save his city from bloodshed and himself from opponents on all sides.

Essential Reading:
Miller, *Greek Lyric*, Archilochus and Solon selections.

Supplementary Reading:
Kurke, “The Strangeness of ‘Song Culture’: Archaic Greek Poetry.”
Miller, “Introduction.”
West, “Other Early Poetry.”

Questions to Consider:
1. Lyric is a much less elevated and often less serious genre than epic and is sometimes defined in terms of these negatives, but what can lyric poetry do that epic cannot?

2. What points of similarity in theme, style, or other qualities can you find between the very different poets Archilochus and Solon?
Lecture Eleven
Lyric Poetry II—Sappho and Alcaeus

Scope: In this second lecture on lyric poetry, we consider several types of melic poetry (from the Greek melos, "song"). While other types were sung as well, this group generally has more complicated meters. In the late 7th century, two poets from the island of Lesbos, Sappho and Alcaeus, composed monodies, poems sung by individuals. Sappho, the only woman in this group (in fact, the only woman in this course), was revered in antiquity for her love poems, which we have only in fragments. Her contemporary Alcaeus wrote as much about politics as about love. We touch only briefly on the Theban Pindar, known especially for his choral epinicians, poems celebrating athletic victories composed for public performance by a chorus. We conclude this lecture by considering why this type of public song effectively died out by the end of the 5th century.

Outline

I. We continue our discussion of lyric poetry with the category called melic, comprising both monodies (songs for one voice) and choral compositions.

II. Sappho was among the most celebrated poets of antiquity, her collected works filling several papyrus rolls in the Library at Alexandria. But we have only fragments from her now.
   A. Sappho lived in the city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, but we know very little about her life.
   B. Sappho seems to have composed and performed much of her work among women, but the nature of their relationship is unclear.
      1. From her, and from her home on the island of Lesbos, we have the modern term lesbian, but there is no evidence of female homoeroticism in Sappho’s circle.
      2. One suggestion is that Sappho was entrusted with the musical and poetic education of the other women.
   C. She wrote in her native dialect and, as far as we can tell, had a particular tendency to write in stanzas of four lines each, using a metrical pattern that has come to be called Sapphic.
   D. Our only complete poem from Sappho, in seven 4-line stanzas, is a prayer to Aphrodite.
      1. The overall structure follows a formal prayer pattern: The speaker addresses a deity, complete with titles, epithets, and maybe, genealogy; the speaker then makes the request for help and reminds the deity of past associations, and we have, finally, a restatement of the request.
      2. Sappho’s genius is to infuse even this formal structure with an immediacy of passion and longing. We get no specifics—only that someone has rejected the poet; rather, the emphasis is on the despair of the poet contrasted with the calm assurance of the goddess.
   E. Sappho uses another formal device, the priamel, to make a statement about what is most valuable in the world.
      1. The priamel emphasizes a point by contrast, starting with what others think about a particular subject and leading up to the climax of what the author thinks.
      2. While others consider a body of cavalry, infantry, or warships the most beautiful sight in the world, the poet claims that the object of one’s love is the most beautiful thing in the world.
      3. She uses Helen to prove the point, and reference to her effectively turns a Homeric example against Homeric values.
   F. Our third example is a fragmentary poem (we have four 4-line stanzas) documenting the physical effects of love or, perhaps, jealousy.
      1. This poem was much admired in antiquity and translated into Latin by the Roman poet Catullus.
      2. There are three people in the poem: the speaker, her beloved, and the man who sits across from the beloved.
      3. After brief recognition of the man’s good fortune, to be so close to the beloved, the poet devotes three stanzas to detailing her own physical condition, from pounding heart to trembling pallor.
   G. In 2005, a new poem by Sappho was first published in full.
1. An important section of it was found in 2004 on a piece of papyrus in a German collection—part of a mummy wrapping.
2. In this poem, Sappho addresses a group of younger girls and comments on her own advancing age.

III. Alcaeus was a contemporary of Sappho, also from the island of Lesbos, and like her, he wrote love poetry. But here we will look at some examples of his more political compositions.
   A. Like Sappho, Alcaeus writes in the dialect of the island of Lesbos and favors particular stanzaic forms. His favorite metrical form has come to be called Alcaic.
   B. The political unrest on Lesbos makes no appearance in Sappho’s poetry, but from Alcaeus’s poems, we can guess that factional struggles led to the serial ascendency of several aristocrats and to the exile of our poet, Alcaeus.
   C. Alcaeus uses the ship-of-state metaphor to describe the instability on Lesbos and the need for strong leadership.
   D. One of his poems from exile poignantly details what he misses most about life in his city.

IV. We touch only briefly on Pindar of Thebes, the latest of our lyric poets, who lived into the first half of the 5th century.
   A. From his large and varied production, we have examples only of his epinicians, choral odes written to commemorate athletic victories.
   B. These highly complex poems tend to polarize readers, who either praise Pindar for his allusive sophistication or bemoan his dense artificiality.
   C. There are certain structural features that recur in Pindar’s work, most notably a myth that reflects in some way on the victor or victory being celebrated.
   D. It is this sort of choral song that leads most directly into the choral parts of Greek drama.

V. Lyric poetry continued to be sung and performed after the time of Pindar, but it was no longer at the center of literary production.
   A. The rise of comedy and tragedy as civic art forms in the 5th century absorbed and recast much of what lyric had been.
      1. The conversation with literary predecessors now takes place on the stage, as old myths are retold from a contemporary viewpoint.
      2. The choral odes in particular become the venue for lyric expression in complicated metrical patterns.
   B. Prose authors, including historians, orators, and those who came to be known as Sophists, gradually took over the lyric poets’ role as moral compasses and political commentators.

Essential Reading:
Miller, Greek Lyric, Sappho and Alcaeus selections.

Supplementary Reading:
Whitmarsh, Ancient Greek Literature, chapters 11 and 12.

Questions to Consider:
1. Finally, we hear a female voice. What does it bring that we have been missing so far?
2. What do Solon’s and Alcaeus’s poems suggest about the place of the poet and poetry in society?
Lecture Twelve

Tragedy—Contexts and Conventions

Scope: This is the first in a series of 13 lectures that address Athenian tragedy and comedy of the 5th and early 4th centuries. In this lecture, we focus on tragedy as produced by the great tragedians of the period: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. What was it about that place and that time that allowed the birth and development of the genre? After some consideration of the historical and cultural background, we move into a discussion of the festival context in which these plays were performed and some mechanics of their production. We conclude by introducing some of the central components and conventions of Greek tragedy.

Outline

I. Our discussion of tragedy brings us squarely into the 5th century and the city of Athens.
   A. Politically, Athens had been on a course toward democracy, and innovations continued in the 5th century.
      1. Following the tyranny of the family of Peisistratus (535–510), the reforms championed by Cleisthenes weakened the entrenched power of hereditary aristocrats, effectively shifting power toward the people at large.
      2. Athenian government throughout the 5th century consisted largely of an assembly open to all adult male citizens, a representative council of 500, an elaborate legal system, and many administrative positions.
   B. A watershed event in the history of all Greece, and especially Athens, was the defeat of the Persians in 490 and again in 480–479.
      1. The Persians attacked Greece with a large armament in 490. Against all odds, the Athenians, almost single-handedly, turned back that attack with a victory at Marathon, just outside Athens.
      2. The Persians returned 10 years later with an even larger force under Xerxes and were defeated by Athenian forces in a naval battle at Salamis and by Spartan forces in a land battle at Plataea.
   C. In the aftermath of the Persian Wars, Athens set herself up as protector of the Greeks from a continuing Persian threat.
      1. Athens formed the Delian League, with its treasury on the island of Delos. Member states contributed tribute money or ships toward the defense of all.
      2. In 454, the treasury moved to Athens, and funds were used toward the beautification of the city, thus making explicit the position of Athens as an imperial power.
   D. The concentration of optimism, political power, and wealth in Athens brought with it unprecedented artistic, intellectual, and literary innovation.
      1. Intellectuals from throughout the Greek world converged on Athens, bringing new ideas about such burgeoning fields as rhetoric, philosophy, and medicine.
      2. Perhaps the greatest symbol of the ascendancy of Athens is the Parthenon, the temple of the patron deity of Athens that still dominates the skyline.
   E. Later in the century, that Athenian optimism was tempered by the 27-year war between Athens and Sparta, the Peloponnesian War (431–404).
      1. The war brought great hardships to Athenians and, indeed, all Greeks and resulted in the defeat of Athens.
      2. Athenian literature later in the century reflects life during this war.

II. In the environment of Athenian success and optimism early in the century, two dramatic genres came into being and reached their highest level of perfection, tragedy and comedy. Here, we focus on tragedy.
   A. The origins of tragedy are unclear, but they certainly predate the development of democracy in Athens.
      1. Many credit the playwright Thespis, about whom we know very little, with staging the first tragedy in 534.
      2. At the public festivals in honor of Dionysus, a variety of choral performances developed into tragedy.
   B. The most prominent of those festivals was the City Dionysia.
1. Months before the festival, magistrates chose three playwrights, each of whom was to stage three tragedies and one shorter, less serious drama called a *satyr play*.

2. Each of the selected playwrights was then matched with a single wealthy Athenian, whose duty it was to provide financial support for the production of the plays.

3. The festival itself involved ritual celebration of Dionysus that culminated in several days of dramatic performance: one day for comedies and one day each for the three tragic playwrights.

4. Attendance was promoted by the suspension of all civic duties, amnesty for prisoners, and (eventually) a public fund to defray the cost of attendance. Spectators turned out in great numbers and seem to have paid close attention to the performances.

5. After all the performances, judges awarded a prize to the best production. Proud sponsors erected monuments to commemorate victories, and careful records were kept of the prizewinners.

6. Thus, what we consider a lofty and purely literary genre took place in a religious context, required civic support and funding, played to the masses, and had as an immediate objective the winning of a prize.

**III.** The tragedies themselves follow formal patterns of construction and make use of a variety of stage conventions.

A. Except for Aeschylus’s *Persians* (and an earlier play that does not survive), all take their subject matter from myth.

B. The tragedy consists in general terms of a series of episodes divided by choral songs.
   1. All is in verse, the episodes usually in iambic trimeter, a meter that the Greeks said most closely resembled normal speech.
   2. The choral songs are often in complex meters, building on the tradition of choral lyric.

C. The number of participants in the drama, all of them male, was strictly limited.
   1. The number of speaking actors never exceeded 3.
   2. The chorus, a group of 12 and, later, 15 members, represented a communal reaction to the events enacted.

D. The theater space did not allow the sort of fine psychological detail we are used to, especially from film.
   1. In the large outdoor theaters, the distance from the furthest spectator to the actors might have been 100 yards. The spectators sat on curved benches, usually on the side of a natural slope above the performance area.
   2. The chorus sang, danced, and interacted with the actors from a space between the actors and the audience, the orchestra.
   3. There is considerable debate about the use of a raised stage, but the tragedies certainly used a backdrop, with a variable number of doors to represent a variety of buildings and a higher platform for the appearance of gods, heroes, or anyone who needed to speak from a rooftop.
   4. Tragic actors and chorus members wore masks and, thus, had fixed facial expressions for the entire performance.
   5. Stage devices included the *mechane* (*machina* in Latin), a crane that enabled the lowering of an actor from above, as for a *deus ex machina*, and the *ekkyklema*, a wheeled platform that allowed an interior scene to be rolled out for public view.

**IV.** Can we say anything about the nature, the spirit, the essence of tragedy?

A. It is a genre that has had moments of flowering, in a variety of forms, throughout the ages, but it has not been consistently popular.

B. Some have concluded that the modern world, and its view of the divine, has no place for tragedy anymore.

C. Aristotle said that tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and complete. It involves a reversal of fortune, generally a good man suffering because of some mistake, *not* because of some tragic flaw.

D. From another angle, tragedy often involves the necessary choice between equally unpleasant options. We have seen examples of such choices, and we will see more as we study our ancient Greek tragic playwrights.
Supplementary Reading:
Easterling, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, parts I and II.
Storey and Allen, *A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama*, chapters 1, 2, and 5.

Questions to Consider:
1. The 5th century in Athens was one of the greatest flowerings of culture in world history. Consider other such flowerings. What causes them or allows them to happen?
2. Given the many differences between ancient and modern theater production, what might a producer do now to try to re-create the energy of the original performance?
Timeline

**Note:** All dates in this timeline are B.C.E.

**2000–1100** ................. **Bronze Age.**

**1100–800** ...................... **Dark Age.**

**800–490** ......................... **Archaic Period.**

c. 750 .............................. Homeric epics written down; Hesiod’s poems written down; some Homeric Hymns written down.

c. 638 ............................... Birth of Solon.

Late 7th century ............. Archilochus, Sappho, Alcaeus flourish.

558 ................................. Death of Solon.

535–510 ............................ Tyranny of Peisistratus and his sons in Athens.

c. 534 ............................... Thespis produces first tragedy.

525 ................................. Birth of Aeschylus.

c. 505 ............................... Democratic reforms of Cleisthenes in Athens.

496 ................................. Birth of Sophocles.

**490–323** ......................... **Classical Period.**

490 ................................. Battle of Marathon.

c. 484 ............................... Birth of Herodotus.

480 ................................. Battles of Thermopylae and Salamis; birth of Euripides.

479 ................................. Battle of Plataea; defeat of Persians.

472 ................................. Aeschylus, *The Persians.*

c. 460 ............................... Birth of Thucydides.

458 ................................. Aeschylus, the *Oresteia.*

456 ................................. Death of Aeschylus.

454 ................................. Delian League treasury moved to Athens.

c. 450 ............................... Birth of Aristophanes.


c. 440 ............................... Sophocles, *Antigone.*

431–404 ............................ Peloponnesian War.

431 ................................. Euripides, *Medea.*

c. 429 ............................... Birth of Plato.

428 ................................. Euripides, *Hippolytus.*

c. 425 ............................... Death of Herodotus; Sophocles, *Oedipus the King;* Aristophanes, *The Acharnians.*

c. 420 ............................... Euripides, *Electra.*

415................................. Euripides, *Trojan Women*.

411................................. Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*.

409................................. Sophocles, *Philoctetes*.

408................................. Euripides, *Orestes*.

406................................. Death of Euripides; death of Sophocles; Euripides, *The Bacchae*.

405................................. Aristophanes, *The Frogs*.

401................................. Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*.

C. 400............................. Death of Thucydides.

399................................. Execution of Socrates.

C. 385............................. Death of Aristophanes.

384................................. Birth of Demosthenes.

C. 380............................. Death of Lysias.

351................................. Demosthenes, *First Philippic*.

347................................. Death of Plato.

323–31............................... **Hellenistic Period**.

323................................. Death of Alexander of Macedon, called “the Great.”

322................................. Death of Demosthenes.

C. 300................................. Birth of Callimachus; birth of Theocritus.

C. 270................................. Birth of Apollonius of Rhodes.

C. 240................................. Death of Callimachus; death of Theocritus.

C. 210................................. Death of Apollonius of Rhodes.
Glossary

analysts: Homeric critics who argue that the poems are compilations of several different stories or songs, discrete parts that we can distinguish from one another.

Areopagus council: A council established early in Athenian history, probably with particular oversight of murder trials; it was reformed in 462 and figures prominently in Aeschylus’s Oresteia of 458.

aristeia: A hero’s moment of glory on the battlefield, especially seen in the Iliad, when he reveals himself as best, or aristos.

aulos: A double-reeded instrument akin to our oboe, used in accompaniment to some lyric poetry.

City Dionysia: Annual Athenian festival in honor of Dionysus. The celebration included dramatic competitions, perhaps as early as 534.

Delian League: Established as a defensive alliance after the Persian Wars, it gradually turned into an Athenian Empire, as evidenced, for instance, by the transfer of the treasury from Delos to Athens in 454.

deliberative oratory: Also known as political oratory, this refers to the speeches delivered in public assemblies in the polis.

Delphi: Site of the oracle of Apollo, where pilgrims came from all over Greece to learn the future from Apollo’s human mouthpiece, the Pythian priestess.

deus ex machina: Latin for “god from the machine,” the term for the sudden appearance of a god or hero at the end of a play; used to bring resolution to a plot.

ekklyklema: The rolling platform used in Greek drama to bring out before the spectators an interior scene or tableau.

ekphrasis: The description within a literary work of a physical object.

elegiac poetry: Poems written in elegiac couplets, not necessarily mournful or funereal.

epideictic oratory: Oratory for show; a large category of speeches that includes those delivered at funerals, festivals, or other public occasions—outside of the courtroom and the assembly.

epinicians: Poems celebrating athletic victories, composed for public performance by a chorus.

ethopoeia: The ability of a speechwriter to create with language a distinct and sympathetic persona for each of his clients.

forensic oratory: Courtroom speeches, for both prosecution and defense.

Homer: Actually, a series of questions about the authorship of the Homeric epics: Was there a single author? If so, who? When? And by what mechanism?

iambic: Poems that are often (but not always) in iambic meter, marked by erotic themes and sometimes harsh invective.

kleos: Glory or fame, especially after death.

Lesbos: Island in the eastern Aegean; home of the lyric poets Alcaeus and Sappho.

Library of Alexandria: Founded in the 4th century, this was not only the largest collection of books in the ancient Greek world but also a center of scholarly and literary activity.

Marathon: Site north of Athens of a battle in 490. There, the Athenians, with little help from other Greeks, turned back the attack of the Persians under Darius.

mechane: Greek word for the crane used in the Greek theater to lower gods and others onto the stage or the stage building. The Latin translation is machina, hence, deus ex machina.

melic poetry: Any poetry that was sung; from the Greek melos, “song.”
metatheater: A theatrical convention wherein actors call attention to a play’s own theatrical status, commenting on the necessities and practices of the stage; a self-referentiality or awareness of theater as theater.

nostos: Greek for “return,” this term is applied to those stories, such as Homer’s *Odyssey* or Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, that involve the return of a hero to his home after a long absence.

oral-formulaic composition: According to a theory developed in the 20th century, this is the means by which the Homeric poems were produced. Generations of singers passed along the poems orally, with additions, deletions, and modifications appearing in every retelling.

parabasis: The choral song in a Greek comedy during which the chorus comes forward and addresses the audience directly, often on behalf of the playwright.

parodos: The opening choral song of a Greek tragedy, during which the chorus proceeds into the orchestra, where it will operate for the remainder of the play.

Parthenon: The temple of Athena Parthenos, the patron deity of Athens, situated on the Acropolis above Athens and destroyed by the Persians in 480; the one we see now was built from 447–433 during the height of Athenian imperialism.

Peloponnesian War: The war between Athens, with her allies, and Sparta, with her Peloponnesian allies; it lasted from 431–404 and ended with the defeat of Athens.

Persian Wars: The wars between the Greeks and Persians fought in two stages: Darius invaded and was turned back in 490; his son Xerxes invaded in 480 and, after a victory at Thermopylae, was defeated at Salamis in 480 and Plataea in 479.

Plataea: Site in northern Greece of the Greek victory over Xerxes’s land forces in 479.

polis: Greek political unit in the 5th century, often translated as “city-state.”

Potiphar’s wife story: The name taken from the story in Genesis 39 and applied to any story that follows the same pattern: a love triangle in which a woman tries unsuccessfully to seduce the son (or younger friend) of her husband.

priamel: A poetic device in which the author emphasizes a point by contrast, starting with what others think about a particular subject and leading up to the climax of what the author thinks.

Salamis: Island near Athens, off the shores of which the Greeks, led by an Athenian contingent, defeated Xerxes’s Persian navy in 480.

Sicilian expedition: The Athenian invasion of Sicily in 415–413, which took place during a break in the Peloponnesian War (the Peace of Nicias). A large Athenian fleet was completely destroyed.

stichomythia: A rapid-fire verbal exchange in a drama, with each character speaking only one line; often used at moments of heightened tension.

symposium: A semi-formalized male gathering for eating and drinking.

Telemacheia: The name given to the first four books of Homer’s *Odyssey*, because they describe, in part, the coming of age of Odysseus’s son, Telemachus.

Thermopylae: Site of a battle in 480 between the Persians, under Xerxes, and the Greeks, led by a select group of Spartans under King Leonidas. Every Spartan died in the failed attempt to defend a pass.

timē: Honor, especially as measured by outward manifestations, such as war prizes.

Titanomachy: The battle described by Hesiod between the Titans and the Olympians, led by Zeus. The Olympian victory was an essential step toward establishing Zeus as the chief god.

unitarians: Homeric critics who argue that the poems are the unified products of a single poetic genius.

xenia: Greek for hospitality, an important social bond, often lasting for generations between the families of guests and hosts, and overseen by Zeus in his role as the protector of guests.
Masterpieces of Ancient Greek Literature
Part II
Professor David J. Schenker

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David J. Schenker is Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He has been interested in classical literature at least since he was six years old, when his mother took him to see the 1967 production of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. His career took him from Vanderbilt (B.A., 1982); through one year of teaching high school Latin at the Darlington School in Rome, Georgia; to the University of California at Berkeley (M.A., 1985, and Ph.D. in Classics, 1989). He taught two years at Allegheny College before coming to Missouri.

Professor Schenker was a recipient of the 2006 American Philological Association Awards for Excellence in Teaching. He has also won several teaching awards at Missouri, including the Provost’s Outstanding Junior Faculty Teaching Award and the William T. Kemper Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Professor Schenker’s primary area of research interest is Greek literature of the 5th and early 4th centuries B.C.E., with a special focus on Plato and the tragedians, especially Aeschylus. He has published articles on these subjects in several academic journals, such as *Classical Journal*, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, and the *American Journal of Philology*. From 1999–2005, Professor Schenker served as coeditor of the journal *Classical and Modern Literature*. 
# Table of Contents

**Masterpieces of Ancient Greek Literature**

**Part II**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor Biography</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Scope</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Notes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Thirteen Aeschylus I—<em>Persians</em></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Fourteen Aeschylus II—<em>Agamemnon</em></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Fifteen Aeschylus III—<em>Libation Bearers</em> and <em>Eumenides</em></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Sixteen Sophocles I—<em>Ajax</em> and <em>Philoctetes</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Seventeen Sophocles II—<em>Oedipus the King</em></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Eighteen Sophocles III—<em>Oedipus at Colonus</em> and <em>Antigone</em></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Nineteen Euripides I—<em>Electra</em>, <em>Orestes</em>, <em>Trojan Women</em></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty Euripides II—<em>Medea</em> and <em>Hippolytus</em></td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-One Euripides III—<em>The Bacchae</em></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-Two Aristophanes I—Introduction to Old Comedy</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-Three Aristophanes II—<em>Acharnians</em> and <em>Lysistrata</em></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-Four Aristophanes III—<em>The Frogs</em> and <em>The Clouds</em></td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td>Part I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>Part I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical Notes</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>Part III</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Masterpieces of Ancient Greek Literature

Scope:

The best of ancient Greek literature retains a freshness and immediacy that reaches far beyond its time and place of creation and speaks to readers and audience members today. In these 36 lectures, we discuss selections from that group of masterpieces, starting in every case with the cultural and historical background of each, then focusing on close readings of the works themselves. A guiding principle throughout is that these are not museum pieces to be venerated because of their age, but works of great literature that remain compelling, meaningful, and enjoyable. The organization of the course is largely chronological; in a few places, we break from that order to bring together works of similar genre.

We begin with definitions of the key words in the title of the course—ancient, Greek, and literary masterpieces—then move into six lectures on Homer’s two epics: Lectures Two through Four on the *Iliad* and Lectures Five through Seven on the *Odyssey*. We briefly consider the method of their composition, then move through the epics book by book, highlighting the primary themes and poetic devices of each. The *Iliad* is indeed a moving war story, and the *Odyssey* is full of adventure and intrigue, and that narrative force is enough to qualify these epics as masterpieces. Beyond that, though, they both confront timeless questions and problems that define our human condition. For us, as for the ancient Greeks, these two poems serve as foundation for all that follows.

Lectures Eight and Nine focus on works contemporary, or nearly so, with the Homeric poems: Hesiod’s didactic epics *Theogony* and *Works and Days* and the poems, authorship unknown, collectively called the Homeric Hymns. These works are central to our understanding of early Greek myth but can also stand on their own for their literary and artistic value.

In Lectures Ten and Eleven, we cover considerable ground, geographically and chronologically, with a discussion of the large and varied collection referred to as lyric poetry. The richness of this corpus makes generalization difficult: These poems are metrically varied, often reflective rather than narrative, typically fairly short, and intended for a wide variety of purposes and contexts. Representative authors include Archilochus, Solon, Sappho, and Alcaeus.

A large section of the course, Lectures Twelve through Twenty-Four, covers the drama of 5th- and early 4th-century Athens, both tragedy and comedy. We survey the historical and dramaturgical context of the plays in Lecture Twelve, then devote three lectures to each of the four major playwrights of the period. For Aeschylus, we look at *The Persians* in Lecture Thirteen, then discuss his trilogy, the *Oresteia*, in Lectures Fourteen and Fifteen. For Sophocles, Lecture Sixteen introduces two plays, *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*; then, we go into greater depth with the three plays that center on the story of Oedipus: *Oedipus the King* in Lecture Seventeen and *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone* in Lecture Eighteen. The corpus of extant tragedies by Euripides is larger. We look briefly at *Electra*, *Orestes*, and *Trojan Women* in Lecture Nineteen, then, choosing depth over breadth, we focus on three more of his works: *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, and *The Bacchae* in Lectures Twenty and Twenty-One. Our sole representative of Old Comedy, Aristophanes, takes us into the early 4th century. We discuss the genre in Lecture Twenty-Two, then, in Lectures Twenty-Three and Twenty-Four, look at several of the extant comedies as illustrations of his technique.

We turn next to two historians, with no apologies for including their works as literary masterpieces. Herodotus’s *Histories* (Lectures Twenty-Five and Twenty-Six) is, in fact, much more than that. Using the Greek-Persian conflict as an organizing principle, Herodotus gives us an account of his world that is stamped both by Homeric models and by his own particular vision. Thucydides’s masterpiece *The History of the Peloponnesian War* does indeed give us a straightforward narrative of the events of that war but also stands, as the author himself claims, as a possession for all time. In Lectures Twenty-Seven through Twenty-Nine, we consider passages from *The History* that illustrate Thucydides’s views of the effects of war, international politics, and human nature more generally.

The next three lectures (Thirty through Thirty-Two) bring us into contact with an author who would seem to reject the whole idea of studying literary masterpieces. Plato’s characters often speak of the shortcomings of the poets and storytellers, yet the artistry of his own dialogues belies that attitude toward literature. Lecture Thirty introduces the idea of Plato as a literary author, rather than simply a philosopher, with examples drawn from throughout his corpus. We then look in greater detail at two of the most polished of his literary creations, *Symposium* (Lecture Thirty-One) and *Phaedrus* (Lecture Thirty-Two).
Moving into a genre often maligned in Plato’s dialogues, we consider, in Lecture Thirty-Three, the literary merits of some of the greatest orators of the 5th and 4th centuries, drawing examples from the speeches of Lysias and Demosthenes.

Thanks in large part to the conquests of Alexander the Great, literary production in the 4th century shifts away from the Greek mainland to the city of Alexandria in northern Africa. In Lectures Thirty-Four and Thirty-Five, we discuss the work of three poets of the Hellenistic Age: one of Callimachus’s hymns, Theocritus’s pastoral poetry, and the epic of Apollonius.

The final lecture (Thirty-Six) gives us an opportunity to look back at the primary themes and developments raised in the course of the lectures and forward to the influence of these masterpieces, most immediately on the Romans and, through them, on much of the Western world.
Course Notes

All dates in the course are B.C.E. unless otherwise indicated.

All Essential Readings listed after the lectures in this booklet are primary sources. If no Essential Readings are listed for a particular lecture, then no primary sources are required reading for that lecture.
Lecture Thirteen

Aeschylus I—Persians

Scope: In this lecture, we discuss the life and some aspects of the dramatic technique of Aeschylus, the oldest of the three great Athenian tragedians. We then look at the earliest of his extant plays, The Persians, produced in 472. The Persians enacts the aftermath of the Greek victory over the Persians at Salamis, remarkably, from the Persian point of view. This play presents challenges to the modern reader and audience: It is static by contemporary theatrical standards, contains lengthy scenes of lamentation, and the language can be dense. Was the play meant simply to congratulate the Athenians on their victory by showing the suffering of their defeated foe? Or was it a warning of sorts against Athenian tendencies toward imperialism? Beyond those more topical concerns, the play comments on a moral situation that has more general application—a warning to those who reach too far. We conclude this lecture by looking at some of the techniques in this play that we might call characteristically Aeschylean.

Outline

I. Aeschylus (525–456) lived and worked in Athens but moved to Sicily late in life, where he died.
   A. We know from his epitaph that he fought at Marathon in 490 and probably also at Salamis 10 years later.
   B. Sources suggest that he wrote between 70 and 90 plays in his career. We have 7 plays (although the authorship of one of those is questionable) and many fragments.
      1. Early plays are The Persians (472), Seven against Thebes (467), and Suppliant Women (c. 463).
      2. The Oresteia is our only trilogy extant from antiquity. All three plays were performed on the same day in 458, followed by a satyr play, Proteus, which is lost.
      3. The seventh surviving play, Prometheus Bound, was possibly a late work or might have been composed by Aeschylus’s son in the style of his father.
   C. Although we have plays only from the end of Aeschylus’s career, we can still see some development of his style.
      1. Stage sets also seem to become more elaborate, as later plays require more complex entrances and exits.
      2. Earlier having used only one or two actors in dialogue with the chorus, by the time of the Oresteia, Aeschylus uses three speaking actors in some scenes.
      3. Even with this increasing use of the actors, the chorus remains of central importance in the plays of Aeschylus.
   D. Aeschylus’s plays were highly successful and popular. They won many victories during his lifetime, and they were often restaged after his death.
      1. Even so, they were characterized as lofty and almost unintelligible at times.
      2. Even in antiquity, other authors, such as Aristophanes, noted the difficulty of Aeschylus’s language.

II. In 472, only eight years after the Athenian victory over the Persians at Salamis, Aeschylus presented The Persians, a dramatization of the aftereffects of that battle from the Persian perspective.
   A. The play is named for the chorus of Persian elders who, at the start of the play, are awaiting news of the great expedition to Greece.
      1. In the parodos, the introductory choral song, they emphasize the wealth and size of the Persian armament as they catalogue the names of leaders and describe the golden trappings.
      2. But already there is an undercurrent of dread or foreboding. Has Xerxes overstepped the bounds of proper behavior?
   B. The Queen, mother of Xerxes, enters with great pomp, having been disturbed by a dream that bodes ill for Persia and her son.
      1. She dreamed she saw two women, one Persia and the other Greece, and her son trying unsuccessfully to yoke them together to a chariot.
      2. Earlier, we heard that Xerxes had yoked the Hellespont, throwing a bridge over it in order to take his troops into Europe.
3. As the Queen is preparing to leave the stage, she and the chorus engage in a rapid-fire exchange that adds to the sense of doom and foreboding. This sort of exchange, with each character speaking only one line, is called *stichomythia* and is often used at moments of heightened tension.

C. Fulfilling the Queen’s foreboding, a herald arrives with news of the destruction of the Persians at Salamis.
   1. He lists names, echoing the earlier choral catalogue, but now they are names of the dead.
   2. We hear of Athenian strategy and their spirited defense only from the perspective of those defeated by them.

D. After lamentation by the chorus, the Queen asks them to call up from the dead the ghost of her husband, Darius.
   1. Darius sees in the Persian defeat a fulfillment of a prophecy, a plan of the gods brought to fruition through the behavior of Xerxes.
   2. He also foretells the continuing destruction of the Persians remaining in Greece.

E. Finally, Xerxes appears, in rags, and the play ends with a lengthy lamentation between Xerxes and the chorus.

III. This is the only extant tragedy not based on a mythological theme, and it has been interpreted variously.

A. Clearly, the play is a commentary on the recent Athenian victory and its aftermath.
   1. The Athenians were certainly proud of their victory, but showing the suffering of the defeated hardly seems the best way to express that pride.
   2. Some have seen in the defeat of the Persians a message to the Athenians about their own growing empire.

B. More generally, the play enacts a theme we have already encountered in the poetry of Solon: Those who reach too far are doomed to fail.
   1. Aeschylus builds to this theme through an emphasis on the size, the wealth, and the confidence of the Persian forces.
   2. The downfall comes before us three times: in the herald’s report of the defeat; in Darius’s reflections on Xerxes’s errors; and finally, in Xerxes’s own stunning appearance in rags.

IV. Already in *The Persians*, we can detect certain dramatic techniques that mark all the extant plays of Aeschylus.

A. Reflecting the early date of this play, and the origins of tragedy, most of the dialogue takes place between the chorus and one actor, but we do have two scenes with two actors.

B. Aeschylus was noted for his effective use of spectacle, the way things look on stage, and there are several memorable examples in this play.
   1. The Queen arrives in regal array, with a retinue from the palace, in stark contrast to Xerxes’s later entrance alone and in rags.
   2. The appearance of the ghost of Darius was noted long after the performance as a memorable theatrical moment.

C. Aeschylus often builds patterns of imagery that persist throughout a work or, in the case of the *Oresteia*, an entire trilogy.
   1. We have already noted his use of the language for yoking, applied both to crossing the Hellespont and to the Queen’s dream.
   2. As well, the play begins with repeated references to the gold, riches, and multitudes of Persian soldiers.
   3. Those same words and ideas take on different meaning later in the play, when the wealth is lost, as manifest in Xerxes’s rags, and the multitudes are dead, leaving Persia emptied of her youth.

**Essential Reading:**
Aeschylus, *The Persians*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Harrison, *The Emptiness of Asia: Aeschylus’ Persians and the History of the Fifth Century*. 

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Questions to Consider:
1. Consider a question raised in the lecture: Why does Aeschylus dramatize the Athenian victory from the perspective of the defeated Persians?
2. This play is fairly static, without much action on the stage. How does Aeschylus make up for the lack of incident?
Lecture Fourteen
Aeschylus II—Agamemnon

Scope: In this lecture and the next, we discuss Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, the only tragic trilogy that survives intact from antiquity. We start with an introduction to the mythical background, filling in the story of the House of Atreus that the original audience would have already known. The majority of the lecture is then devoted to the first play of the trilogy, *Agamemnon*. The play stands on its own as a monument of poetic and theatrical brilliance and introduces the many interwoven themes and questions that will continue throughout the trilogy: What is justice or just behavior? What is the role of the gods in enforcing that justice? To whom do we owe primary loyalty: the gods, our state, our family? What happens when those loyalties come into conflict?

Outline

I. The *Oresteia*, our only surviving trilogy from antiquity, is a treatment of part of the mythological tradition centered in Argos and Mycenae. The Athenian audience would have known the mythological background to Aeschylus’s version, so it is useful to start with a brief review of that.
   A. The great-grandfather of Agamemnon, Tantalus, had tried (unsuccessfully) to fool the gods at a dinner by serving them his own son Pelops.
      1. The gods punished Tantalus for this, sending him to the Underworld, where he stood in a pool of clear, cool water but was unable to drink.
      2. Later Pelops, whom the gods reconstituted, and his entire family were cursed for killing the man who helped him win his bride.
   B. Pelops had two sons, Atreus and Thyestes, each of whom claimed the right to be king.
      1. Thyestes seduced Atreus’s wife; Atreus retaliated with the infamous “feast of Thyestes.” He served his brother many of his own children in a stew.
      2. One son of Thyestes who missed the feast was Aegisthus.
   C. The sons of Atreus, Menelaus and Agamemnon, ruled jointly in Argos in Aeschylus’s version.
      1. They were married to sisters: Clytemnestra for Agamemnon and Helen for Menelaus.
      2. The abduction of Helen set them on the way to the Trojan War.
      3. Under Agamemnon’s leadership, all the Greeks gathered at Aulis to set sail against Troy, but the winds were adverse and kept them in port.
      4. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia in order to appease Artemis and win favorable winds for the Greeks.

II. Our trilogy starts in Argos, at the moment of the fall of Troy, 10 years after Iphigeneia was sacrificed at Aulis and the great armament sailed against Troy.
   A. In *Agamemnon*, the first play of the trilogy, Agamemnon returns home to Argos with his war prize, Cassandra, only to be killed by his wife, Clytemnestra, with the help of her consort, Aegisthus.
   B. In the second play, *The Libation Bearers*, Agamemnon’s children Electra and Orestes avenge their father by killing their mother, Clytemnestra, and Aegisthus.
   C. The third play, *The Eumenides* (translated as *The Furies*) brings the bloodshed to an end by transferring the site of vengeance from the family to the city and, specifically, to a court in Athens.
   D. Unlike Sophocles and Euripides, Aeschylus seems to have preferred the trilogy format; it allows for the development of the same story, with some of the same themes, images, and characters, over a larger span.

III. *Agamemnon* enacts Clytemnestra’s deceptive murder of Agamemnon, and especially in its long choral sections, the play introduces the imagery and the theme of justice that will be central throughout the trilogy.
   A. Structurally, this play is a *nostos* story, about the return of Agamemnon from Troy, but the contrast with Odysseus’s *nostos* is striking.
   B. The play opens in darkness, with a watchman waiting for and finally sighting the beacon that signals the end of the Trojan War.
C. The parodos sung by the chorus of Argive elders sets the tone for all that follows. As in *The Persians*, a group of loyal citizens awaits, with some foreboding, the return of their king from battle.

1. Reflecting on the war, the members of the chorus support Agamemnon and see the expedition to Troy as justified, even sanctioned by Zeus.
2. Yet they recognize the cost of war, all for the sake of one woman.
3. They also recall Agamemnon’s choice at Aulis, between killing his daughter Iphigeneia or disbanding the army. As often in tragic situations, each choice brings with it dire consequences.

D. While the chorus fluctuates between support and foreboding, Clytemnestra appears forceful and effective from the start.

1. Within moments of the fall of Troy, she has the news, by way of a relay of beacons from Troy to Argos.
2. Thus, when Agamemnon’s herald arrives from Troy by a more conventional route, she has no need for his news and little patience with his report.
3. When Agamemnon finally arrives, halfway through the play, she manipulates him into entering the house on her own terms, treading against his will on fine fabrics dyed blood red.

E. Cassandra, a war prize brought back from Troy by Agamemnon, uses her prophetic powers—powers that no one will believe—to see bloodshed both past and future in the house.

1. She recognizes that horrors, particularly the feast of Thyestes, have taken place in the house in past generations.
2. And she foresees the imminent deaths of Agamemnon and herself, yet she enters the palace anyway.
3. The members of the chorus do not understand or believe her.

F. The murders of Agamemnon and Cassandra take place offstage, but Clytemnestra appears over the bodies on the *ekkyklema*, exulting in the deed, at least at first.

1. Clytemnestra finally speaks openly and claims full responsibility for the murder, even describing it as a sacrifice to Zeus.
2. In response to the chorus’s outrage, she justifies the act primarily as a proper return for Agamemnon’s killing of Iphigeneia.
3. This principle of revenge, that the doer should suffer, contains unpleasant implications for Clytemnestra, and her uneasiness prepares us for the second play in the trilogy.

IV. In moving to the other two plays in the trilogy, we might keep some questions in mind.

A. If the expedition to Troy was sanctioned by the gods, was Agamemnon right to kill his daughter? Or is Clytemnestra justified in killing the killer of her daughter?

B. What happens when the demands of society come into conflict with the demands of the family?

C. Is there some sort of divine plan or order behind these deeds, and if so, what does it portend for the future?

**Essential Reading:**

Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*.

**Supplementary Reading:**


Goldhill, *Aeschylus: The Oresteia*.


**Questions to Consider:**

1. Women in Aeschylus’s Athens had little public power, yet a woman is clearly the most powerful figure in this play. Why might that be? (You might reconsider this question after reading the next two plays.)

2. This chorus has an unusually large role. What do the choral songs add to the play? Consider both their content and their place within the action of the play.
Lecture Fifteen

Aeschylus III—Libation Bearers and Eumenides

Scope: Aeschylus continues to explore the themes of Agamemnon in the second and third plays of the trilogy, The Libation Bearers and The Eumenides. Libation Bearers replays much of the action of the first play, underscoring visually as well as poetically the cyclical nature of violence: The dead Agamemnon and Cassandra are replaced here by the dead Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Again, the killer has been killed. Where will the violence end? We enter a new world in the third play, with deities on the stage and in the chorus. The play culminates in the trial of Orestes for the murder of his mother. His acquittal brings an end to the cycle of violence, but at what cost? The conclusion of the play celebrates the transfer of vengeance from the family to the city, but patches of darkness remain amidst the light. In the final part of the lecture, we look back over the trilogy and consider possible interpretations.

Outline

I. Libation Bearers replays in many ways the action of the first play, thereby underlining the idea of inescapable and repeating doom.
   A. Some time has passed since the action of the previous play.
   B. Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, appears onstage with his friend Pylades. Clytemnestra had sent Orestes away while Agamemnon was in Troy, for safekeeping, she said, but also to get him out of the way of her plot. Orestes has now returned. He cuts a lock of hair for his father’s grave, but he sees someone coming and hides.
   C. It is a chorus of slave women loyal to Agamemnon as well as Electra, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.
      1. Clytemnestra has had a nightmare that prompts her to send libations, liquid offerings, to the grave of Agamemnon.
      2. Electra and the chorus of women bring the libations, all the while expressing their desire for revenge against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.
      3. Electra longs for the return of her brother Orestes, unaware that he is hiding onstage all the while.
   D. There follows a famous recognition scene between the siblings, as Electra recognizes Orestes first by his hair, then by his footprints, and finally, by a piece of weaving.
   E. As in the previous play, a plan is developed to carry out the murders.
      1. Electra, Orestes, and the chorus sing at length about their grief and anger at the death of Agamemnon and the need for revenge.
      2. The plan itself is briefly formulated. Unlike in the first play, we are on the side of the deceivers now.
   F. Orestes and Pylades disguise themselves as travelers, bringing news of the death of Orestes.
      1. When they tell this news to Clytemnestra, she expresses grief.
      2. However, an old nurse soon appears and suggests that Clytemnestra was putting on a sad face to hide her real joy—she has no need to worry about retribution from Orestes.
      3. Orestes is invited inside the house.
   G. After he kills Aegisthus, Orestes confronts his mother onstage.
      1. Despite all of his preparation, he hesitates when confronted with the actuality of killing his mother.
      2. In a surprise move, Orestes’s hitherto silent friend Pylades speaks up, reminding Orestes that the god Apollo, called here by his cult name Loxias, has commanded him to carry out the deed.
      3. Orestes is faced here with impossible choices: disobey the gods and his own desire for revenge, or kill his own mother. As his father, Agamemnon, did at Aulis, Orestes obeys the gods, even at heavy cost to his family.
   H. The play ends with Orestes on the ekkyklema standing over two bodies, one male and one female, in a repetition of the tableau that ended the first play.
      1. Orestes, though, is almost immediately defensive about the rightness of his act.
2. The avenging spirits of his mother appear—but only to Orestes—and hound him off the stage to end this play and set up the next.

II. *Eumenides*, the third play in the trilogy, breaks this cycle of violence in surprising ways. Whereas the second play had reenacted some of the scenes and actions of the first, this third play is a complete departure, in every way imaginable.

A. The scene has shifted to Delphi, where a priestess of Apollo speaks the prologue.
   1. The priestess enters the temple and quickly comes out, terrified: The Furies, those avenging spirits, have taken up residence in Apollo’s temple, hunting their prey, Orestes.
   2. Apollo appears, the first time we have seen a god onstage in this trilogy. The god promises to protect Orestes but not at Delphi. He advises Orestes to go off to Athens, where Athena will look after him.
   3. The Furies, the avenging spirits of Clytemnestra who were visible in the previous play only to Orestes, are now the members of the chorus.
   4. The Furies confront Apollo and claim that it is their right to take vengeance on those who shed kindred blood. Apollo can’t argue with the duty of the Furies but promises to keep supporting Orestes.

B. The scene shifts to Athens, where Athena, too, refuses to settle the dispute herself.
   1. She establishes a court on the hill of the Areopagus and appoints a jury of Athenian citizens.
   2. This play thus explains the origin of the court of the Areopagus, an actual homicide court in Athens.

C. The trial itself pits Orestes, with Apollo as counsel, against the prosecuting Furies, with Athena as judge. The Athenian citizens are the jury.
   1. Orestes admits the killing but quickly turns to Apollo for help in justifying his actions.
   2. Apollo establishes his credibility by claiming that he always tells the truth. He argues that killing a man, especially a victorious general, is much worse than killing a woman and that it is much worse to kill a father than a mother. He clinches his argument with the claim that a woman is no real parent, just a convenient receptacle.
   3. The Athenian jurors cast their votes, and the result is a tie.
   4. Athena, who was born from the head of her father, Zeus, supports Apollo’s questionable biology lesson and breaks the tie by casting a vote in favor of acquitting Orestes.
   5. At issue more generally is a dichotomy set up throughout the play between males and male gods on one side and women, both mortal and divine, on the other.

D. After the trial, the Furies threaten to destroy Athens.
   1. Athena deflects their anger by offering them a home in Athens, not as Furies but as Eumenides, “Kindly Ones.” And, by the way, she reminds them that she has access to her father’s thunderbolts.
   2. The Furies are persuaded, and now called the Eumenides, they join in a general celebration that ends the trilogy.

III. Interpretations of this trilogy have been various, focusing both on its immediate context and on larger issues.

A. There is particular relevance of this trilogy to its time and place of production.
   1. In 461, as tensions grew between Athens and Sparta, Athens had joined an alliance with Argos, a former ally of Sparta. By situating the family of Atreus in Argos rather than in Mycenae, Aeschylus is then able to lend mythological support to the friendship between Athens and Argos.
   2. Just before the performance of the trilogy, there was considerable talk about reforming one of the oldest Athenian civic institutions, the court of the Areopagus. The issue was hotly debated, and one of the reformers was killed in 461. Given that we know few details about that reform, opinions differ about the trilogy as a commentary on it.

B. If we look at the trilogy more generally, the most traditional reading is to take it as a movement from family revenge to the celebration of a legal system possible only in a *polis* setting. The trilogy, in this view, enacts central aspects of the founding of the *polis*.
   1. In particular, we start in the world of the Trojan War and monarchy, looking backward to the effects of ingrained family traditions.
   2. By the end, we have moved to an Athens with citizens involved in the decision-making process and the establishment of a jury trial.
3. What had appeared to be an endless series of killings has found a solution in the impartial civic forum. Darkness at the beginning has yielded to light.

C. But there are some difficulties with such a clear and straightforward reading.

1. Many readers are disturbed that the acquittal of Orestes implies, on many levels, the favoring of male over female interests: Agamemnon and Orestes over Iphigeneia and Clytemnestra, Apollo and the masculine Athena over the Furies, and finally, the city over the family.

2. More particularly, the trial itself is hardly a ringing endorsement of the jury system: The jurors’ vote is split, and the final decision is based on less-than-persuasive arguments.

3. Orestes’s acquittal solves no problems but allows them to go away. The best response to the trilogy might be to recognize the insolubility of the issues it raises.

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

**Supplementary Reading:**
Conacher, *Aeschylus’ Oresteia: A Literary Commentary*, chapters 2 and 3.
Zeitlin, “The Dynamics of Misogyny in the *Oresteia*.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. What does each of the three plays gain by its incorporation within the trilogy? Does each play work individually, apart from its association with the other two?

2. The end of the trilogy raises any number of questions—about the justice of the decision, the treatment of women, and Aeschylus’s attitude toward the *polis*. Does it supply answers to any of them?
Lecture Sixteen
Sophocles I—Ajax and Philoctetes

Scope: Sophocles, the younger contemporary of Aeschylus, was the most popular and successful of the three playwrights during the 5th century. We begin this lecture with an introduction to his life and some of the innovations and techniques of his drama; then, we look at two of his seven extant plays, Ajax and Philoctetes. Both of these plays present us with a prototypical Sophoclean hero, unwavering in the face of all obstacles, even to the point of death. Ajax, one of the greatest of the Greeks at Troy, decides that he cannot live with disgrace and kills himself. Philoctetes refuses to help the Greeks who had abandoned him on a deserted island, even though that assistance would bring a cure for his own disease. Because each of these plays has a Trojan War setting and a largely Homeric cast of characters, they are able to offer a reflection on the place of Homeric values in Sophocles’s contemporary world.

Outline

I. Sophocles (496–406) had a long and successful career, not only on the stage but in Athenian political life, as well.
   A. His theater career began in 468, and his final play was produced posthumously in 401.
      1. Sources suggest that Sophocles wrote about 120 plays and won numerous victories at the dramatic competitions. Seven of his tragedies are extant.
      2. Dating is not secure for most of Sophocles’s extant works, but the earliest seems to be Ajax (440s), followed by Antigone (c. 440), Trachinian Women (c. 430), Oedipus the King (420s), and Electra (410s). Philoctetes was performed in 409 and Oedipus at Colonus posthumously in 401.
   B. Sophocles was one of the city’s treasurers in 443, elected a general in 441, and served as a religious official in 420 and as one of the magistrates appointed in the crisis of 413.
   C. Even our small sample of extant works reveals that Sophocles’s dramatic technique is different in some ways from that of Aeschylus.
      1. Aristotle credits Sophocles with introducing the third speaking actor, a technique that Sophocles uses more often than Aeschylus, leading to more flexibility and more naturalistic exchanges onstage. At the same time, there is less use of the chorus than we saw in Aeschylus’s plays.
      2. The language is for the most part less grandiose, more easily translatable into English.
      3. The plots, especially in some of the later plays, are more intricate than what we saw in Aeschylus.
      4. Sophocles often centers his tragedy on a strikingly memorable individual, the so-called Sophoclean hero. This individual is strong-willed, single-minded, unyielding, and not always likable or admirable.

II. Ajax (440s) centers on the great Trojan War hero whose physical and unsophisticated style of heroism appears as admirable but out of date.
   A. In the mythical accounts, Ajax was a straightforward fighting man. Odysseus, known for a very different sort of heroism, defeated Ajax in a contest for the armor of Achilles.
   B. Sophocles picks up the story as Ajax responds to his defeat by attempting to kill the Greek leaders. Athena, protecting her favorite, Odysseus, has stolen Ajax’s wits and deflected his murderous wrath against farm animals instead.
      1. Even in Ajax’s moment of humiliation, surrounded by the victims of his lunatic rage, his enemy, Odysseus, recognizes the frailty of all humans.
      2. Sophocles continues to build our sympathy for Ajax, despite his murderous intentions, by presenting him through a sympathetic chorus and through Tecmessa, a Trojan woman who is now the loving consort of Ajax.
   C. Having left the stage after intimating unflinchingly that suicide is his only option, Ajax returns and delivers a more reflective speech to Tecmessa that suggests, to her at least, otherwise.
      1. This is one form of dramatic irony, and no one does it better than Sophocles.
      2. We identify dramatic irony when a character says something onstage that the audience understands even more fully than other characters or even the one speaking.
D. The scene changes, and we watch Ajax as he fixes his sword in the ground, prays to the gods, then falls on the sword.

E. The remainder of the play still centers on Ajax and what he stands for. At issue now is how to treat his body.
   1. Ajax’s brother Teucer, of course, wants to bury the body with proper honors.
   2. The Greek leaders Menelaus and Agamemnon would treat him as a traitor, leaving the body to rot because Ajax thought more of his personal honor than of the good of the Greeks.
   3. Only Odysseus, again recognizing the greatness of Ajax, is able to persuade the leaders to bury him as the hero he was.

F. We leave the play appreciating Odysseus’s capacity for generosity, as well as the awesome power and nobility of Ajax, a Homeric hero, but recognizing, too, that Ajax is out of place in any sort of communal structure.

III. Philoctetes (409) serves as another reflection on different types of heroism, again in a Trojan War context.

A. The Greeks, encouraged by Odysseus, had abandoned Philoctetes on a deserted island because of a disgusting and distressing wound to his foot.
   1. The Greeks learn, though, that only with the help of Philoctetes and the bow of Herakles that he possesses will they be able take Troy. We also learn that Philoctetes will be healed only if he rejoins the Greeks.
   2. Thus, an embassy is sent to retrieve him. Odysseus leads, but because Philoctetes hates him so much, he brings as spokesman Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles.

B. As the son of Achilles, it is Neoptolemus’s nature to be direct and forceful rather than deceptive.
   1. Odysseus has other ideas and convinces Neoptolemus that deception is best. In a complex and intricate plot, we see Neoptolemus reluctantly adopting the deceptive manner of Odysseus and trying to trick Philoctetes into coming with them.
   2. Just as Odysseus’s trick is working, Neoptolemus, with the bow of Herakles in his hands, reverts to his true nature, reveals all to Philoctetes, returns the bow, and promises to take Philoctetes home to Greece instead of to Troy.
   3. Everyone in the audience knows that the myth ends differently: Philoctetes has to go to Troy, use the bow, get cured, and help the Greeks take Troy, but we go along with Sophocles’s version.

C. The play thus seems a clear triumph for the old values of Achilles against the cleverness of Odysseus.
   1. Philoctetes has persisted successfully in his hatred, even though his only hope for a cure is in Troy.
   2. But the play ends with an about-face. Herakles appears, as a deus ex machina, and orders Philoctetes to go with Neoptolemus and Odysseus to Troy. As the myth demands, Philoctetes goes.
   3. Thus, we have two different endings to the play.
      a. One arises in which Philoctetes does not budge from his resolve, Neoptolemus finally comes back to his true nature, and Odysseus has failed. In this ending, we have a victory for old-fashioned honesty, with Odysseus losing out.
      b. The other ending has Philoctetes changing his mind for his own good.
   4. In terms of character or heroic temperament, Sophocles brings to the stage both the hotheaded intransigence of Philoctetes and the manipulative changeability of Odysseus, and we see the strengths and flaws of both extremes.

Essential Reading:
Sophocles, Ajax and Philoctetes.

Supplementary Reading:
Hesk, Sophocles: Ajax.
Kitto, Form and Meaning in Drama: A Study of Six Greek Plays and of Hamlet, chapters 4 and 6.
Questions to Consider:
1. Many critics claim that the second part of *Ajax*, after the hero’s death, is too long. Do you agree? What does that section add to the play as a whole?
2. Odysseus appears in both of these plays. How does Sophocles’s treatment of him compare to Homer’s?
Lecture Seventeen
Sophocles II—Oedipus the King

Scope: Sophocles did not produce his three Theban plays as a trilogy, but it is useful to consider them together because they follow the same story, the career of Oedipus and his descendants in Thebes. This lecture introduces that mythological background, then moves into Sophocles’s treatment of the early part of the myth in Oedipus the King. That play is often hailed as the high point of ancient drama, engaging viewers and readers alike with its tight plot construction and its layers of dramatic irony. Freud famously offered one explanation for the popularity of the play. Other interpretations focus on Sophocles’s creation of a self-sufficient man who brings about his own demise, an intellectual hero whose questioning reveals his own ignorance. Those interpretations speak to issues current in 5th-century Athens, but they also raise questions more generally about the proper limits of human inquiry and the relation between fate and free will.

Outline

I. Sophocles’s three plays on the Oedipus story are not a connected trilogy but were written over the span of his career. We consider them in mythological order.
   A. Oedipus the King (420s) begins with Oedipus in power at Thebes and ends with his realization that he has killed his father and married his mother.
   B. Oedipus at Colonus (401) starts with Oedipus blind, homeless, and except for his daughters Antigone and Ismene, friendless. By the end of the play, he has been welcomed in Colonus, near Athens, where he meets a mysterious end.
   C. Antigone (c. 440) takes us back to Thebes and the aftermath of a battle between Oedipus’s sons Eteocles and Polynices. Both died in the battle, and Antigone, in defiance of the new king, Creon, is determined that each should receive proper burial.

II. The mythological background to Oedipus the King comes out only gradually in the course of the play.
   A. Oedipus’s father, Laius, king of Thebes, was cursed: His son will grow up to kill his father (Laius) and marry his mother.
   B. Laius marries Iocasta, they do have a son, and they send him out to be exposed on Mount Cithaeron, between Thebes and Corinth.
   C. But the shepherd entrusted with exposing the child instead gives the baby to a shepherd from Corinth.
   D. King Polybus and his wife, Merope, raise Oedipus in Corinth.
   E. Oedipus learns from the oracle of Apollo that he is destined to kill his father and marry his mother, and he flees Corinth.
   F. At a crossroads, he skirmishes with an older man (who turns out to be Laius) and kills him.
   G. Oedipus arrives in Thebes, where a sphinx plagues the city. Oedipus rids Thebes of the sphinx by successfully answering her riddle. In return, he is made king of the city and given in marriage the queen, Iocasta (who turns out to be his mother).

III. Oedipus the King is not a play about Oedipus’s atrocious deeds but about his coming to realize he has committed them.
   A. Sophocles starts when Oedipus is firmly ensconced as the successful savior and king of Thebes, unaware that he has killed his father and is married to his mother.
      1. Thebes is again suffering from a plague.
      2. A priest pleads for help from Oedipus, reminding him of his past help.
      3. Oedipus, anticipating the pleas, has already sent his brother-in-law Creon to seek information from the oracle of Apollo at Delphi.
   B. Oedipus learns that Thebes is plagued because the murderer of the previous king is still at large.
      1. With dramatic irony, he calls down curses on the murderer and any who might be harboring him.
2. In another scene thick with irony, the blind prophet Teiresias announces that Oedipus himself is guilty of the murder and of much more. But Oedipus refuses to hear or believe him.

C. Oedipus’s wife (and mother), Iocasta, trying to convince Oedipus that prophecies are unreliable, describes how Laius died, not at all as prophesied.
   1. Hearing those details, Oedipus wonders if, in fact, he is the one who killed Laius.
   2. There is only one survivor of the skirmish at the crossroads, and he is summoned.
   3. Oedipus only now fills in his background, telling how he came to Thebes from Corinth.

D. We expect the entry of the sole surviving witness, but instead, a messenger from Corinth comes onstage.
   1. He announces that Polybus is dead and that Oedipus is to be the next king of Corinth.
   2. Oedipus hesitates to return to Corinth because his mother, Merope, is still alive, and he is fated to marry her.
   3. The messenger assures Oedipus that Merope and Polybus are not his parents. He knows this because he, the messenger from Corinth, is also the very shepherd who once received the baby Oedipus from the Theban shepherd.
   4. Oedipus is now eager to determine his true parentage, but Iocasta, guessing the truth, tries to stop him. Having failed, she runs offstage, never to be seen alive again.

E. Now the survivor of the attack on Laius enters.
   1. In another great coincidence, this shepherd is also the very man who took the baby Oedipus up the mountain and handed him off to the man from Corinth.
   2. At first reluctant to reveal what he knows, under threat of torture, the Theban shepherd reveals that Oedipus is, in fact, the child of Iocasta and Laius.

F. Oedipus leaves the stage in anguish, realizing that he has fulfilled what was prophesied. We hear from a messenger what happens inside.
   1. Oedipus discovers that Iocasta has hanged herself.
   2. With her long brooches, he violently blinds himself.

G. Back onstage, the blinded Oedipus blames the gods for all that has happened but claims personal responsibility for his blinding.

H. The play ends with Oedipus planning to head off into exile.

IV. The play has prompted a wide variety of questions and interpretations.
   A. Many have looked for some sort of divine justice in this play, some flaw in Oedipus’s character that made him deserve all this suffering. But most conclude that he is more mistaken than flawed.
   B. Sigmund Freud famously argued that the play is so successful because it enacts a desire shared by all males, to kill the father and sleep with the mother—the Oedipus complex.
      1. In fact, at one point in the play, Iocasta mentions that every man dreams of sleeping with his mother.
      2. But the play is less about the acts Oedipus committed and more about the process of inquiry that led him to realize what he had done.
   C. One interesting approach is to see in Oedipus and his ceaseless questing for the truth a model of the 5th-century Athenian, intellectually curious and self-confident.
      1. His insistence on finding answers leads to Oedipus’s own downfall and reveals the depths of his ignorance.
      2. But this searching does lead to the salvation of Thebes.
      3. Thus, the play has been taken both as an indictment of human self-reliance and intellectual curiosity and as a statement in their favor.

Essential Reading:
Sophocles, Oedipus the King.

Supplementary Reading:
Dodds, “On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex.”
Knox, Oedipus at Thebes.
Segal, C., *Oedipus Tyrannus: Tragic Heroism and the Limits of Knowledge*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. No gods appear in this play, but their presence is felt. Can we draw any conclusions about Sophocles’s attitude toward the gods from this play?

2. This play is filled with startling coincidences and unlikely events. Do those moments detract from the force of the drama? Why does Sophocles construct his play like that?
Lecture Eighteen
Sophocles III—Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone

Scope: We discuss the other two Theban plays in this lecture. Oedipus at Colonus, a work of Sophocles’s old age, gives us the end of Oedipus’s life. The play traces his transformation from the blind, homeless, and disgraced man we saw at the end of Oedipus the King to an object of veneration and a source of continuing power. Antigone takes us back to Thebes and the strife among Oedipus’s successors. The play is a study in contrasts, the opposition between Antigone and her uncle Creon embodying a variety of other conflicts: female versus male, divine law versus human law, the family versus the city. But the play cannot be reduced to any set of simple theses and antitheses.

Outline

I. Oedipus at Colonus, produced posthumously in 401, is a reversal, in some ways, of the direction of the action in the earlier Oedipus play.
   A. As the play begins, Oedipus can hardly go lower: He is homeless, blind, dressed in rags, leaning on his daughter Antigone, and carrying with him the memory and the taint of the atrocious deeds he committed.
      1. When he arrives at a sacred grove in Colonus, on the outskirts of Athens, the citizens ask him not to step on the holy ground.
      2. Later in the play, when they discover his identity, they want him out of the city entirely.
   B. But even early in the play, Oedipus has some force.
      1. He knows from a prophecy that this sacred grove is his final resting place.
      2. And several times in the play he argues strongly for his innocence, claiming that he committed his famously horrendous deeds unwittingly.
      3. The chorus, however, says this is a matter for the king to decide.
   C. Ismene, Oedipus’s other daughter, arrives with two pieces of news: Oedipus’s sons, Polynices and Eteocles, are fighting for supremacy in Thebes. They have heard from the oracle that Oedipus’s presence, whether dead or alive, will bring power to whichever side controls him.
      1. Oedipus says he will never lend his support to either of those two. Rather, he offers that gift to Theseus, king of Athens.
      2. Theseus agrees to allow Oedipus to stay and even offers him all the rights of a citizen, including protection from foreigners. A choral song in praise of Colonus follows.
      3. First Creon (representing Eteocles) and then Polynices arrive, each bent on bringing Oedipus back to Thebes in order to have his power on their own side of the conflict.
      4. Theseus and the Athenians drive Creon away.
      5. Oedipus refuses to go with Polynices and curses the two sons to die at each other’s hands.
   D. The play ends with the mysterious death of Oedipus, as he disappears into the sacred grove, thereby bringing great benefits to the city of Athens.
   E. Oedipus at Colonus has much in it: reflections on the condition of old age by a poet no longer young; praise for Athens; a plot full of events, action, and lots of characters; an example of the Sophoclean hero. But all does turn out well in the end, at least for Oedipus and Athens.

II. Antigone (c. 440) is the earliest of the three Theban plays Sophocles wrote but last in the mythological chronology.
   A. Polynices, with an army and six other leaders (the seven against Thebes), has attacked Thebes and her king, Eteocles. The Thebans held off the assault, but Eteocles and Polynices killed each other in the process.
   B. For the good of the state, the new king, Creon, has pronounced that Eteocles will be buried as a Theban hero, while Polynices’s body will remain unburied, food for the birds and the dogs.
   C. The opening dialogue between Antigone and Ismene establishes the dichotomies that will persist throughout the play.
1. Antigone claims that the needs of her brother outweigh the demands of the state, and she plans to bury Polynices.
2. She also claims to be acting in accord with the wishes of the gods.
3. Ismene pleads that, as women, she and Antigone are powerless against the laws of men.
D. Balancing Antigone’s position is Creon’s opening statement, a not entirely unsympathetic defense of his edict.
E. When Antigone, caught burying Polynices, is brought before Creon, their opposing ideas become even more explicit.
   1. Creon takes the side of the city, the male, and human law, while Antigone champions the family, the female, and divine law.
   2. Creon sentences her to death, or rather, he sentences her to be sealed up in a cave.
   3. But this is no melodrama, with pure good aligned against pure evil. The famous choral song about the wonders of man can be taken as support of either Antigone or Creon.
F. Creon’s son Haimon, engaged to Antigone, opposes Creon as Antigone had, and tempers flare.
G. Surprisingly, on the advice of the prophet Teiresias, Creon relents and decides he has made an error.
   1. But Antigone is already dead, having hanged herself. Haimon kills himself in grief, and even Creon’s wife comes into the action and kills herself from grief.
   2. Creon survives, in misery, having learned too late.
H. Antigone raises many questions about the nature of heroism and the role of the gods in human life.
   1. If there is a hero of this play, would it be Antigone, who sticks to her principles throughout, or Creon, who is able to change and learn, if only too late?
   2. Related to that question: With whom do we sympathize, and why? After all, neither character is without flaw.
   3. We have here two typical Sophoclean heroes. And we see in them both what is admirable and what is destructive in such heroism.
III. Sophocles, more so than the other tragic poets, might suffer from familiarity, and his place in the political and religious mainstream of Athens might lull us into thinking him conventional, but he composed challenging, thought-provoking, and often unsettling plays.

Essential Reading:
Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone.

Supplementary Reading:
Foley, Female Acts in Greek Tragedy, chapter III.3.

Questions to Consider:
1. In what ways is the Oedipus we see in Oedipus at Colonus similar to Oedipus in Oedipus the King? In what ways different?
2. Antigone has become a symbol, a model for those who claim to act justly in resisting authority. Does Sophocles’s portrayal of her support that view of Antigone?
Lecture Nineteen

Euripides I—*Electra, Orestes, Trojan Women*

Scope: The next three lectures are devoted to selected tragedies of Euripides. We start here with some historical and cultural background, especially important given that Euripides’s corpus serves as such a vivid witness to the intellectual and political ferment of the later 5th century. Although he works within the same formal and conventional structure as the other tragedians, Euripides’s many innovations have earned him the reputation as the most modern of the three. For example, in *Electra*, he presents a recognition scene between Orestes and Electra that explicitly parodies Aeschylus’s version. In his *Orestes*, he recasts the end of the Orestes story, including criticisms of contemporary religion and the democratic process, and almost rewrites the entire myth. More explicitly than the other tragedians, Euripides uses the traditional mythic material to call into question contemporary Athenian policies. *Trojan Women*, for example, is a clear commentary on Athenian practices in the ongoing Peloponnesian War.

Outline

I. Euripides (480–406) was the youngest of the three tragedians, although he died before Sophocles.
   A. Of his 90 or so plays, 18 (or 19) are extant, produced between 438 and 406.
   B. We know little about his life, but anecdotes have circulated since antiquity about his low birth, his unhappy love life, his unconventional habits (including living in a cave), and his departure from Athens to the uncivilized Macedonia late in his life. None of this can be confirmed.
   C. Euripides was clearly influenced by the intellectual, political, and social developments of his time. His innovative plays, reflecting those changes, were not always successful during his lifetime—he won fewer dramatic prizes than the others—but he has been the favorite of the ages.
      1. His plots often involve intrigue, rescue, and surprising twists.
      2. The influence of contemporary teachers of rhetoric is evident in the many set speeches, or pairs of speeches, in his dramas.
      3. He combined the loftiness of myth with real-life situations and down-to-earth (or even unsavory) characters.
      4. Even as he worked within the traditional confines of tragedy, he played with conventions of the stage in new ways.

II. In *Electra* (c. 420), Euripides tells the story we have seen in Aeschylus’s *Libation Bearers* and even includes a parody of the earlier version.
   A. In Euripides’s version, Clytemnestra has married Electra off to a poor but dignified farmer to make sure that Electra never has noble children who might one day challenge Clytemnestra.
   B. Euripides’s recognition scene, when Electra is reunited with her long-lost brother Orestes, becomes a sophisticated response to Aeschylus’s version.
      1. An old tutor sees the various signs of Orestes’s presence, and Electra, playing the realist, points out the absurdity of each token.
      2. One by one, he notes the lock of hair, the footprint, and the article of clothing. She responds to each with a dose of untheatrical realism.
   C. Euripides thus engages the audience on multiple levels.
      1. He reminds us of Aeschylus’s version and notes his distance from it.
      2. We are involved in the story about Electra, but he reminds us that this is a fiction.
      3. This scene does not elicit a pure emotional involvement with the ongoing story but a more complex and intellectual sort of response.
   D. There is an extant Sophoclean version of the same story, also called *Electra*, and comparisons among all three can be instructive.

III. In *Orestes* (408), Euripides retells the story of *Eumenides*, moving it into the context of a modern *polis* and stripping the characters of any degree of heroism.
A. Orestes, Electra, and Pylades, Orestes’s friend, are loyal to one another, but their behavior is hardly admirable.
   1. Orestes’s guilt-induced illness reduces him to a physical mess with rare moments of lucidity.
   2. Orestes, Electra, and Pylades are willing to attack women, kill and kidnap, and even bring the city crashing down in order to save their own lives.

B. Most surprising is the democratic context of the play.
   1. Clytemnestra’s father, Tyndareus, appears and blames Orestes for not taking his mother to court for killing Agamemnon.
   2. Recall that the central premise of the Oresteia was that the court of the Areopagus was established during the play specifically for trying this case.
   3. In the world of this play, there are not only courts already but also a democratic assembly where Orestes’s case is debated openly and where we witness an array of demagoguery, political posturing, and the one voice of reason that persuades no one.

C. Orestes, Pylades, and Electra plot to hold Helen hostage or even to kill her.
   1. That outlandish plan is foiled when the gods save Helen.
   2. In the process, they terrify her cowardly Trojan slave, who comes onstage singing in semi-Greek.
   3. The three plotters continue with their plan and kidnap Hermione, the daughter of Helen.

D. Near the end of the play, all is in an uproar, and only the direct (and unconvincing) intervention of the god is able to wrench the plot back to the required mythological conclusion.

E. Thus, in both Electra and Orestes, Euripides makes something strikingly new out of traditional material.

IV. Another characteristic of Euripides’s drama is its close relation to the ongoing Peloponnesian War, fought between Athens and Sparta from 431–404. In several of his tragedies, the Trojan War serves as a mythological model for the more immediate war.

A. In Trojan Women (415), Euripides dramatizes the aftermath of the Trojan War, from the perspective of the suffering women of Troy.
   1. The play is full of lamentation, especially by the Trojan queen Hecuba, who laments her fall from prosperity.
   2. The play’s emphasis on the grief of women, children, and families rather than on the glories of war speaks directly to the wartime situation in Athens and particularly the suffering caused by Athens.
   3. Just before the production, Athens had subdued the island city of Melos, killing all adult males and selling all women and children into slavery. Trojan Women can be seen as a critical commentary on the growing Athenian aggression.
   4. There is another connection between this play and contemporary events: In the prologue of the play, the gods plan the destruction of the Greek fleet on its way home. At the time of production, Athens was preparing for a large naval assault on Sicily. The divine plan in the play can be seen as a commentary on that expedition, a warning to the Athenians against undertaking it at all.

B. Other plays that use the Trojan War in similar fashion include Iphigeneia at Aulis, Andromache, and Hecuba.

Essential Reading:
Euripides, Electra, Orestes, and Trojan Women.

Supplementary Reading:
Burnett, Catastrophe Survived: Euripides’ Plays of Mixed Reversal, chapters 8 and 9.
Zeitlin, “The Closet of Masks: Role-Playing and Myth-Making in the Orestes of Euripides.”

Questions to Consider:
1. In Electra and Orestes, Euripides tears down some of the mythological underpinning of Aeschylus’s Oresteia. Does he offer anything in its place?
2. Compare Euripides’s (more oblique) commentary on the Peloponnesian War to Aeschylus’s commentary on the Persian Wars. How do they differ in their approach and their conclusions?
Lecture Twenty

Euripides II—Medea and Hippolytus

Scope: We continue our discussion of Euripides with a closer look at two of his plays, Medea and Hippolytus. In Medea, the story of Jason and Medea after their return to Greece with the Golden Fleece, Euripides creates one of the most compelling female roles in theater history. The play explores the proper role of a woman, especially as wife and mother. Euripides continues his exploration of the male-female relationship in Hippolytus, the story of a love triangle involving Hippolytus; his father, Theseus; and his stepmother, Phaedra, that ends with only one survivor, and that one an emotional wreck. Gods direct the action in Hippolytus but almost literally from the wings: The play begins with Aphrodite and ends with Artemis, but they are nowhere to be seen as the action unfolds. The role of the gods here has contributed to the ongoing discussion about Euripides’s attitude toward traditional religion.

Outline

I. We continue our study of Euripides, the tragedian Aristotle called the most tragic of all the playwrights, with his play Medea.

II. Medea (431) takes place in Corinth, where Jason and Medea have settled after the quest for the Golden Fleece.
   A. That journey had taken Jason and his crew of heroes, the Argonauts, in their semi-divine ship called the Argo, far from Greece to the eastern reaches of the Black Sea.
      1. They encountered any number of adventures on the journeys there and back.
      2. Once arrived at the site of the fleece, Jason relied heavily on the advice and magic of Medea, the daughter of the king, as he survived the king’s several challenges and finally stole the fleece from him and ran off with Medea.
      3. Medea alienated her father further by killing her brother as the king was hotly pursuing the Argo.
   B. Back in Jason’s hometown, Iolcus in Greece, Medea used magic and trickery to kill Jason’s uncle. She and Jason then fled to Corinth.
   C. As the play begins, Jason, married to Medea, has decided to take as a new wife the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth, and Medea has been exiled.

III. The play consists of a series of conversations and confrontations with Medea. In every case, she gets the better of her interlocutor.
   A. First, she has to convince the chorus of Corinthian women not to divulge her plans, whatever she might do.
      1. Her arguments to the universal plight of women sound like early statements of feminism.
      2. The speech works in winning over to her side these women who have very little in common with her, other than being women: She is a foreigner, a witch, and an enemy of their king.
   B. Creon demands that Medea leave the city immediately.
      1. She fawns on Creon, asking him to delay her exile for just one day, and he agrees.
      2. She is full of scorn for Creon and decides to kill him, his daughter, and her husband, Jason.
   C. She meets twice with Jason and with Aegeus, the king of Athens.
      1. Unable to control her rage in the first meeting with Jason, she reminds him that without her, he would be nothing. Her words are full of the Greek letter σ (sigma), so she sounds like a hissing snake.
      2. Jason constructs a rhetorically organized but powerless response.
      3. After Jason leaves, Aegeus, the human father of Theseus, happens to be passing through, and Medea extracts from him a promise of safe haven in Athens, no matter what.
      4. In her second meeting with Jason, Medea feigns repentance for her earlier anger and asks that their children be allowed to bring a robe as a wedding gift to Jason’s new bride. Jason is taken in by her deception.
   D. Medea has now arranged everything for the execution of her plan: She will kill Jason’s new wife, through the agency of her children, then kill the children, too.
1. Here, Medea meets her strongest opposition, as she debates with herself whether she can, in fact, kill her and Jason’s own children.
2. Report is brought that the princess has died, poisoned by the robe given by the children, and that her father, the king, died trying to save her.
3. Against the protestations of the chorus, Medea leaves to kill her children.

E. The play ends with Medea out of reach of Jason, in the chariot of her grandfather, the Sun, leaving Corinth with the bodies of their children. Jason again is powerless.

1. Most agree that it is a Euripidean invention to have Medea kill her children. That deed becomes the single most memorable of Medea’s actions and allows Euripides to engage and manipulate our emotions more fully.
2. Euripides had invited our sympathy for Medea earlier, as a scorned woman with nowhere to turn.
3. By the end of the play, though, her darker nature has won out, and she is a non-Greek barbarian and a witch more than she is a woman.
4. We might see in this Medea, more generally, the male view of the dangerous power of all women: deceptive, plotting with other women, controlling the household, and in charge of the upbringing of the children.

IV. Hippolytus (428) introduces a woman who is dangerous in a different way: Phaedra, wife of the Athenian king Theseus. Other characters include Theseus’s son (her stepson) Hippolytus, as well as the goddesses Aphrodite and Artemis.

A. The plot is familiar as the “Potiphar’s wife” story from Genesis: a love triangle in which a woman tries unsuccessfully to seduce the son (or younger friend) of her husband, then accuses that younger man of making inappropriate advances.
1. This story pattern appears again and again in widely different cultures and times.
2. It builds on a stereotype of women as lustful, deceptive, and harmful to innocent males.

B. This is Euripides’s second version of the play. The first, now lost, outraged the Athenians by showing Phaedra as uncontrollably lustful.

C. In this version, Phaedra’s lust is somewhat excused because it is entirely caused by Aphrodite.
1. Hippolytus is so extremely chaste and devoted to the virgin goddess Artemis that he refuses to acknowledge Aphrodite and the love that she stands for.
2. In response, Aphrodite causes Phaedra to fall in love with Hippolytus.

D. Phaedra, physically ill because of her overwhelming passion for Hippolytus, finally admits her love to a devoted nurse, who tells Hippolytus.

E. Upon hearing Hippolytus’s outrage, Phaedra kills herself in order to preserve her honor, first writing on a tablet that Hippolytus had raped her.

F. Theseus finds Phaedra dead and wrongly accuses Hippolytus. Theseus places a deadly and effective curse on his son.

G. Driving away in his chariot, along the sea, Poseidon, the divine father of Theseus, sends a monstrous bull from the sea, wrecking Hippolytus's chariot and wounding him fatally.

H. Artemis arrives to explain to Theseus that Hippolytus, now dying, was innocent of any crime.
1. She claims that she could not save her devoted servant because no god can go against the wishes of another.
2. She will repay Aphrodite by punishing some mortal who is devoted to her.
3. Then, unable to remain in the presence of death, she leaves Hippolytus.

V. The two goddesses, one at the start of the play and one at the end, are polar opposites in their attitude toward sex but similar in their treatment of mortals.

A. Some of Euripides’s contemporaries accused him of unconventional ideas about the gods.
1. What we see here is not so terribly unconventional—gods and goddesses have been interfering in mortal lives as far back as the Iliad.
2. However, this play more blatantly highlights the pettiness of the gods’ need to be worshiped and the gods’ willingness to take human life in their own interest.
B. We might also read the two goddesses as external manifestations of human tendencies.
   1. Aphrodite is the embodiment of passion, dangerous in excess but equally dangerous if entirely repressed or denied.
   2. Artemis then represents chastity, admirable unless taken too far.

Essential Reading:
Euripides, Medea and Hippolytus.

Supplementary Reading:
Foley, Female Acts in Greek Tragedy, chapter III.5.
Mills, Euripides: Hippolytus.

Questions to Consider:
1. Euripides has been called both a misogynist and a protofeminist. What do you think of his attitude toward women based on his treatment of women in these two plays?
2. Euripides’s plays often end with a deus ex machina: Medea in the chariot and Artemis fill that role in these plays. Does that device bring effective closure to each of these plays, or does it seem, as some have said, a dramatic trick to tie up loose ends quickly?
Lecture Twenty-One

Euripides III—The Bacchae

Scope: We conclude our discussion of Euripides with *The Bacchae*, one of his final plays, produced posthumously (406). The tragedy centers around a conflict played out over several scenes between the young god Dionysus and Pentheus, who is his cousin and the new king of Thebes. Euripides manipulates our emotions, as we are outraged in turn by the impiety of Pentheus and the unforgiving brutality of Dionysus. The conflict is so subtly worked out that the play has been interpreted both as a criticism of the traditional view of the gods and as an admission, near the end of the playwright’s life, that he has been wrong to question the role of the Olympians in human life. It is perhaps best to read the play as an unflinching consideration of the power embodied in Dionysus, whether divine or natural, and the consequences of ignoring it. It is that direct confrontation with universals that made Euripides’s plays so controversial and so enduring.

Outline

I. *The Bacchae*, one of Euripides’s final plays, was first produced posthumously in 406. The tragedy centers on a conflict between the young god Dionysus and Pentheus, his cousin and the new king of Thebes.

II. Many of the myths involving Dionysus tend to follow a similar pattern: Mortals initially deny his divine status, and he punishes the disbelievers.
   A. In this play, Pentheus and the Thebans fail to recognize Dionysus as a god, with variously grisly results for all.
   B. Students of myth have interpreted this pattern in various ways.
      1. Maybe it recalls a historical event in which the god Dionysus was imported into Greece from the East, met some resistance, and finally won a place among the more traditional gods.
      2. We might find an explanation in the nature of Dionysus, a god associated with emotional release, the uncontrollable life force in humans, animals, and even plants. One might try to deny or repress that force but at one’s peril.
   C. Similarities to the status of the deities in *Hippolytus* are striking.
      1. Dionysus, like Aphrodite, demands worship.
      2. Like both Aphrodite and Artemis, Dionysus is quick to punish those who deny him his due.
      3. There are further similarities between Hippolytus himself and the young Pentheus: They are both young, headstrong, self-confident, and not as careful as they should be in the treatment of the gods.

III. Dionysus appears in mortal disguise in the prologue to introduce the essential background to the play.
   A. Dionysus is the son of Semele, a Theban princess, and Zeus.
      1. Hera, Zeus’s consort, brought an end to this affair by causing Zeus to appear to Semele as a thunderbolt.
      2. Semele was burned on the spot, but Zeus saved the unborn Dionysus from her womb, sewed it into his own thigh, and gave birth to Dionysus.
   B. Because the Thebans have not accepted Dionysus’s divinity, he has driven the Theban women mad and sent them to the mountains, where they celebrate his rituals. His purpose is to bring his rituals to Thebes.
      1. Traditional worship of Dionysus did include female gatherings in secluded spots.
      2. Ritual activity involved ecstatic dancing and eating of animals (perhaps raw) that somehow embodied the spirit of Dionysus himself.
      3. Participants would wear an animal-skin cloak and carry an ivy-entwined stick called a *thyrsus*.
   C. Dionysus also introduces the chorus, the *Bacchae*, a group of willing followers who, in the parodos, sing their praise of Dionysus.

IV. The first episode brings Teiresias, the blind prophet we have met before, and Cadmus, the former king of Thebes and grandfather to Pentheus, onstage in full regalia for the worship of Dionysus, where they confront the young king Pentheus.
A. There is something ridiculous, if not amusing, in the appearance of the old men in such festive garb.
B. Pentheus is hot-headed from the start and announces the actions he has already taken to put a stop to the ritual nonsense in Thebes.
   1. He imagines that the women in the mountains are simply engaging in drunken orgies.
   2. He vows to catch the instigator, Dionysus in his human disguise, and cut his head off or hang him.
C. The two old men try to persuade Pentheus to accept the god, but their motives are hardly persuasive.
   1. Teiresias offers a rationalized account of Dionysus’s birth and emphasizes his usefulness to a city.
   2. Cadmus opportunistically recognizes Dionysus as a god because he is a member of Cadmus’s family.

V. A guard brings the disguised Dionysus before Pentheus.
A. The authoritarian Pentheus elicits only clever responses from the unruffled god.
B. Pentheus then attacks the physical appearance of his adversary, cutting his long hair and stripping him of his thyrsus, before throwing him in jail.

VI. Dionysus easily escapes, causes an earthquake that destroys the palace, then meets a second time with Pentheus.
A. In their presence, a messenger reports on the attempts to round up the Theban women on the mountain.
   1. Left alone, the women were engaged in peaceful activity, creating fountains of water, wine, or honey with the strike of a thyrsus.
   2. Attacked by Pentheus’s men, they became enraged and superhumanly powerful, tearing cattle to shreds with their bare hands.
B. Pentheus decides to take full military action against the women.
   1. But with a word and the suggestion that Pentheus might watch the women, Dionysus changes everything.
   2. Dionysus convinces Pentheus to dress as a woman, sneak through the streets, and spy on the women.
   3. Has Dionysus cast a spell on Pentheus or simply taken advantage of Pentheus’s own latent desires?

VII. In their third confrontation, Dionysus is clearly in charge, adjusting Pentheus’s dress and curls and leading him out to the mountain.
A. It is possible to play this scene for laughs, but we also see a dark side of humor here: Pentheus, the king who so scornfully mocked the effeminate nature of Dionysus, is now completely changed and marching through the streets of Thebes in women’s clothes.
B. Even if we had no sympathy for Pentheus before, it is hard not to pity him now.

VIII. We learn what happened next from a messenger speech.
A. Dionysus delivered Pentheus to the frenzied Theban women.
B. In a moment of clarity, Pentheus admitted his error and asked for forgiveness but too late.
C. Pentheus’s own mother and aunts, failing to recognize him, tore him limb from limb and played ball with pieces of his body.

IX. In the final scene, Pentheus’s mother, Agave, enters with Pentheus’s head on her thyrsus, glorying in her kill and thinking she has killed a mountain lion.
A. Cadmus brings her to her senses and causes her to realize the full horror of what she has done.
B. Dionysus finally drops his disguise and, despite pleas and protestations, metes out even further punishment for the Thebans.

X. Are we to sympathize with Dionysus, with Pentheus, with neither?
A. It is difficult to stomach the brutality of Dionysus’s punishment, but Pentheus was clearly in the wrong.
B. As many have argued, the question of right and wrong might be misplaced here.
   1. Dionysus represents an undeniable force, whether a divinity or simply the life force that pumps in the veins of all living things.
   2. The denial of that force inevitably leads to disaster.
C. Euripides, here as elsewhere, brings difficult issues to the stage and offers no clear solutions. The play works equally well as a commentary on religion and a consideration of human psychology.

**Essential Reading:**
Euripides, *The Bacchae.*

**Supplementary Reading:**
Dodds, “Introduction,” in *Euripides: Bacchae.*
Segal, C., *Dionysiac Poetics and Euripides’ Bacchae.*

**Questions to Consider:**
1. With whom do you sympathize, Pentheus or Dionysus? Do your sympathies change in the course of the play?
2. In this play (and in other tragedies), there are certain qualities shared by those who survive, unscathed at the end. What are those qualities, and what do they suggest about getting by safely in a dangerous world?
Lecture Twenty-Two

Aristophanes I—Introduction to Old Comedy

Scope: The other theatrical genre that developed in 5th-century Athens, Old Comedy, shares some of the conventions and components of tragedy, but in many ways, Old Comedy takes us into a different world. This lecture introduces that world, and the following two go more deeply into particular examples. In all cases, we draw on the fertile imagination and considerable talents of Aristophanes, the author of all our extant examples of the genre. In these comedies, we leave behind the mythical world of tragedy for plots that are both fantastic and highly topical. The setting is contemporary Athens, with references throughout to real-world Athenians, but the situations are anything but real world. Thus, we must pay close attention to the historical and cultural events going on in Athens, even as we marvel at the outlandish costumes, onstage antics, and highly improbable stories.

Outline

I. In turning to comedy, we find some similarities to tragedy, but many differences.
   A. Ancient comedy is often divided into categories (Old, Middle, and New Comedy) based both on date and style. Here, we consider only Old Comedy, with some few notes about the later forms.
   B. The origins of the genre are murky, but it probably grew out of choral performances.
   C. Our first recorded comedy is in the 480s, but our first extant representative is from 427.
   D. Comedies were performed at festivals, in the same theaters as the tragedies.
      1. At the City Dionysia, the most important festival for tragedy, comedies were also performed.
      2. Each playwright produced only one comedy per festival.
      3. There was a smaller festival for comedy called the Lenaia.
   E. Unlike for tragedy, we have to judge the genre based on the works of only one playwright, Aristophanes, who was active from 427−385.
   F. In Old Comedy, the actors and chorus often address the audience members directly, refer to a specific event or person in contemporary Athens, or call attention to the business of performance.
      1. There are times when the distinction is clear between the world of the play and the world of the audience; then a character will suddenly disrupt that distinction, often with comic effect.
      2. In some cases, the references are so topical that it becomes difficult to translate them effectively into English.

II. The structure of comedies is similar to what we have seen in tragedy in the alternation of episodes and choral songs.
   A. In comedy, though, the prologue is more important, because plots are invented, not drawn from myth, and must be introduced to the audience.
      1. One of the main characters in The Birds is leaving Athens and takes a break from his traveling to tell us why.
      2. Less explicitly, amidst all the jokes at the start of The Frogs, for example, Dionysus identifies himself and his longing to go to the underworld to bring back a good tragic poet.
   B. Also, in one section of a comedy, called the parabasis, the chorus addresses the audience directly for an extended period.
      1. In The Knights, for example, the chorus praises the playwright in the hopes of winning a victory in the dramatic competition.
      2. In The Birds, the eponymous chorus members sing of how useful wings would be to the audience: They could fly off during dull tragic choruses to eat, take a bathroom break, or carry on an affair with a woman whose husband is stuck in the front row at the theater.
      3. In The Acharnians, the chorus uses the parabasis to defend the playwright against charges of going too far in earlier comedies in his criticism of Athenian politicians.
      4. In the parabasis of The Frogs, the chorus even more specifically talks about Athenian public policy.
5. There is considerable variation in the use of the parabasis, and some of Aristophanes’s later plays dispense with it entirely.

C. Another structural element found in comedy but not in tragedy is the *agōn*, which features a struggle or long debate between two characters.
   1. In *The Clouds*, we see the “Right Argument” going against the “Wrong Argument.”
   2. In *The Frogs*, we see a long contest between Aeschylus and Euripides as to which is the better tragic playwright.

III. In its language, character, and costume, comedy leaves behind the elevated tone of tragedy.
   A. The language is colloquial, often uses different dialects, and is full of sexual and bodily language that is graphic, direct, and completely without embarrassment.
      1. Translators must decide how to render the graphic language.
      2. Aristophanes’s use of dialects presents problems to translators, as well.
   B. The costumes in comedy also go a long way toward lowering the general tone. They are meant to be ridiculous and include a mask with contorted features, heavy padding in the buttocks and belly, and a large leather phallus.
   C. Often, there is a single figure at the center of a plot, the so-called comic hero, who is not necessarily likable or admirable and is certainly not serious.

IV. The plot, invented by the playwright, is fantastic, often involving an imaginative (or impossible) solution to a difficult situation.
   A. In *The Birds*, two Athenians are tired of Athenian laws and litigiousness and set out to build a perfect society with the birds in the clouds.
   B. In *The Acharnians*, the Athenian citizen Dikaiopolis is weary of all the deprivations that come about in wartime; thus, he establishes a personal peace treaty, just between himself and Sparta, in order to get all the luxuries he has been missing.
   C. In *Lysistrata*, the Greek women are frustrated because their men are always at war; they decide to end the war by refusing to have sex with the men.
   D. In *The Assemblywomen*, we have a different order of fantasy: The women of Athens disguise themselves as men, pack the assembly, and vote in sweeping reforms for Athens.

V. There are multiple levels of humor at play, with a variety of possible purposes.
   A. We notice right away what many consider low-level humor: jokes and innuendoes about sex and bodily function and slapstick.
   B. We also see direct (and usually unflattering) references to specific individuals in the audience, references that are, of course, very difficult to get across to modern spectators.
   C. Likewise, the many, many puns and word plays often don’t convey in other languages because they depend so heavily on the sound of a particular word.
   D. The comedies also make fun of their own theatrical status, making jokes of the necessities and conventions of the stage.
      1. This self-referentiality is known as *metatheater*.
      2. For example, in *Peace*, the main character appears flying on a dung beetle, held aloft by the crane that was usually reserved for the appearances of gods. As the “beetle” falters, we get explicit instructions for the usually behind-the-scenes crane operator.
   E. We see another form of theatrical self-reference in the many parodies of tragedy.
      1. In *The Frogs*, the subject is a contest between two tragic poets, Euripides and Aeschylus, giving us plenty of opportunity to laugh at the tragic genre.
      2. In *The Acharnians*, when Dikaiopolis has to make a pitiful plea for his life, he visits Euripides to borrow a set of rags used as a costume in a recent tragedy.
   F. More generally, the fantastic nature of the plots creates a systemic sort of humor that runs throughout a play. These plays were written not just to amuse but to make us laugh out loud.
Supplementary Reading:
Segal, E., “The *Physis* of Comedy.”
Taplin, “Fifth-Century Tragedy and Comedy.”

Questions to Consider:

1. One element of a successful comedy is surprise; one aspect of a literary masterpiece is its ability to remain engaging after several readings. What makes a comedy a masterpiece?

2. Ancient Greek comedy and tragedy overlap in many ways, including the festival setting and many of the conventions of the stage. Why is that close connection important to comedy? And is it important to tragedy, as well?
Lecture Twenty-Three

Aristophanes II—Acharnians and Lysistrata

Scope: The Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta lasted 27 years (431–404), a period that coincided with the height of Aristophanes’s career. Several of his comedies directly address aspects of that war, and we look at two of those in this lecture. In Acharnians, we meet an individual Athenian, Dikaiopolis, who is so fed up with the war that he makes a personal peace treaty between himself and the Spartans. In Lysistrata, the women of Greece take matters into their own hands, withholding sex until their husbands agree to end the war. In both plays, there are discussions of the motives for the war, the foibles and failures of the leaders, and the reasons for seeking peace—but all in the context of fantastic plots and a barrage of the broadest sorts of jokes, puns, and abusive treatment of the audience. Can we read these plays as serious political commentary?

Outline

I. In this lecture, we look at the life, career, and selected works of Aristophanes.
   A. The Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta lasted from 431–404.
      1. This period coincided with the height of Aristophanes’s career.
      2. Several of his comedies address aspects of that war.
   B. Aristophanes lived from roughly 450–385, and he produced comedies from 427 almost up to his death, with many victories in the dramatic competitions.
      1. Stories suggest that Aristophanes got into legal trouble very early in his career by attacking too viciously one of the leading Athenian politicians of his day, Cleon.
      2. Of the 40 or so plays that Aristophanes wrote, 11 survive.

II. The highly topical nature of Aristophanes’s comedies led him to comment in several of them on the ongoing war between Athens and Sparta.
   A. After the Persian Wars early in the 5th century, Athenian power grew steadily, especially at sea, and she made many alliances with other seafaring powers.
      1. That growth in power led to conflict with Sparta.
      2. The general feeling was that Sparta would make short work of Athens.
      3. During the early years of the war, Athenians retreated within their walls, hoping to harass Sparta by sea, because they knew they were no match on land.
      4. Just after the war began, Athens was devastated by a plague that lasted for four years.
   B. When The Acharnians was presented in 425, Athens had been embroiled in the war for six years and was just recovering from the worst of the plague.

III. In The Acharnians, Dikaiopolis is fed up with the ineffectual bureaucracy of Athens and decides to make a personal peace treaty between himself and Sparta.
   A. The play starts in the Athenian assembly, where Dikaiopolis uses standard political procedures to try to make peace.
      1. No one listens to his attempts to make peace, as all are attending to a group of charlatans skimming money from the public purse.
      2. Fantastically, Dikaiopolis makes a deal with the semi-divine Amphitheus and buys a 30-year peace with Sparta. Much is made of the fact that the same Greek word means “truce” and “drink-offering” or “wine.” Dikaiopolis has bought a skin of well-aged wine.
   B. A chorus of angry old Acharnians (men from the Acharnae region outside Athens) attack Dikaiopolis for being soft on the enemy.
      1. In a speech filled with parody, humor, and some seriousness, Dikaiopolis argues that the Athenians are just as guilty as the Spartans for starting the war.
      2. He gradually persuades the chorus to agree with him.
C. In the parabasis, the chorus says that the Athenians will win the war if they only follow the advice of Aristophanes.

D. Now that he has persuaded the Acharnians, Dikaiopolis enjoys his private peace, and he is visited by a variety of Athenians and others.
   1. Among those who take advantage of the peace is a man from Megara, a Spartan ally suffering from Athenian economic sanctions.
   2. In a darkly humorous scene, he sells his daughters into slavery, passing them off as pigs and receiving in exchange only a bit of garlic and salt.
   3. A Theban then enters with a bag full of the delicacies that Athenians have been missing ever since the war started. In exchange for those delicacies, Dikaiopolis packs up and sends to Thebes something that Athens has an excess of—government informants!

E. The play ends, as most comedies do, with a scene of revelry, this time limited to Dikaiopolis and his family and contrasted with the general going off to war.

F. Is there a serious message here? Opinions are divided.
   1. On the one hand, Aristophanes has sharply suggested that Athenian leaders are avoiding the most important issue—making peace with Sparta—while wasting the city’s money lining the pockets of the rich.
   2. On the other hand, Dikaiopolis is selfish to the extreme—not, in other words, a model for the city.
   3. And there’s that line in the parabasis that the Athenians can still win this war, if only they continue to listen to Aristophanes.
   4. We might conclude from this play, then, that Aristophanes sees real problems in the running of the war but that he is no pacifist.

IV. At the time of *Lysistrata* in 411, Athens had been nominally and temporarily at peace with Sparta since 421.
   A. During the peace, Athens had sent a massive naval expedition to Sicily, where it suffered a total defeat in 413.
   B. At the same time, Sparta had finally fortified a town near Athens, thus establishing a permanent military outpost on the doorstep of Athens. Sparta delayed attacking, however.
   C. Back in Athens, the crisis led to several political innovations, including the appointment of a special group of magistrates right after the defeat, then a short-lived oligarchic coup.

V. *Lysistrata* is fantastic in a different way from *The Acharnians*, imagining a scenario in which women seize power in Greece in an attempt to end the war.
   A. Under the leadership of the Athenian Lysistrata, the women’s plan is twofold.
      1. They reluctantly agree to withhold sex from their husbands until the men agree to end the war.
      2. The older women seize and occupy the Acropolis, thereby depriving Athens of access to its treasury.
   B. On the one hand, the women are stereotyped negatively.
      1. Their lives revolve around sex and drinking.
      2. The men are no better, though, as the women constantly outwit and even outfight them.
   C. But the suffering of the women and their contribution to the war effort is clearly recognized.
      1. Women, Lysistrata reminds the magistrate, have always done well managing households, as the men have made a complete mess of the city’s affairs. She even offers a plan of action, in the form of a metaphor about weaving.
      2. When the magistrate asks Lysistrata what right she has to make decisions about the war, Lysistrata replies that women have lost sons and fathers and have a right to comment on the war.
   D. The play ends happily, with a reconciliation of all Greeks engineered by the women.

VI. Is this play a serious call for peace?
   A. What *Lysistrata* does that *Acharnians* doesn’t is to emphasize the universality of the desire for peace.
   B. Aristophanes also returns to the theme of reconciliation with the Spartans, or at least a recognition of their shared values as Greeks and their shared glories in the past.
C. However, we should not forget that Aristophanes was a comedian trying to entertain and win a prize.

**Essential Reading:**
Aristophanes, *The Acharnians* and *Lysistrata*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, chapters 6 and 12.
Foley, “Tragedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ *Acharnians*.”
Pelling, *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian*, chapters 7, 8, and 10.

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Is Dikaiopolis a sympathetic character? What about Lysistrata?
2. The Athenians in the theater were undergoing considerable wartime hardships, yet they seemed to appreciate Aristophanes’s comic response to the war. How does Aristophanes manage that? Are some subjects off limits even to him?
Lecture Twenty-Four

Aristophanes III—The Frogs and The Clouds

Scope: Also during Aristophanes’s career, Athens was at the forefront of intellectual and cultural changes, and those innovations underlie several of his comedies. In The Clouds, we meet a caricature of Aristophanes’s friend Socrates, standing as an example of the new breed of teachers commonly referred to as Sophists. Aristophanes draws a contrast between their innovative rationalism and humanism and, on the other hand, good old-fashioned Greek traditions. In The Frogs, the deaths of Sophocles and Euripides prompt a trip to the Underworld in an attempt to bring tragedy back from the dead. What ensues is a hilarious contest between Aeschylus and Euripides as each tries to prove that he is better—and better for Athens. The play thus becomes, almost inadvertently, one of our first documents of literary criticism. We conclude the discussion of comedy with a brief look at comedy after Aristophanes.

Outline

I. Aristophanes also responds in his comedies to many of the intellectual and cultural movements of late-5th-century Athens.
   A. In The Clouds, Aristophanes draws a contrast between the Sophists’ innovations and good old-fashioned Greek traditions.
   B. In The Frogs, an attempt to bring tragedy back after the deaths of Sophocles and Euripides becomes one of our first examples of literary criticism.

II. In The Clouds, Socrates serves as the butt of Aristophanes’s jokes about new forms of education.
   A. At the time, teachers for hire, who came to be known as Sophists, brought changes to traditional values and methods of education.
      1. There was no formal system for advanced education and not much in the way even of basic training.
      2. The importance of public speaking in the Athenian democracy led naturally to an increased focus on instruction in rhetoric.
   B. These Sophists invited their students to question traditional beliefs, including belief in the gods, and this sort of questioning, of course, was not welcome in many quarters.
   C. Socrates never taught for pay and had little interest in what we would call scientific issues, but he was the most prominent and recognizable of all those questioning the status quo in any way.
   D. As we assess Aristophanes’s treatment of Socrates in The Clouds, we might keep in mind two other commentaries on the relationship between the two men.
      1. In Plato’s Symposium, Aristophanes and Socrates are both guests at a dinner party and get along well.
      2. In Plato’s Apology, his version of Socrates’s defense speech against charges of impiety and corruption of youth, Socrates blames Aristophanes’s Clouds for setting the people of Athens against him.

III. Aristophanes wrote two versions of The Clouds. The first, now lost, was such a flop that he tried again, producing the version we now have in about 419.
   A. In the play, Strepsiades, an old Athenian farmer, wants his son, Pheidippides, to learn the new rhetorical tricks at Socrates’s school, the Phrontisterion, called the Thinkery, so he can win a case with weak arguments and thereby dodge his debts.
      1. Strepsiades himself ends up attending the Thinkery when his son refuses.
      2. In the school, we meet Socrates and some of his students, all of them engaged in ridiculous speculation and silly experiments and willing to teach for a fee.
      3. Strepsiades is impressed, but he cannot possibly manage all these new ideas.
   B. Pheidippides is finally persuaded to attend the school.
      1. He witnesses a debate in which the old-fashioned “Right Argument” loses to the newfangled “Wrong Argument.”
      2. Strepsiades’s plan backfires when his son is taught to throw out all traditional values, including respect for his father.
C. Strepsiades has the last laugh as he sets fire to the Thinkery, and the play ends with Socrates and his students in flight.

D. The play finally gives us the triumph of traditional values and beliefs over Socrates and all the innovation he stands for. We need not, though, read this play as a reactionary statement against these intellectual innovations.
   1. Aristophanes himself was a member of this new generation and was sometimes classed with the clever innovators.
   2. The Sophists were high profile and an easy target for Aristophanes’s humor.

IV. *The Frogs* (405) addresses the innovations in tragedy in the later 5th century. As Socrates stood for modernity in the intellectual world, Euripides is the exemplar for modern tragedy.
   A. After the deaths of Euripides and Sophocles, the god Dionysus travels to the Underworld to bring back a poet who can save the city.
   B. In the Underworld, Dionysus judges a contest between Euripides and Aeschylus (to whom Sophocles had deferred), with the winner to be Chair of Tragedy among the dead.
      1. The contest introduces a variety of literary critical terms and methods, some of them more reasonable than others. Through it all, we get stereotypical portrayals of Aeschylus as old-fashioned, serious, and bombastic and Euripides as entirely too clever and subtle. Neither comes across as admirable.
      2. Finally, though, the poets are judged on the basis of their ability to provide moral direction for the city.
      3. Aeschylus claims that Euripides inherited good citizens and made them worse with his poetry.
      4. Dionysus chooses Aeschylus to be the Chair of Tragedy, then takes him back from the Underworld. Aeschylus leaves his Chair of Tragedy to Sophocles.
   C. The play thus considers the relevance of literature in ways that shed light on the seriousness of Aristophanes’s comedies.
      1. We should not take too seriously the criticism of Euripides’s innovations; Euripides, like the Sophists, was an easy target, and Aeschylus comes in for his share of ribbing, too.
      2. But the emphasis here on the moral and didactic force of drama invites us to apply the same standards to Aristophanes’s work.
      3. Aristophanes’s plays are indeed funny, but they also address contemporary issues of central importance.

V. Aristophanes’s later comedies reveal a marked change, and his successors take that change even further.
   A. Aristophanes’s later plays, such as *The Assemblywomen* (392) and *Wealth* (388), are less pointed and politically topical, even as they remain fantastic in their plots.
   B. His greatest successor in antiquity, Menander (344–292), moved comedy from a political to a domestic context.
      1. Extremely popular in antiquity, Menander’s plays were largely unknown to us until some papyrus discoveries in the past 100 years.
      2. Plots involve family situations in the real world: sons, father, lovers, the clever slave, the girl next door, and so on.
      3. Menander’s influence on Roman comedy through Plautus and Terence led to various types of European domestic comedies, right through to the television situation comedy.

**Essential Reading:**
Aristophanes, *The Clouds* and *The Frogs*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, chapters 8 and 14.
Segal, C., “Aristophanes’ Cloud-Chorus.”
Questions to Consider:

1. Strepsiades in *The Clouds* and Dikaiopolis in *The Acharnians* are good examples of the sort of comic hero who appears in many of Aristophanes’s plays. How would you characterize them?

2. The contest between Aeschylus and Euripides in *The Frogs* raises many questions about the criteria for judging literature. How would those criteria apply to the Homeric epics, to lyric poetry, or to other works we have discussed?
Biographical Notes

Legendary, Mythological, and Fictional Figures:

**Achilles:** The best of the Greeks fighting at Troy. Homer's *Iliad* centers on his decision to leave the fighting and later return to it to avenge the death of his friend Patroclus.

**Aegisthus:** Cousin of Agamemnon, son of Thyestes; he has an affair with Agamemnon’s wife, Clytemnestra, while Agamemnon is at Troy. Killed by Clytemnestra’s son Orestes.

**Agamemnon:** Leader of the Greek forces at Troy. Killed upon his return from the war by his wife, Clytemnestra.

**Agave:** Daughter of the Theban king Cadmus, mother of a son, Pentheus. She kills her son in a Dionysian frenzy after refusing to acknowledge the divinity of Dionysus.

**Ajax:** A Greek warrior at Troy noted for his physical prowess. After losing to Odysseus in a contest for the dead Achilles’s arms, he tries to kill the leaders of the Greek force, then kills himself.

**Anchises:** A Trojan prince, who, seduced by Aphrodite, becomes the father of the Trojan hero Aeneas.

**Andromache:** Wife of the Trojan hero Hector.

**Antigone:** Daughter of Oedipus; she insists on proper burial for both of her brothers, even after an edict from King Creon forbidding the burial of Polynices. She is caught in the act and sent to her death.

**Aphrodite:** An Olympian goddess associated with erotic love.

**Apollo:** An Olympian god associated with health, music, and prophecy. Mortals learned of the future through an oracle devoted to him at Delphi.

**Artemis:** A virginal Olympian goddess, sister of Apollo; associated with the hunt and protectress of hunters.

**Astyanax:** Son of Hector and Andromache, he was thrown to his death from the walls of Troy after the Greeks won the war.

**Athena:** A virginal Olympian goddess, born full-grown and armed from the head of Zeus. She was associated with warfare, wisdom, and womanly crafts, such as weaving.

**Atreus:** Father of Agamemnon and Menelaus, who are thus referred to as the Atreidae. He tricked his brother Thyestes into eating a stew of his own children.

**Cadmus:** Founder and king of Thebes; father of Semele, Agave, and others; grandfather of Pentheus.

**Cassandra:** Daughter of King Priam of Troy, she was given the gift of prophecy by Apollo, but after rejecting his advances, she received another “gift”: No one would ever believe her. After the fall of Troy, she became Agamemnon’s war prize and died with him upon their return to Greece.

**Circe:** A divine sorceress who turned many of Odysseus’s men into pigs but was unable to get the better of Odysseus for several years during his trip home from Troy.

**Cassandra:** Daughter of King Priam of Troy, she was given the gift of prophecy by Apollo, but after rejecting his advances, she received another “gift”: No one would ever believe her. After the fall of Troy, she became Agamemnon’s war prize and died with him upon their return to Greece.

**Circe:** A divine sorceress who turned many of Odysseus’s men into pigs but was unable to get the better of Odysseus. He spent one year with her during his return from Troy.

**Clytemnestra:** Wife of Agamemnon, sister of Helen; she killed Agamemnon when he returned home from Troy, mostly because he had killed their daughter Iphigeneia. Her son Orestes avenged his father by killing her.

**Creon:** A generic name for a king. One was the brother of Iocasta, the mother/wife of Oedipus. He ruled in Thebes after the expulsion of Oedipus and again after the death of Oedipus’s two sons. Another Creon was king in Corinth when Jason and Medea were there.

**Demeter:** An Olympian goddess associated with fertility, especially of grains. One center of her worship was at Eleusis, near Athens, where Greeks celebrated a highly influential and secretive set of rites in her honor.

**Dikaioptos:** Hero, if you will, of Aristophanes’s comedy *The Acharnians.* We might call him a low-life everyman, desperate for peace, but largely so that he can satisfy his many personal appetites.
Diomedes: One of the greatest of the Greek warriors at Troy, he won particular glory when Achilles sat out of the fighting.

Dionysus: An Olympian god, son of Zeus and the Theban princess Semele; he was associated with wine, exuberant behavior, and fertility. Myths about him often involve an initial resistance to recognizing his divinity.

Electra: Daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra; she plotted with her brother Orestes the deaths of Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus.

Eros: Love and the personification of love. Sometimes seen as a son of Aphrodite (think Cupid with his bow), sometimes as an elemental force in the creation of the universe.

Eteocles: Son of Oedipus and Iocasta, ruler of Thebes until he died in battle with his brother Polynices.

Eumaeus: Odysseus’s swineherd, loyal to Odysseus during his 20-year absence. Odysseus stayed with him when he first returned to Ithaca.

Furies: Translation of the Erinyes, chthonic goddesses (that is, living under the Earth rather than on Olympus) whose particular job was to take vengeance on those who shed kindred blood. In Aeschylus’s Oresteia, we see them transformed into Eumenides, or “Kindly Ones.”

Gaia: Earth, the mother of all through her mating with Ouranos, the Sky. Hesiod gives her a personality and a role in the downfall of Ouranos as ruler of the universe.

Hector: Son of Priam, husband of Andromache, greatest of the Trojan heroes; killed by Achilles.

Helen: Most beautiful woman in the world, she was the wife of Menelaus, then taken to Troy by Paris; hence, the Trojan War.

Hephaestus: An Olympian god associated with the forge and things made there. He was lame, the only physically imperfect god.

Hera: An Olympian goddess, primary consort of Zeus, most active in myth as a foil to Zeus in his various plans and dalliances.

Hermes: An Olympian god associated with trickery, fast talking, and the ability to cross boundaries, as between gods and mortals, life and death. As such, he was useful as a messenger.

Hippolytus: Son of the Athenian king Theseus, he was a devoted follower of the virginal huntress Artemis, whom he emulated in his hunting and in his rejection of all things associated with love. Aphrodite punished him for that.

Iocasta: Mother, then wife of Oedipus; she hanged herself when she realized she had been married to her own son.

Iphigeneia: Daughter of Agamemnon, who killed her at Aulis in order to win from the gods favorable winds for the voyage to Troy.

Jason: Hero whose quest took him after the Golden Fleece on the eastern shores of the Black Sea. He completed the quest with the help of Medea, whom he subsequently left for another woman.

Kronos: A son of Ouranos and Gaia, he plotted with his mother to castrate and, thereby, overthrow his father. He was subsequently overthrown by his son Zeus.

Laertes: Father of Odysseus.

Laius: King of Thebes and father of Oedipus; he was killed by Oedipus in a scuffle at a crossroads.

Medea: A regal sorceress from the East; after helping Jason retrieve the Golden Fleece, she punished him for trying to marry another in her place.

Menelaus: Brother of Agamemnon, husband of Helen, and hence, one of the principals in the Greek expedition against the Trojans.

Nausicaa: Phaeacian princess who first encountered Odysseus when he washed up on her shores. She had marriage on her mind but proved invaluable in helping Odysseus on his way back to Ithaca.
Neoptolemus: Son of Achilles, he was instrumental in bringing Philoctetes to Troy, where his presence was required for Greek victory.

Odysseus: Cleverest of the Greeks fighting at Troy; his return to Ithaca took 10 years, and there, he was faced with a household of suitors for the hand of his wife, Penelope.

Oedipus: Son of Laius and Iocasta, king and queen of Thebes, he was exposed on a mountain soon after birth; he survived to kill his father, marry and bed his mother, and eventually come to realize what he had done.

Orestes: Son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, he plotted with his sister Electra the deaths of Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus.

Ouranos: The Sky, married to Gaia, the Earth, and the first dominant male in Hesiod’s creation story. He stuffed their many children back inside Gaia in an attempt (failed) to avoid overthrow by his children.

Paris: A Trojan prince, son of Priam, and brother of Hector. For choosing Aphrodite as the fairest (above Hera and Athena), he was given Helen. Given that she was already married to Menelaus, the Trojan War ensued.

Patroclus: Close companion of Achilles. His death at the hands of Hector spurred Achilles to return to the fighting in the *Iliad*.

Penelope: Wife of Odysseus, she remained faithful to him throughout his 20-year absence and used her cleverness to hold off the suitors.

Pentheus: Young king of Thebes, grandson of Cadmus; he was torn to pieces by a crazed group of Theban women, including his own mother, Agave, because he and they refused to recognize the divinity of Dionysus.

Phaeacians: Odysseus’s final stop before Ithaca was with these people. They hosted him graciously, and after he narrated to them the story of his wanderings, they took him safely home.

Phaedra: Wife of Theseus and stepmother of Hippolytus. As punishment for Hippolytus’s avoidance of sex, Aphrodite caused Phaedra to fall in love with him, thus starting a sequence of events that led to the deaths of both Phaedra and Hippolytus.

Philoctetes: A Greek who was abandoned on the way to Troy because of a festering foot wound. When it became known that he and the bow of Herakles he possessed were needed by the Greeks in order to take Troy, Odysseus and Neoptolemus brought him to Troy.

Phoenix: Father figure of Achilles at Troy, he was unable to persuade Achilles to return to the fighting with his speech in *Iliad* 9.

Polynices: Son of Oedipus and Iocasta, he brought an army against Thebes in an attempt to claim rule from his brother Eteocles. Both brothers died in the battle, and Polynices’s body was left unburied until his sister Antigone performed a ritual burial.

Polyphemus: The Cyclops who hosted Odysseus and his men in *Odyssey* 9. Odysseus’s cleverness won the release of most of the men, but his boasting allowed the Cyclops to call down a devastating curse on him.

Priam: King of Troy, he visited Achilles in *Iliad* 24 to ask for the body of his son Hector.

Prometheus: Son of a Titan, he tried to trick Zeus on behalf of mortals and was punished: chained to a rock, where an eagle ate at his liver daily.

Pylades: Close companion of Orestes, he supported him in his plot to kill his mother. He made a surprising and central proclamation to motivate Orestes in Aeschylus’s *Libation Bearers*.

Rhea: A Titan, daughter of Ouranos and Gaia and consort of Kronos. She ensured that their last son, Zeus, was not swallowed down by Kronos. Zeus thus went on to overthrow Kronos.

Semele: Daughter of Cadmus of Thebes, mother of Dionysus by Zeus. Hera tricked her into asking Zeus to appear as he did to the gods; when he did so, she burned, and Zeus was able to save only the unborn baby, who gestated within his thigh.
Sirens: Half-woman, half-bird creatures who tempt mariners to their deaths by singing. Odysseus and Jason both survived their charms, in different ways.

Sphinx: A creature that has the head of a woman, the body of a lion, and the wings of an eagle. She tormented the city of Thebes until Oedipus answered her riddle and caused her to destroy herself.

Strepsiades: Hero of Aristophanes’s Clouds; the embodiment of old-fashioned, rural Athenian values, as opposed to the newfangled intellectual developments of Aristophanes’s own day.

Teiresias: Blind Theban prophet, he appears in Sophocles’s Theban plays, in Euripides’s Bacchae, in Callimachus’s Hymn 5, and in the Underworld in Odyssey 11.

Telemachus: Son of Odysseus and Penelope, he came of age in the opening books of the Odyssey and later helped his father defeat the suitors.

Theseus: Early king of Athens (after his adventures in Crete with the Minotaur), he cursed his son Hippolytus after reading a false message from his wife, Phaedra. He was also known for welcoming to Athens outsiders, such as Oedipus.

Thetis: Sea nymph, mother of Achilles, she persuaded Zeus in Iliad 1 to honor her son by causing the Trojans to succeed while Achilles sat out.

Thyestes: Brother of Atreus, father of Aegisthus, recipient of the grisly feast of Thyestes, where his own children were served to him by Atreus.

Titans: Children of Gaia and Ouranos; overthrown by Zeus and his sibling Olympians in the Titanomachy; described by Hesiod.

Typhoios: Monstrous son of Gaia, he challenged Zeus after the Titanomachy. Zeus defeated him, thereby securing his place as chief god.

Zeus: King of the Olympian gods, associated with the sky, the weather, and such matters as justice and the proper treatment of guests.

Historical Figures:

Note: All dates are B.C.E. unless otherwise indicated.

Aeschylus (525–456): The oldest of the three great Athenian tragedians; a veteran of the battle of Salamis, he wrote between 70 and 90 plays, of which 7 survive, or only 6 if, as many suggest, he did not write Prometheus Bound.

Alcaeus (late 7th century): With Sappho, one of the two great lyric poets from the island of Lesbos. His verses include both amatory and political themes.

Alcibiades (c. 450–404): An Athenian general during the Peloponnesian War, famous as a student of Socrates and a bon vivant. He agitated in favor of the Sicilian expedition but was recalled from it on charges that he had smashed statues of Hermes. One of the most brilliant and controversial figures of the period, he was in and out of favor in Athens for the rest of his life.

Alexander (356–323): A Macedonian king; called “the Great” because of his military conquests around the Mediterranean and far beyond. He founded Alexandria in Egypt, the city that became the center of Greek culture in the Hellenistic Period.

Apollonius (c. 270–c. 210): Called Apollonius of Rhodes because of an association with that island late in life. He was a librarian at Alexandria, where he wrote the epic about Jason, the Argonautica.

Archilochus (mid-late 7th century): One of the earliest of the lyric poets, his range included elegiac and iambic poetry of considerable grace and power.

Aristophanes (c. 450–c. 385): The author of the only surviving examples of Old Comedy, highly successful during a career that began in 427. He claims to have run afoul of certain politicians with his outspoken criticism, but we know little about his life, and most of that is suspect.
Aristotle (384–322): Prolific and tremendously influential Greek philosopher; student and critic of Plato; and author of treatises on a wide variety of subjects, including ethics, physics, politics, and poetry. His writings come to us in an unpolished form, possibly notes rather than finished works.

Callimachus (c. 300–c. 240): A prolific scholar and poet who worked in the Library of Alexandria. He wrote some 800 works, very few of which survive, and some of those only in fragments.

Croesus (c. 550): Lydian king who ruled over eastern Greeks; he was famous for his wealth.

Darius (d. 486): Persian king who put down the Ionian Revolt, then made an expedition against the Greeks; defeated at Marathon in 490.

Demosthenes (384–322): Greatest of the Greek orators, his career began with forensic speeches as he tried to defend himself against unscrupulous guardians. He called, vociferously but unsuccessfully, for a union of Greeks against the growing threat of Philip II of Macedon.

Euripides (480–406): The youngest of the three Athenian tragedians and the most obviously influenced by the intellectual innovations in the 5th century. His plays (of which 18 are extant) did not often win first prize in his lifetime but became more popular after his death.

Herodotus (c. 484–c. 425): From Halicarnassus in modern Turkey, he traveled extensively and spent some time in Athens. For his history of the Persian Wars, he is referred to as the Father of History.

Hesiod (c. 700): Author of Theogony and Works and Days, he gives us some biographical information about himself in his poems, but most of that is suspect.

Homer (c. 750): This is a name we give to the poetic tradition that culminated in the two epics the Iliad and the Odyssey. Maybe there was an individual by this name, maybe a blind bard from Asia Minor, as the ancients thought.

Lysias (c. 445–c. 380): One of the greatest of the orators, he has been celebrated through the ages especially for the clarity of his style and, in his forensic speeches, his ability to create and convey the character of the speaker for whom he was writing.

Menander (344–292): An Athenian comic playwright, leading representative of the so-called New Comedy. His work comes to us primarily through Roman adaptations of his plots and, more recently, papyrus finds.

Nicias (c. 470–413): An Athenian general known for his caution and his great wealth, he negotiated the so-called Peace of Nicias with Sparta, a 50-year peace that actually lasted from 421–414. During that peace, he became a reluctant general of the Athenian forces that went to Sicily, where he died.

Peisistratus (c. 607–528): Tyrant of Athens from 535–528, he was a supporter of the arts and institutionalized several of the religious festivals, such as the Dionysia, at which tragedies were performed. His sons succeeded him in the tyranny until 510.

Pericles (c. 495–429): Leading Athenian politician of the mid-5th century, from roughly 461 until his death from the plague. He was behind the rebuilding program on the Acropolis, and it was his strategy that guided Athens through the early years of the Peloponnesian War. He was a student of philosophy, the greatest orator of his day, and even won the praise of Thucydides for his leadership.

Phaedrus (c. 444–393): A follower of Socrates, Plato includes him as a major character in both Phaedrus and the Symposium. He was implicated in the sacrilegious behavior of 415 that led to Alcibiades’s recall from Sicily.

Philip II (382–336): King of Macedonia, to the north of Greece, from 359 until his death. He expanded his country considerably, eventually seizing power throughout the Aegean. He thus bequeathed a strong position to his son Alexander, later called “the Great.”

Pindar (c. 518–c. 438): From Thebes, the author of 17 books of choral songs, from which almost all that survives is a group of epinicians, songs in honor of athletic victories.

Plato (c. 429–347): A follower of Socrates, he composed dialogues in the form of Socratic conversations, gradually inserting more of himself and less of Socrates as he developed his own ideas. Although he never speaks in his own voice, he is often referred to as the Father of Western Philosophy.
Sappho (late 7th century): With Alcaeus, one of the two great lyric poets from the island of Lesbos; her works survive largely in fragments, giving us just a glimpse of what made her so famous in antiquity as one of the greatest of the lyric poets. Her themes are largely amatory.

Schliemann, Heinrich (1822–1890 C.E.): A German businessman with a passion for Homer, he spent a portion of his fortune on excavating at Troy and Homeric sites in Greece in an attempt to prove the historicity of the Homeric epics.

Socrates (470–399): The gadfly that stirred up the sluggish Athenian citizenry. He wrote nothing himself, but according to the accounts of Plato, Xenophon, and Aristophanes, he spent his life questioning his fellow citizens. His fellow Athenians put him to death, but his methods and his interest in ethical questions formed the basis for all subsequent Western philosophy.

Solon (c. 638–558): Athenian statesman and poet, he described his political innovations and tribulations in verse and offered moral reflections.

Sophocles (496–406): An Athenian who was successful in his political career, held an important religious position, and wrote nearly 120 tragedies, often winning with them at the dramatic festivals.

Theocritus (c. 300–c. 240): Probably from Sicily but later working in the circle of Callimachus and Apollonius in Alexandria; he is best known as the inventor of pastoral poetry, but his Idylls also include urban mimes, vignettes from the streets of Alexandria.

Thucydides (c. 460–c. 400): Athenian from a wealthy family, he suffered and survived the plague; he was elected general in 424 and was exiled from Athens soon after that. In his History of the Peloponnesian War, he traces events that led up to the war and takes us through the events of 411. The work is notable not only for its attention to accuracy but also for its insightful treatment of power and morality.

Vergil (70–19): Roman poet, much influenced by the epics of Homer and Apollonius, as well as Greek tragedy and lyric, in his epic The Aeneid. His pastoral poems, The Eclogues, show the influence of the Idylls of Theocritus.

Xenophon (c. 427–355): Author of Socratic reminiscences, as well as a history that picks up where Thucydides’s left off. His style is remarkably lucid, but he has the misfortune to be compared to Plato in his Socratic writings and Thucydides in his histories.

Xerxes (r. 486–65): Son of Darius, he led the second great Persian invasion of Greece in 480. After a victory at Thermopylae, his navy was defeated at Salamis and his land forces at Plataea.
Masterpieces of Ancient Greek Literature
Part III
Professor David J. Schenker
David J. Schenker, Ph.D.
Associate Professor and Chair of Classical Studies,
University of Missouri-Columbia

David J. Schenker is Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He has been interested in classical literature at least since he was six years old, when his mother took him to see the 1967 production of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis. His career took him from Vanderbilt (B.A., 1982); through one year of teaching high school Latin at the Darlington School in Rome, Georgia; to the University of California at Berkeley (M.A., 1985, and Ph.D. in Classics, 1989). He taught two years at Allegheny College before coming to Missouri.

Professor Schenker was a recipient of the 2006 American Philological Association Awards for Excellence in Teaching. He has also won several teaching awards at Missouri, including the Provost’s Outstanding Junior Faculty Teaching Award and the William T. Kemper Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Professor Schenker’s primary area of research interest is Greek literature of the 5th and early 4th centuries B.C.E., with a special focus on Plato and the tragedians, especially Aeschylus. He has published articles on these subjects in several academic journals, such as *Classical Journal, Transactions of the American Philological Association*, and the *American Journal of Philology*. From 1999–2005, Professor Schenker served as coeditor of the journal *Classical and Modern Literature*. 
# Table of Contents

**Masterpieces of Ancient Greek Literature**

## Part III

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professor Biography</th>
<th>i</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Scope</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Notes</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-Five</td>
<td>Herodotus I—Introduction to History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-Six</td>
<td>Herodotus II—The Persian Wars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-Seven</td>
<td>Thucydides I—The Peloponnesian War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-Eight</td>
<td>Thucydides II—Books 1–5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Twenty-Nine</td>
<td>Thucydides III—Books 6–7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Thirty</td>
<td>Plato I—The Philosopher as Literary Author</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Thirty-One</td>
<td>Plato II—<em>Symposium</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Thirty-Two</td>
<td>Plato III—<em>Phaedrus</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Thirty-Three</td>
<td>Rhetoric and Oratory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Thirty-Four</td>
<td>Hellenistic Poetry I—Callimachus and Thucydides</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Thirty-Five</td>
<td>Hellenistic Poetry II—Apollonius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture Thirty-Six</td>
<td>Looking Back and Looking Forward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td>Part I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>Part I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical Notes</td>
<td>Part II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Masterpieces of Ancient Greek Literature

Scope:

The best of ancient Greek literature retains a freshness and immediacy that reaches far beyond its time and place of creation and speaks to readers and audience members today. In these 36 lectures, we discuss selections from that group of masterpieces, starting in every case with the cultural and historical background of each, then focusing on close readings of the works themselves. A guiding principle throughout is that these are not museum pieces to be venerated because of their age, but works of great literature that remain compelling, meaningful, and enjoyable. The organization of the course is largely chronological; in a few places, we break from that order to bring together works of similar genre.

We begin with definitions of the key words in the title of the course—ancient, Greek, and literary masterpieces—then move into six lectures on Homer’s two epics: Lectures Two through Four on the Iliad and Lectures Five through Seven on the Odyssey. We briefly consider the method of their composition, then move through the epics book by book, highlighting the primary themes and poetic devices of each. The Iliad is indeed a moving war story, and the Odyssey is full of adventure and intrigue, and that narrative force is enough to qualify these epics as masterpieces. Beyond that, though, they both confront timeless questions and problems that define our human condition. For us, as for the ancient Greeks, these two poems serve as foundation for all that follows.

Lectures Eight and Nine focus on works contemporary, or nearly so, with the Homeric poems: Hesiod’s didactic epics Theogony and Works and Days and the poems, authorship unknown, collectively called the Homeric Hymns. These works are central to our understanding of early Greek myth but can also stand on their own for their literary and artistic value.

In Lectures Ten and Eleven, we cover considerable ground, geographically and chronologically, with a discussion of the large and varied collection referred to as lyric poetry. The richness of this corpus makes generalization difficult: These poems are metrically varied, often reflective rather than narrative, typically fairly short, and intended for a wide variety of purposes and contexts. Representative authors include Archilochus, Solon, Sappho, and Alcaeus.

A large section of the course, Lectures Twelve through Twenty-Four, covers the drama of 5th- and early 4th-century Athens, both tragedy and comedy. We survey the historical and dramaturgical context of the plays in Lecture Twelve, then devote three lectures to each of the four major playwrights of the period. For Aeschylus, we look at The Persians in Lecture Thirteen, then discuss his trilogy, the Oresteia, in Lectures Fourteen and Fifteen. For Sophocles, Lecture Sixteen introduces two plays, Ajax and Philoctetes; then, we go into greater depth with the three plays that center on the story of Oedipus: Oedipus the King in Lecture Seventeen and Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone in Lecture Eighteen. The corpus of extant tragedies by Euripides is larger. We look briefly at Electra, Orestes, and Trojan Women in Lecture Nineteen, then, choosing depth over breadth, we focus on three more of his works: Medea, Hippolytus, and The Bacchae in Lectures Twenty and Twenty-One. Our sole representative of Old Comedy, Aristophanes, takes us into the early 4th century. We discuss the genre in Lecture Twenty-Two, then, in Lectures Twenty-Three and Twenty-Four, look at several of the extant comedies as illustrations of his technique.

We turn next to two historians, with no apologies for including their works as literary masterpieces. Herodotus’s Histories (Lectures Twenty-Five and Twenty-Six) is, in fact, much more than that. Using the Greek-Persian conflict as an organizing principle, Herodotus gives us an account of his world that is stamped both by Homeric models and by his own particular vision. Thucydides’s masterpiece The History of the Peloponnesian War does indeed give us a straightforward narrative of the events of that war but also stands, as the author himself claims, as a possession for all time. In Lectures Twenty-Seven through Twenty-Nine, we consider passages from The History that illustrate Thucydides’s views of the effects of war, international politics, and human nature more generally.

The next three lectures (Thirty through Thirty-Two) bring us into contact with an author who would seem to reject the whole idea of studying literary masterpieces. Plato’s characters often speak of the shortcomings of the poets and storytellers, yet the artistry of his own dialogues belies that attitude toward literature. Lecture Thirty introduces the idea of Plato as a literary author, rather than simply a philosopher, with examples drawn from throughout his corpus. We then look in greater detail at two of the most polished of his literary creations, Symposium (Lecture Thirty-One) and Phaedrus (Lecture Thirty-Two).
Moving into a genre often maligned in Plato’s dialogues, we consider, in Lecture Thirty-Three, the literary merits of some of the greatest orators of the 5th and 4th centuries, drawing examples from the speeches of Lysias and Demosthenes.

Thanks in large part to the conquests of Alexander the Great, literary production in the 4th century shifts away from the Greek mainland to the city of Alexandria in northern Africa. In Lectures Thirty-Four and Thirty-Five, we discuss the work of three poets of the Hellenistic Age: one of Callimachus’s hymns, Theocritus’s pastoral poetry, and the epic of Apollonius.

The final lecture (Thirty-Six) gives us an opportunity to look back at the primary themes and developments raised in the course of the lectures and forward to the influence of these masterpieces, most immediately on the Romans and, through them, on much of the Western world.
Course Notes

All dates in the course are B.C.E. unless otherwise indicated.

All Essential Readings listed after the lectures in this booklet are primary sources. If no Essential Readings are listed for a particular lecture, then no primary sources are required reading for that lecture.
Lecture Twenty-Five
Herodotus I—Introduction to History

Scope: We shift now from poetry to prose for the next nine lectures, starting with five lectures on history and the two major Greek historians, Herodotus and Thucydides. Herodotus has been called both the Father of History, as the first practitioner of the genre as we know it, and the Father of Lies, for his many so-called digressions and fantastic stories. In this lecture, we first look at the proem of Herodotus’s *Histories*, in which he sets out the goals of his history of the Persian Wars, revealing, among other things, his heavy reliance on Homer. Then, using selected passages from throughout the history, we discuss such issues as his use of sources, arrangement of material, and reliance on an overarching view of history. Discussion of Herodotus’s historical method raises more general questions about historical objectivity, the relation between history and literature, and the place of the historian in his work.

Outline

I. In this lecture, we move from poetry to prose, starting with Herodotus, the man who has been called both the Father of History and the Father of Lies.

II. We know few details about the life of Herodotus (c. 484–425).
   A. He was born in the city of Halicarnassus on the coast of what is now Turkey.
   B. He traveled widely, to various parts of Persia, to Egypt, and to Babylon.
   C. He lived in Athens for some time.
      1. He is said to have been a friend of Sophocles and to have given public readings in Athens of his work in progress.
      2. He then moved to the Greek colony of Thurii in southern Italy.

III. He describes his work as the publication of his “inquiry,” *historie* in Greek, from which we derive the word *history*.
   A. Completed during the 420s, the work was later divided into nine books.
   B. The first six books take us through the growth of the Persian Empire (with an excursus on Egypt in Book 2) and end with the defeat of the Persians at Marathon, just outside Athens, in 490.
   C. The final three books describe the second wave of invasions of Greece, led this time by the Persian king Xerxes, ending with his defeat at Plataea in 479.

IV. The brief proem and the first few chapters of the history outline Herodotus’s goals and methods.
   A. His goal is Homeric, to preserve the memory of the great deeds of both Greeks and non-Greeks.
   B. His discussion of the origins of the East/West conflict tells us much about his use of sources.
      1. The Persians, he says, blame the Phoenicians for starting the conflict by kidnapping the Greek woman Io. The Greeks retaliated by kidnapping the Phoenician Europa. The Trojans then kidnapped Helen, and the Greeks won her back.
      2. In other words, he brings together what we see as the separate realms of myth and history. Mythical accounts have Io and Europa snatched away by Zeus, and we know about Helen.
      3. He also records the Phoenician account: Io was not kidnapped but went willingly.
      4. He offers the two versions of the story but does not judge their accuracy, opting instead to begin with the first Eastern aggression against Greeks, by Croesus the Lydian (c. 550).
   C. Herodotus then reveals a cyclical view of events that will guide and inform his history.
      1. He will tell equally about small and large cities, because many of the formerly small have become great and vice versa.
      2. The general principle is that happiness never stays long in one place.
V. Two shorter stories from later in the *Histories* illustrate Herodotus’s idea about the inevitable change in human fortunes.

A. In Book 3, we see that the Egyptian king Amasis was nervous about the unalloyed prosperity of his ally Polycrates (3.40–43).
   1. He persuaded Polycrates to forestall disaster by throwing away some prized possession.
   2. Polycrates threw a valuable ring into the sea, but a fisherman soon brought it back in the belly of a fish, with predictably dire results.

B. In another story, in Book 7, we hear about a storm in 480 that destroyed some 400 ships from Xerxes’s fleet just off the Greek coast.
   1. Herodotus mentions that one Ameinocles, a Greek who lived on the nearby shore, collected great wealth from the shipwreck (7.190).
   2. But even this bit player cannot get away with his good fortune: Herodotus tells us briefly and cryptically that he suffered the calamity of killing his own son.

VI. Several passages from Book 1 illustrate Herodotus’s methods.

A. He explains how the sovereignty in Lydia passed into the family of Croesus by telling the story of Gyges and Candaules (1.7–13).
   1. This early change in Lydian dynasties is hardly essential to an understanding of the Persian Wars, but the story is irresistible.
   2. The king Candaules was so in love with his wife that he felt compelled to show her off, naked, to his favorite bodyguard, Gyges.
   3. The queen realized she was being watched and gave Gyges the option of killing the king or being killed himself. Thus, Gyges, ancestor of Croesus, became king.
   4. Herodotus gives no indication of how he knows this story, and some of the speeches could have been known only by the principals.
   5. But the story serves as a good introduction to the intrigue and imperial oddity of Eastern monarchs.

B. The story of Solon and Croesus (1.29–33, 86) is similarly suspect—and useful.
   1. The Athenian wise man and, as we have seen, lyric poet Solon traveled to the court of Croesus at Sardis.
   2. Croesus showed off his legendary wealth, then asked Solon who, in his opinion, was the happiest man he knew.
   3. Solon mentioned first an Athenian, Tellus, who had died gloriously in battle defending his city, then two sons from Argos who had died in an act of devotion to their mother.
   4. To Croesus’s outrage, Solon explained that fortunes change, and no one can be considered happy until dead.
   5. Years later, Sardis was taken by the Persians, and Croesus, about to be killed, called out the name of Solon and was saved at the last instant. Only then had he recognized the truth of what Solon said.
   6. The meeting between Solon and Croesus is historically impossible.
   7. But it serves as a perfect introduction to the differences between the East, represented by a king who values wealth more than all else, and an Athenian wise man who recognizes happiness in private citizens and understands the fickleness of fortune.

VII. We can draw some conclusions about Herodotus’s goals and his methods.

A. Sometimes he shows an interest in source evaluation, but sometimes not. In any case, he is transparent about the preconceptions that guide him.

B. Herodotus might not meet the standards of a modern scientific historian, but he does achieve his own goals.

C. His primary goal is to preserve the memory of great deeds and ensure that they receive proper glory. He certainly makes events and people memorable.
Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Kurke, “Charting the Poles of History: Herodotos and Thoukydides.”
Romm, *Herodotus*.

Questions to Consider:
1. Herodotus, it has been said, was too good a historian to let facts get in the way of the truth. What do you think of that statement as it applies both to Herodotus and to other historians?
2. Herodotus was steeped in the literature we have been reading. What influences on his work do you find, from Homer through to the playwrights?
Lecture Twenty-Six
Herodotus II—The Persian Wars

Scope: In this lecture, we continue with Herodotus, shifting from his historical methods to his narrative style. Herodotus gives us a detailed account of the main events of the Persian Wars, and we look here at his account of Xerxes’s preparations and the battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis. But he gives us much more as well, offering cultural background, geographical breadth, and what we consider mythological background to those central events. These so-called digressions often take the form of self-contained stories and are among the most memorable parts of the history. Do they add anything to his overall history? Or does this style lead us to suspect even the most straightforward and seemingly pertinent parts of the history?

Outline

I. The first four books, and part of the fifth, trace the growth of the Persian Empire through several generations of kings and include extended discussion of expeditions to Egypt, Scythia, and elsewhere.
   A. As Herodotus introduces each new region, each part of the world that becomes part of the Persian Empire, he stops to fill in some detail about the customs of those people.
   B. Books 3 and 4 take us into the reign of Darius and his expeditions against India and the Scythians far to the north. Again, there are many more opportunities for ethnography and lists of local customs.

II. We now pick up the narrative with the first clash between Greeks and Persians in the Ionian revolt against Persian rule (5.28—38, 97—6.42).
   A. Greeks living in Ionia, the area along the eastern coast of the Aegean, went to the Greek mainland to find help in their revolt.
      1. The Athenians sent 20 ships.
      2. The Ionians and the Athenians burned the Persian city Sardis, and the Athenians returned home.
   B. The Persians sacked the Ionian stronghold Miletus in 494, and the remaining Ionians fell easily after that.
      1. In Miletus, most of the men were killed, and the women and children were sold into slavery.
      2. Phrynichus, an Athenian playwright, wrote a tragedy called The Capture of Miletus. The Athenians fined him for reminding them of their sorrows and made it illegal to stage the play ever again.

III. The Persian king Darius then sent a force against Greece, using as a pretext the involvement of Greek cities, especially Athens, in the Ionian revolt.
   A. The Athenians asked Sparta for assistance, but the Spartans were unable to help because it was against their law to march before the full moon.
   B. The Athenians attacked the Persians at Marathon at a run and defeated them.
   C. Although they were outnumbered two to one (20,000 to 10,000), only 194 Athenians died compared to 6,400 Persians.

IV. Ten years later, under Darius’s son Xerxes, the Persians returned to finish the job.
   A. The Persian preparations were undertaken on a magnificent scale (7.20).
      1. Ten years earlier, the Persian fleet had been caught in a storm rounding Mount Athos; for this reason, Xerxes had a canal cut through the peninsula that connects the mountain to the shore (7.22—24).
      2. Xerxes transported his troops across the Hellespont by means of a bridge of boats. When his first bridge fell apart in a storm, he cursed the sea, whipped it, and threw chains into it (7.33—36).
      3. Having thus subdued both land and sea, Xerxes led an army toward Greece so large that it drained rivers dry (7.43).
4. Visions and omens were uniformly unfavorable, but Xerxes ignored them. His Greek advisor, Demaratus, warned that the Greeks, especially the Spartans, would not be overawed by the size of his army, but Xerxes did not believe him (7.102–104).

B. On the Greek side, the Athenians had been building up their naval power.
   1. With profits from a surprisingly productive vein in the silver mines, the Athenian Themistocles had persuaded the city to build ships.
   2. As the Persians approached, an oracle said that the Athenians should trust in their wooden walls. Themistocles interpreted the wooden walls as their ships (7.141), and his interpretation carried the day.

V. The Greeks first took a stand against the Persians at a narrow pass in northern Greece called Thermopylae (7.175), with the navy nearby at Artemisium.
   A. The Greek forces at Thermopylae were led by the Spartan king Leonidas and 300 Spartan soldiers (7.202–204).
      1. Xerxes expected the small number of Greeks to run at the sight of his army, but instead, they held the narrow pass against numerous assaults (7.210–212).
      2. A native of the area then told Xerxes about a secret pass over the mountain that would allow him to surround the Greeks (7.213).
      3. Realizing that his forces were being surrounded, Leonidas sent all the Greeks to safety, remaining at the pass with his Spartans.
      4. The slaughter was terrible, and every Spartan died. Herodotus made a point of learning the name of each of the Spartans (7.223–224).
   B. The Greek fleet, far outnumbered, held its own against the Persians at Artemisium (8.10–18).

VI. Thanks to Athenian trickery, the Greek fleet defeated the Persians at Salamis, near Athens.
   A. The Athenians had abandoned their city; the Persians sacked it and burned the Acropolis (8.50–54).
   B. As other Greeks were deciding to take up a defensive position further south, Themistocles sent a secret message to the Persians (8.75–83).
      1. Pretending to offer help, he encouraged the Persians to blockade the Greek fleet at Salamis, lest it slip from Persian grasp.
      2. In fact, his goal was to keep the entire navy at Salamis, where the shallows and narrow straits worked to the advantage of the smaller Greek ships.
      3. As we read in Aeschylus’s Persians, the Greeks won a decisive naval victory at Salamis (8.84–96).
      4. After the destruction of the Persian fleet at Salamis, Themistocles laid the foundation for friendship with the Persians, something that would come in handy shortly when he turned out to be a little too clever for the Athenians and had to leave his home city.

VII. The Persians retreated by land to Plataea, north of Athens, where the Greek forces led by the Spartans defeated them soundly (9.61–70).

VIII. What do we make of Herodotus: Father of History? Father of Lies? Maybe both?
   A. His use of sources is often exemplary, even by modern historical standards, but he is clearly not limited by those standards.
   B. He has strong ideas about the shape of history, and those ideas guide his narrative.
   C. In any case, he tells a compelling and a memorable story.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Lateiner, The Historical Method of Herodotus.
Luce, *The Greek Historians*, chapters 2 and 3.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Compare Herodotus’s account of the Persian Wars, and the battle of Salamis in particular, with the version in Aeschylus’s *Persians*.

2. On what grounds are we justified in calling this account of the Persian Wars a literary masterpiece?
Lecture Twenty-Seven
Thucydides I—The Peloponnesian War

Scope: At the beginning of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides introduces himself as a different sort of historian. His war is the greatest ever, and his methods are superior to those used by earlier historians. In this lecture, we begin with the life of Thucydides and some background information on the war itself. Then, we consider in some detail Thucydides’s style and his own statement of purpose and methods. He presents himself as accurate and scientific, careful about his sources, and dismissive of those features that make a history simply pleasant. Thucydides is indeed more modern in his historical methods than Herodotus, but questions about his objectivity and bias remain.

Outline

I. What we know about the life of Thucydides (c. 460–c. 400) comes largely from information he gives us.
   A. He was born into a wealthy family with ties to the north of Greece.
      1. He says that he began writing his history as soon as the Peloponnesian War started and that he was old enough throughout it to understand what was happening.
      2. When the plague struck Athens in 430, Thucydides himself caught it and survived.
   B. He was elected general in 424 but was held responsible for the Athenian defeat by Spartan general Brasidas at Amphipolis.
   C. He was exiled until the end of war and apparently spent some of that time in Sparta.
   D. He lived past the end of the war but did not finish his history of it. His younger contemporary Xenophon picked up the narrative where Thucydides ended.

II. We have touched already on the Peloponnesian War (431–404), the subject of Thucydides’s history.
   A. After the Persian Wars, Athens grew in wealth and stature.
      1. Claiming that they were protecting Greeks from further Persian invasion, Athenians organized an association of states called the Delian League.
      2. Through the 460s, Athens became increasingly democratic in its constitution.
      3. The Delian League became more obviously an Athenian empire when its treasury was moved to Athens in 454.
   B. Sparta, meanwhile, remained a traditional oligarchy, allied with states throughout the Peloponnesus in the Peloponnesian League.
      1. The democratic tendencies of Athens worried the oligarchs of Sparta and her allies.
      2. The aggressive expansion of the Delian League (and then empire) brought Athens into direct conflict with allies of Sparta.
   C. Hostilities between Athens and Sparta began in the 460s, with a pause for relative peace from 446–431.
      1. Thucydides cites two specific incidents involving allies of Athens and allies of Sparta as the immediate cause for the outbreak of war in 431.
      2. But the real cause, he says, is that the Spartans feared the growth of Athens.
   D. The war itself falls into two parts, broken by the Peace of Nicias from 421–414.
      1. For the early part of the war, Athenians, under the direction of Pericles, and those living near Athens retreated within the walls of the city and avoided open conflict with the superior Spartan land forces, instead harassing them by sea.
      2. A terrible plague broke out in Athens in 430; Pericles was among the many who died from it.
   E. After 10 years of indecisive fighting, with victories and losses on both sides, the two parties entered into a treaty, the Peace of Nicias, that was meant to last 50 years.
   F. Even as hostilities continued during the peace, Athens set off on a major expedition against Sicily in 415. It ended in total defeat for Athens.
G. Hostilities resumed more openly in 414 and ended with the defeat of Athens in 404.

III. Thucydides starts by establishing this war as the greatest ever, then goes on to document the events, proceeding by summer and winter through each year of the war, until his account stops abruptly in the middle of the events of 411.
   A. Book 1 gives a general introduction and the causes for the war.
   B. Books 2–5 focus largely on the first 10 years of the war.
   C. Books 6 and 7, deviating from the summer and winter organization, describe the Sicilian expedition.
   D. Book 8 takes the second phase of the war down to 411.

IV. Thucydides was very much a man of his age, but there is a brilliant uniqueness in both his style and outlook.
   A. The rationalism of the 5th century is evident in his search for human, rather than divine, causes for events.
   B. The influence of rhetorical developments is clear in his frequent use of paired speeches, treating a subject pro and con.
   C. We can also detect the influence of medical writers, whose general approach was to look for humanly intelligible rather than divine causes for things and to describe the world in precise detail in order to determine those causes.
   D. Thucydides’s prose is dense and, in places, famously difficult. Easy entertainment was not his goal.
   E. His view of the world is complex, but we might begin by saying that he is interested here in power, especially how its exercise conflicts with or redefines morality.
      1. In particular, he considers the Athenian attempts to manage the growing empire and what that entails.
      2. His vision, and that of the characters in his History, is refreshingly unclouded by sentimentality: Those with power use it in their own interest; those without it appeal to morality or justice.
      3. But in making these summaries, we are, in effect, extrapolating from Thucydides’s works what we might call patterns, if not laws—a Thucydidean historical view or political philosophy, although he never states such views or philosophies explicitly.
      4. Rather, Thucydides maintains an almost constant position of objectivity; however, we have to be constantly on the lookout for underlying strategies and hidden bias.

V. We start our look at the work itself by considering what Thucydides himself says about it.
   A. After introducing himself, he continues, claiming that the Peloponnesian War is worth documenting because it far surpasses every other war.
      1. To establish the greatness of the war, Thucydides goes into ancient history. In this section, referred to as the archaeology, we find no heroism and very little mention of individuals but an assessment of large forces and movements leading up to the power of Greece at the time of the Peloponnesian War.
      2. He analyzes the Trojan War as a historical event and concludes that it went on so long simply because the Greeks were poorly provisioned at the start.
      3. He then describes political changes in the Greek city-states and the slow growth of naval power and takes care of all of Herodotus in one line, mentioning Marathon and the defeat of Xerxes 10 years later.
      4. The Peloponnesian War, by contrast, involved not only all Greeks, at the height of their wealth and power, but also the Persians and other non-Greeks, and it went on for a long time.
   B. Other writers, he claims, believe all that they hear, without applying critical judgment. He does not mention Herodotus explicitly but gives an example of such credulity from Herodotus (1.20).
   C. Thucydides claims he has firsthand knowledge of his subject.
      1. In Book 5 (5.26), Thucydides reminds us that he lived through the whole war himself, being old enough at its start to understand it. Also, because of his exile, he had the opportunity to spend time with the Spartans.
      2. He tells us in Book 2 (2.48) that he can describe the plague in detail because he suffered from it himself.
D. He claims to apply high standards to establishing the truth of what he says.
   1. He does not exaggerate or embellish in order to win an audience, as the poets and others do (1.21).
   2. The speeches he records he either heard himself or got from some other source; in all cases, he says, he records what was demanded by the occasion, staying as close as possible to what was actually said (1.22).
   3. He says he tests all information, whether from his own experience or from others, rigorously for accuracy. He checks his own memory against the accounts of others and double-checks what he hears from others.

E. Thucydides’s goal is to create something useful for future readers. Because human nature and behavior remain unchanged through time, he says, knowledge of the past can help in understanding the future.

F. His comments seem to suggest that Thucydides was the first of all the authors we have encountered who intended his work for private study, rather than for public performance.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Crane, *The Blinded Eye: Thucydides and the Written Word*.
Luce, *The Greek Historians*, chapters 4 and 5.

Questions to Consider:
1. Thucydides makes considerable claims about his own accuracy as a historian. Does he support those claims adequately?
2. Herodotus’s methods seem well suited to his goal, namely, to preserve the memory of great deeds. How well do Thucydides’s methods match his goal, to create an accurate record of what happened so others might learn from it?
Lecture Twenty-Eight
Thucydides II—Books 1–5

Scope: In this lecture, we discuss three famous passages from Books 1–5 of Thucydides’s History of the Peloponnesian War. Although we treat these passages in chronological order, the primary goal here is not to re-create the actual events of the war through Thucydides’s account. Rather, our goal is to examine how Thucydides uses the Peloponnesian War as a stage for his larger considerations of human nature, particularly as it manifests itself in times of crisis. We start with a summary of the essential differences between Athens and Sparta, as expressed in speeches at Sparta before the war. Then, in Book 2, we turn a spotlight on Athens itself, at its peak in Pericles’s funeral oration and at its lowest depths in the description of the plague. The Melian dialogue from Book 5 marks a particular event in the war but also raises larger questions about empire, power, and international relations.

Outline

I. In this lecture, we continue with Thucydides by discussing three famous passages from Books 1–5, examining how Thucydides uses the war as a stage for his larger considerations of human nature.
   A. We start with speeches at an assembly in Sparta before the war; we then move to Pericles’s funeral oration, followed by the description of the plague. We conclude with the Melian dialogue.
   B. Taken together, these passages trace for us a change in Athens as the war progresses.

II. The speeches at Sparta in 432 (1.68–88) center on whether or not Sparta should declare war on Athens, but they also establish fundamental differences between the two combatants.
   A. The meeting has been called by Sparta’s ally Corinth to try to persuade Sparta of the need to go to war, and the Corinthians speak first.
      1. The Spartan nature is to be slow and inactive.
      2. The Athenians are famous for their speed and innovation.
      3. And so, conclude the Corinthians, Sparta must act now to stop Athenian expansion and aggression.
   B. Athens has not been invited to the meeting, but an Athenian happens to be there on other business and responds to the Corinthian speech.
      1. He does not deny the Corinthian characterization of the Athenian nature.
      2. But he does defend Athenian behavior since the Persian Wars.
      3. He also cautions against being hasty in going to war and suggests talking first.
   C. The Spartan king, Archidamus, responds to both speeches, warning the Spartans of the dangers of war with Athens and, indeed, of any war.
      1. He does not deny the Corinthian characterization of their dilatory nature.
      2. His long experience has taught him that arbitration is better than war.
      3. He suggests sending ambassadors to Athens and, in the meantime, preparing for war.
   D. The otherwise unknown Spartan Sthenelaidas speaks briefly in favor of war and carries the day.
   E. We do not know if this meeting actually happened, but it serves well (as the meeting between Solon and Croesus did for Herodotus) to introduce the essential nature of both Sparta and Athens.

III. In Book 2.35–46, Thucydides records the funeral oration of Pericles for Athenians who died in the first year of fighting. Immediately following that (2.47–54), he describes the physical and moral ravages of the plague in Athens.
   A. In the funeral oration, instead of focusing only on the deeds of the dead, Pericles emphasizes the unique qualities of Athens, the city for which they died.
      1. He praises the democracy both for serving the majority and for fostering an atmosphere of openness in the city.
2. Athenians have a high standard of living, with regular festivals that allow for relaxation and cultivation; yet even so, they are a formidable military force.

3. Everyone is encouraged to be engaged in public affairs, whether through action or deliberation.

4. In short, the city is an exemplar, the school of all Greece, and it produces men who are self-sufficient, versatile, and famous.

5. Pericles then encourages the crowd to love Athens and do all possible to preserve it.

6. Pericles then turns to the survivors, with comfort rather than condolence.
   a. He tells parents of childbearing age who have lost a son to have more children.
   b. He directs sons and brothers of the dead to try hard to match the standards of those who have won such glory.
   c. He cautions widows to keep a low profile, conveying a standard view of the public role of women at the time.

7. The speech has been praised since antiquity for so eloquently and persuasively extolling the excellence of Athens, but we should not take it out of context.

B. Part of that context is the description of the plague that struck Athens in 430.
   1. Thucydides refuses to look for causes, claiming instead that he will describe—which he can do well given that he had the plague—so that future generations might be better prepared for another outbreak.
   2. He gives vivid details about the course of the disease, in language that seems to owe much to the medical writers of his day.
   3. With so many dying, Athenians became careless about funerary rituals and the care of the dead. In other words, so soon after the highly ritualized and formal state burial celebrated by Pericles, we have a complete abandonment of all proper burial practices.
   4. Lawlessness became rampant, and all thought only of immediate pleasure because death was so randomly imminent.
   5. In short, the plague narrative takes us from the height of Athenian civilization to its very depths.

IV. In 416, the Athenians were on the brink of attacking the island Melos, a colony of Sparta, and sent an embassy first to see if the Melians would yield. The dialogue between the Athenian ambassador and the Melians gives us a bald expression of Athenian power (5.84–116).
   A. The Athenians disallow any talk of what is just or right, saying that such talk is appropriate only among equals and Athens is much more powerful than Melos.
   B. Instead, the Melians must save themselves by yielding now to Athens. Athens cannot afford to let the Melians remain neutral; their choice is between war and survival.
   C. Melos refuses to yield. The Athenians take the city, kill every adult male, and sell the rest of the population into slavery.
   D. This passage is considered one of the clearest examples of Thucydides’s unsentimental realism. It is cold, calculating, and detached.
   E. We have come a long way from the Athens of Book 1 and Pericles’s funeral oration. Whether moral abyss or effective pragmatism, the destruction of Melos prepares well for the Sicilian expedition that follows.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Hornblower, “Narratology and Narrative Techniques in Thucydides.”
Questions to Consider:

1. The speeches at Sparta in Book 1 are all addressed to the growing conflict between Athens and Sparta, but it has been said that many of the arguments apply more broadly, to consideration of war at any time, in any place. How valid is that statement?

2. Why does Thucydides so abruptly juxtapose the funeral oration and the account of the plague? Can we read the plague description as a commentary, albeit inexplicit, on the glories of Athens that have just been described?
Scope: Books 6 and 7 of Thucydides’s History are something of a departure from the rest of the work, a self-contained unit on the Athenians’ ill-fated expedition against Syracuse in Sicily. What begins with optimism and unparalleled wealth ends in complete and utter defeat for the Athenians. This movement from the heights of power to such unexpected depths parallels what we often find in tragedy. Also, in the depiction of the Athenians as the imperial aggressors against the democratic Syracuse, Thucydides recalls the earlier Persian Wars, with implicit comparisons between the Persian aggressors and the Athens that has developed in recent decades.

Outline

I. Book 6 of Thucydides’ History begins with the bald declaration that Athens has decided to subjugate Sicily.
   A. Only gradually does Thucydides explain the context of that decision.
      1. In 421, open hostilities between Sparta and Athens temporarily came to an end with the Peace of Nicias, meant to last for 50 years.
      2. In 416, an Athenian ally in Sicily sent a request for aid, thereby giving Athens an excuse to attack the Spartan ally Syracuse in Sicily.
   B. The Athenian generals Nicias and Alcibiades debate the pros and cons of the expedition.
   C. Nicias is an older man, noted as much for his piety as for his wealth.
      1. He argues that Sicily is too far away and that Athens has plenty of enemies and rebelling allies closer to home.
      2. The Athenians should beware, he warns, of young generals who hope to win personal fame and fortune from the expedition.
   D. Alcibiades, the young general obliquely slandered by Nicias, argues that the Sicilian expedition is in the best interest of Athens (6.16−18).
      1. Thucydides characterizes Alcibiades as a spendthrift eager for personal glory. His personal behavior was wildly licentious, but his conduct of public affairs was good.
      2. Later events prove Alcibiades a brilliant general, and Thucydides blames the Athenians for distrusting him; they made the mistake of confusing his public and private behavior.
      3. The Sicilians, Alcibiades says, are ruled by mobs and frequently change their laws.
      4. We have to help an ally in need and, at the same time, show how we despise the Spartan threat.
      5. He concludes by reminding the Athenians that it is in their national character to be active, to take risks, and to set off on adventures.
   E. Nicias, in his first misjudgment of this narrative, argues that the Athenians must send a massive force if they hope to succeed. He was trying to dissuade the Athenians but instead inspired them to make the expedition larger and richer than before (6.19−24).
      1. In the enthusiasm for war, dissenters feared to speak openly against it (6.24).
      2. Thucydides emphasizes the size, splendor, and cost of the expedition in terms that might recall Xerxes’s campaign (6.30−31).

II. We then cut to an assembly in Syracuse—a democracy much like Athens herself—where two speakers debate the need to prepare for an Athenian invasion.
   A. The first speaker insists that Athens is on the way.
      1. He compares the Sicilians to the Greeks faced with the approaching Persians. Those defending their country must pull together in the face of a foreign aggressor.
      2. He suggests that they go meet the Athenian fleet in southern Italy. The plan is not pursued, but it reveals a mentality not unlike the Athenians’.
B. The second speaker urges a moderate response to the rumor of invasion.
   1. In the process, he pointedly praises the democratic features of Syracuse (6.39).
   2. Thucydides reminds us that Athens has not previously fought against a democracy, in this case, the Athenians are unable to win over the foe by promising a change in government (6.20 and 7.55).

III. As preparations are underway, someone smashes the statues of Hermes that guard doorways throughout Athens (6.27–29, 53, 60–61).
   A. In response to the offer of rewards, informers accuse Alcibiades of the crime, saying it is a prelude to overthrowing the democracy and seizing power for himself.
   B. Alcibiades demands a quick trial to face the charges before the expedition, but his enemies fear the influence of the army, all of them behind Alcibiades, and they delay until after the expedition has left.
      1. He is found guilty in absentia at the trial, and a ship is sent to retrieve him from Sicily.
      2. Alcibiades slips free of his captors and finds his way to Sparta, where he gives the Spartans valuable information (6.89–92).
      3. He advises the Spartans to establish a year-round fortification near Athens and to send a Spartan general to help in the defense of Syracuse. The Spartans eventually act on both, with devastating results for Athens.
   C. The Athenians, meanwhile, are left in Sicily with Nicias, an unimaginative and unwilling general.

IV. The Athenians win several key victories over Syracuse and are on the verge of taking the city when the Spartan general Gylippus arrives, and the tide turns against Athens.
   A. Nicias, now in a defensive mode, asks that the Athenians be withdrawn or reinforced (7.11–15); hoping for the former, he gets the latter, under the Athenian general Demosthenes (different from the great orator in Lecture Thirty-Three).
   B. Even with reinforcements and the initial Athenian success of a daring night raid on the heights above Syracuse, the Athenians suffer another defeat.
   C. Demosthenes advises leaving Sicily, but Nicias delays, fearing the wrath of the Athenians back home.
   D. When Nicias has seen the considerable reinforcements the Syracusans have received from an ally in Sicily, and he is finally ready to retreat, there is an eclipse of the moon. Those who read the signs forbid troop movement for 27 days, and the pious Nicias obeys (7.50). Thus, the besiegers are condemned to stay in Sicily.

V. After a Syracusan victory in a naval battle in the harbor of Syracuse, the Athenians try to retreat but lose their entire force.
   A. The Athenians modify their ships by adding grappling hooks, but the Syracusans, out-innovating the innovators, stretch hide across their prows so the hooks do not catch.
   B. The battle is fiercely fought, with Athenians watching from the shore of the harbor as their fleet is destroyed.
   C. The defeated Athenians regroup on land but fail to escape the environs of Syracuse, held in check by a false message that the passes are heavily guarded.
   D. When the Athenians finally do retreat by land, the Syracusans are well prepared, but the Athenians are demoralized, ill-provisioned, poorly led, and disgraced.
   E. Many Athenians are killed on the march, including Nicias and Demosthenes. The Athenians not killed on the march are imprisoned in a quarry in Syracuse, where they die slowly of exposure, disease, and starvation.

VI. This was the greatest achievement in Greek history, says Thucydides—at once the most glorious victory for the winners and the most calamitous defeat for the losers.
   A. The earlier emphasis on Athenian wealth and numbers now becomes a negative; so much was lost.
   B. As in the Persian Wars, we see the result of an imperial war of aggression.
C. Athens does recover from this blow but loses the war to Sparta in 404.

VII. Looking back from the end of the Sicilian expedition, we can see that many of the same qualities that were admirable in the description of Athens earlier have led to the disaster now.

A. Thus, there is a degree of predictability in the path that Athens has followed, from a democracy aggressively protecting its own people to an empire that lives by subjugation and dies by overreaching.

B. Perhaps it was inevitable that Athens became what it did, given who she was.

C. If we think of Athens as the hero of Thucydides’s work, then we see her as a hero unwilling to change her nature, whose own greatest strengths lead eventually to her fall. In that, we can see that Thucydides’s history owes much to tragedy.

D. But we cannot forget the extraordinary care and accuracy of his account of the war. Thucydides was rarely copied—he was too much of a genius in his style, too singular in his outlook—but his influence cannot be overestimated.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. What led to the Athenian disaster in Sicily? Was it an inevitable result of the natural Athenian tendency toward action and innovation? Was it human error, because Nicias instead of Alcibiades was in charge? Some combination of the two?

2. Thucydides gives us an account of specific events during the war, but some critics have extracted from the changing fortunes of Athens a statement of political philosophy about the dangers of democracy and imperialism. What lesson, if any, do these events teach later generations?
Scope: In this lecture, we examine some of the literary qualities that appear throughout Plato’s philosophical dialogues. Rather than discussing the philosophical ideas or systems that might be extracted from the dialogues, we look in some detail at the way Plato has chosen to present those ideas. He never speaks in his own voice, and ideas are not stated categorically but emerge from discussion, modified by the particular nature of each dialogue and by the strengths and weaknesses of the cast of characters in each. Despite arguments within certain dialogues against Homer and other poets, Plato himself borrows much from them in his own style. The Republic, for example, includes arguments against the poets as distant imitators of reality, yet it concludes with a poetic description of life after death. Other examples of similar practice appear throughout the corpus. What, then, is Plato’s attitude toward literature?

Outline

I. We now turn to Plato and his philosophical dialogues.
   A. Our purpose in these lectures is to examine some of the literary qualities that appear throughout those dialogues rather than to discuss the philosophical ideas or systems that might be extracted from them.
   B. Plato never speaks in his own voice; rather, ideas and arguments emerge from conversations between Plato’s characters.
   C. What, then, is the attitude within the dialogues toward literature? Several dialogues contain strong arguments against poetry, yet Plato himself borrows much from the poets in his own style. Plato, in other words, contradicts in the form of his dialogues what his characters say within them.

II. Plato (c. 429–347) is careful to reveal nothing of himself in his dialogues, and we have little information about his life.
   A. A group of letters attributed to Plato gives some detail (especially the seventh), but we should treat that information with care.
   B. Having come from a wealthy and aristocratic background, Plato devoted himself to philosophy after listening to Socrates.
   C. Unlike Socrates, he established a formal school, the Academy, for the study and teaching of philosophy.
   D. Also unlike Socrates, who wrote nothing, Plato wrote numerous philosophical dialogues, almost all of them including Socrates as a central character but never including himself as a speaker.

III. The dialogue format allows Plato to act as midwife or gardener of ideas, helping others formulate their own views rather than telling his own.
   A. There is, thus, an elusive quality to the dialogues that has prompted discussion since antiquity.
      1. Some sift the dialogues for Platonic dogma, looking for what Plato thinks and even a complete philosophical system in the words he gives his characters.
      2. Others see Plato as testing, questioning, and by his very reticence, inviting his readers and students to come to their own conclusions.
      3. It has been said by the English philosopher Whitehead that all of Western philosophy is “a series of footnotes to Plato,” so great is his influence on all that followed. But it has also been said that Plato cannot be blamed for all that has been done in his name.
   B. Certain ideas do recur in his dialogues, and it will be helpful to introduce one here: his theory of forms or ideas.
      1. The dialogues present themselves as records of conversations between Socrates and others.
         a. The early or Socratic dialogues seem to give us a relatively unadulterated view of the historical Socrates as he carried on conversations.
b. The middle-period dialogues seem to come from the days of Plato’s Academy; Socrates is still a prominent character, but now, Plato shows him espousing new ideas and theories—that’s where we find the theory of forms.

c. In the late dialogues, Socrates plays a less central role, and the discussion turns to such subjects as logic and political philosophy.

2. According to the theory of forms, all that we see and know in this physical world is partial, changeable, and only a reflection of its eternal and unchanging form or idea, which can be comprehended only through philosophical study.

3. In this view, there exist outside of the sensible world ideal forms of justice, beauty, truth, goodness, and so on.

4. The most important human pursuit is the attempt, by means of philosophy, to apprehend these forms.

IV. Our emphasis here is on the literary quality of Plato’s corpus. We begin with the views expressed within the dialogues themselves about various types of literature.

A. Three dialogues in particular, the *Apology*, the *Ion*, and the *Republic*, comment on poetry.

B. The *Apology* is Socrates’s defense speech against charges of impiety.

1. In explaining why he always went around questioning people, Socrates states that an oracle of Apollo at Delphi declared that he, Socrates, was the wisest man. Socrates, who always claimed he knew nothing, set out to find a wiser man than he.

2. He talked to all sorts of people and had no luck finding someone wiser than he.

3. When he spoke to poets, he found that they could recite beautiful poetry, but when he asked if they could explain the poetry, they could not. He concluded that the poetry came to them simply through inspiration, not through wisdom or understanding.

C. The *Ion* is a conversation between Socrates and Ion, a performer of the Homeric poems.

1. Socrates suggests that poets, such as Homer, and the performers of their poems, such as Ion, have no real knowledge of what they are doing; they are possessed by divine inspiration, conduits of a divine voice.

2. Poetic inspiration is, thus, something passed from the gods to a poet, to the performer, and to the audience, like magnetism through a set of iron rings.

3. While poetry in this view is closely connected to the divine, the emphasis here is on the essentially irrational nature of poets, unable to give an explanation of themselves or their work.

D. The *Republic*, a wide-ranging work on political and moral philosophy, contains several statements about art and literature, particularly their place in society.

1. In Books 2 and 3, Socrates discusses the qualities of an ideal state and suggests that only true and beneficial poetry be allowed in the state.

2. Homer and Hesiod and their like tell stories that make the gods appear less than perfect, and they include examples of humans acting ignobly; they must be severely edited.

3. The danger, he continues, is greater when the poetry is mimetic, that is, when the poet adopts the voice of his characters (as often in Homer) instead of narrating about the characters.

4. The poet, or the reader of the poetry, runs the risk of becoming like the characters in these mimetic scenes, and not all of the characters are good models.

5. Finally, in Book 10, Socrates generalizes further: The world as we see it is simply a pale imitation of true and eternal reality, and art of all kinds is simply an imitation of this world. It is, thus, an imitation of an imitation.

6. Hence, poetry stands at three removes from reality and should be entirely banished from the ideal state.

V. Plato complicates things, though, by resorting often and effectively to poetry itself and the techniques of poetry in his dialogues.

A. In the first place, the dialogues are entirely mimetic rather than narrative; every word is presented in the voice of one or another character. And not all of the characters are admirable or noble.
B. Throughout the dialogues, Plato’s characters reveal a close acquaintance with poetry, especially the poetry of Homer, referring often to famous scenes or passages to bolster their points.

C. Plato’s characters, especially Socrates, often resort to a form of discourse that shares much with poetry. Instead of arguing a point logically, he tells an imaginative story that illustrates his point. We have three examples.
1. Just after the banishment of poets in the Republic, Socrates describes the system of reward and punishment in the afterlife in the so-called Myth of Er, the story of a man who had a near-death experience, saw what waits on the other side, and came back to tell the tale.
2. In the Phaedo, the dialogue that describes the last hours of Socrates’s life, Socrates says just before his death that he has insufficient time to discuss and prove the nature of the world, but he can tell a descriptive story about it.
3. Finally, Plato introduces in two different dialogues, the Timaeus and the Critias, a story that has endured through the centuries about an island kingdom called Atlantis.
   a. In the distant past, the story goes, Athens brought an end to an imperialistic attack by Atlantis, then both were utterly destroyed by earthquake, wiping out memory of the event.
   b. Thus, Plato has his character concocting a story and attesting to its truth—a myth that serves as a foundation of his argument.

VI. These dialogues, then, say one thing about poetry and do another. Plato has given us plenty to ponder and to figure out for ourselves. It is no wonder that articles and books appear regularly and consistently addressing Plato’s views on art, poetry, and literature.

Essential Reading:
Plato, Ion and Republic, Books 2, 3, 10.

Supplementary Reading:
Asmis, “Plato on Poetic Creativity.”
Clay, D., Platonic Questions: Dialogues with the Silent Philosopher, chapter 2.
Nightingale, “Sages, Sophists and Philosophers: Greek Wisdom Literature.”

Questions to Consider:
1. What are the advantages and the disadvantages to writing philosophy in the dialogue form?
2. Plato’s Socrates does not think highly of poetry, yet Plato himself resorts to poetic devices in his dialogues. How might we resolve or explain this apparent contradiction?
Lecture Thirty-One  
Plato II—Symposium

Scope: The next two lectures take us through two of Plato’s most polished literary masterpieces, the Symposium in this lecture and Phaedrus in the next. The Symposium is the story, told many years after the fact, of a party at which each attendee delivers a speech on Eros, the personification of love. Philosophers who are uninterested in the literary aspects of Plato’s dialogues often look only at one speech, delivered by Socrates, for the dialogue’s kernel of philosophical truth. We, on the other hand, take into consideration not only the other speeches but also the introductory framing of the party and the riotous interruption near the end. We will see that distinctions between philosophical and literary parts of the dialogue are impossible to draw and that the dialogue is best read as the seamless whole that Plato gave us.

Outline

I. In this lecture, we study the Symposium, the story of a celebratory party at which each member of the party agrees to deliver a speech in honor of love.

II. The dialogue begins with Apollodorus, one of Socrates’s followers, in mid-conversation with an unnamed character who has asked him to tell what happened at the famous party at the house of Agathon, a tragic playwright.

A. Someone else had recently asked Apollodorus the same question, chasing after him in his eagerness to know, and Apollodorus now recounts the details of that meeting.
   1. Apollodorus was not at the party but heard about it from Aristodemus, another member of Socrates’s circle, who was there.
   2. A man named Phoenix has also been talking about the party, also having heard details from Aristodemus.

B. Thus, even before the account of that party begins, we have the sense that it is important, interesting to many, and worth attending to.

C. At the same time, we learn that the party took place long ago and that the version of it we will hear has been filtered through several tellings.

III. It will help to pause here for a brief introduction to two aspects of Athenian culture that underlie this dialogue: the nature of the symposium and Athenian sexual customs.

A. The symposium was a social gathering for aristocratic males.
   1. The events included food, drink, and entertainment of various sorts provided by the so-called flute girls.
   2. Typically, the men reclined at these parties, two to a couch.
   3. Strict protocols were followed, as the host, or one appointed in his place, would decide how much and how quickly the guests would drink.
   4. These symposia seem to have been important venues not only for relaxation and entertainment but also for passing along aristocratic values in an increasingly democratic Athens.

B. Aristocratic Athenian males of the 5th century often formed erotic attachments with boys.
   1. It was viewed as natural and traditional for an Athenian male to seek sexual gratification from a younger male, and for the younger male to yield in return for the attention, admiration, and social standing given him by the older male.
   2. However, it’s somewhat misleading to refer to these relationships, or these men, as homosexual, because these same men also married women and raised children.
   3. The Greek terms for those involved in these relationships are usually translated as “lover” for the older male and “beloved” for the younger.

IV. This gathering is in celebration of a dramatic victory by Agathon. Socrates was supposed to arrive with
Aristodemus, but Socrates fell into a deep reverie on the way and stopped, only to arrive later. Because all the guests are still queasy from the previous night’s drinking, they decide that instead of drinking, they will give speeches on Eros, the personification of love.

**A.** Phaedrus, a young follower of Socrates, starts with a traditional speech of praise that focuses on the lineage and the good consequences of love, with mythological examples.

**B.** The next man to speak, Pausanias, is more analytical, identifying two types of love: Earthly love desires only physical satisfaction, while heavenly love is long-lasting and interested in the moral well-being and improvement of all involved.

**C.** Aristophanes is to speak next, but he has the hiccups. Eryximachus, a doctor, first offers Aristophanes several cures for hiccups; he then expands Pausanias’s analysis to a general, even global, duality between good and bad desires and, further, to general scientific laws.

**D.** Aristophanes, now cured, offers a very different view of love, one that accounts for the various types of human desire.

1. Once upon a time, there were three sexes: male, female, and a mixture of the two.
2. Each being was spherical in shape, with four arms, four legs, two faces, two sets of genitalia, and so on.
3. Because these mortals behaved arrogantly toward the gods, Zeus cut them in half, right down the middle, then sewed skin and shifted parts to result in mortals as we now know them.
4. Each half now yearns for its other half: Some desire the other sex for completion, some desire the same sex, depending on how each was configured before the split.

**E.** Agathon, the poet, delivers a beautiful and almost poetic speech of praise.

**F.** The philosophical core of the dialogue comes in Socrates’s speech, which he attributes to a woman named Diotima, invented for this speech.

1. Socrates starts by saying that he had misunderstood the assignment—he thought the idea was to tell the truth about love, not just make pretty statements.
2. He goes on to say that Diotima had instructed him in the ways of love, telling him how love of a single example of physical beauty on Earth can lead to the philosophical love of the eternal forms of beauty, truth, and goodness.
3. There is a progression of love toward those forms, moving upward, as on the steps of a ladder. The progression goes as follows: Love of a single body leads to recognition of the beauty of all bodies, then to an appreciation of the greater beauty of the soul, and from there, to an apprehension of true, unchanging beauty.
4. Thus, love of beauty in this world is a necessary stepping stone toward understanding the eternal form of beauty.

**V.** At this philosophical climax, there is a commotion at the door and a very drunk Alcibiades crashes the party.

**A.** Invited to join in, he offers a eulogy, not of love, but of Socrates.

**B.** Alcibiades, one of the most sought-after youths in Athens, had been so taken by Socrates’s wisdom that he had taken on the role of lover, rather than beloved, with the older (and physically unattractive) Socrates.

**C.** Socrates, though, was not interested in Alcibiades’s advances, suggesting that Alcibiades was too much interested in the physical world.

**D.** After Alcibiades’s eulogy, the speechmaking gives way to uproarious drinking.

**VI.** We can understand the dialogue as a whole as demonstrating in a variety of ways the procession toward ideal beauty that Socrates describes in his speech.

**A.** First, in order to get at the truth of what happened at the symposium, we have to work through layers of opinion, hearsay, and retelling.

**B.** And there is a similar progression in each of the earlier speeches. There is something of value in each one, but each is just an imperfect approximation of what love really is or how love can be so centrally important in a philosophical life.
C. The speech of Socrates, from Diotima, then outlines that progression toward beauty explicitly.

D. Alcibiades’s speech, describing the behavior of Socrates, gives us a concrete example of what we’ve been discussing in the abstract.

E. Plato gives us no clear answers, but he does give us plenty of hints and leaves the answers sufficiently unclear to make us continue reading the dialogue, talking about it, and asking about what happened at that famous dinner party at Agathon’s.

**Essential Reading:**

Plato, *Symposium*.

**Supplementary Reading:**


**Questions to Consider:**

1. Plato takes great care to characterize the participants in this dialogue, giving each an individual personality. Does that make any difference in the interpretation of what they say?

2. The dramatic date of the *Symposium* is in 416, days after Agathon’s first victory and just before the Sicilian expedition and Alcibiades’s troubles. Athenian readers of this dialogue would have known all that. Should this historical information make a difference in our interpretation of the dialogue?
Lecture Thirty-Two  
Plato III—*Phaedrus*

Scope:  *Phaedrus* is another dialogue about love and rhetoric, another of Plato’s acclaimed masterpieces, but this one takes place outside the walls of Athens and has only two participants, Socrates and his young admirer Phaedrus. Again, there is a clearly philosophical core within one of Socrates’s two speeches about love, but the dialogue contains much besides that: an introduction to the setting and the speakers, a speech attributed to the orator Lysias and Socrates’s speech in response to that, and a large section of the dialogue devoted to an analysis of rhetoric. Since antiquity, readers who look for philosophical precision have been puzzled by the apparent lack of unity in the dialogue. Here, we examine the dialogue with an eye toward the characters involved. The twists and turns reveal Socrates’s subtle and careful attempts to engage his interlocutor—and, by extension, Plato’s readers—in a more serious study of philosophy.

Outline

I. *Phaedrus*, a dialogue between Socrates and his young admirer Phaedrus, takes place outside the walls of Athens in a pastoral setting. Like the *Symposium*, it begins with a seemingly nonphilosophical conversation that nonetheless adds to the argument.

A. In the first sentence, Socrates asks Phaedrus where he is coming from and where he is going.
   1. These simple questions become meaningful in light of the rest of dialogue. In fact, an old story suggests that Plato did indeed take great care with the opening words of his dialogues.
   2. We might interpret Socrates’s greeting as a question about Phaedrus’s educational progress: He is coming from the study of rhetoric with the orator Lysias and, in the course of this dialogue, moving toward the study of philosophy with Socrates.

B. It is also significant that the two leave the city, moving away from the setting of the morning’s rhetoric and toward a pastoral setting filled with the inspiration of rural deities. This setting is odd, however, for two reasons.
   1. Socrates famously never liked to leave Athens, except on military service for the city.
   2. Socrates gladly joins Phaedrus in his rhetorical exercises, but Socrates is almost consistently hostile toward the orators of his day and to the study of rhetoric.

II. The first half of the dialogue consists of three speeches on the subject of love.

A. Phaedrus reads the first one, written by Lysias, from a manuscript he has brought with him in order to practice and memorize the speech.
   1. Lysias’s speech, spoken by one who claims he is not in love, argues that it is better for a beloved to yield to a nonlover than to a lover.
   2. In a list of examples, Lysias points out the dangerous emotions that drive a lover; better by far to become involved with one who is rational and in control of himself.

B. Socrates responds to this argument for calm rationality by saying that watching Phaedrus deliver it has driven him into an ecstatic frenzy.

C. Socrates then claims that voices of past authors are welling up within him, encouraging him to deliver a better speech on the same subject.
   1. He begins by breaking the deceit: The speaker is not really a nonlover but a lover trying to get a jump on the competition by posing as a nonlover.
   2. His speech gets at the same point as Lysias’s: It is dangerous for a beloved to become involved with a lover.
   3. But the presentation is far better organized and systematic, beginning with a definition of love and moving through a series of clear points.

D. As they prepare to go back to Athens, Socrates’s familiar divine sign prevents him from returning to the city.
1.  This divine sign never compels Socrates toward any sort of activity but often checks or stops him when he’s heading in the wrong direction.

2.  The sign sits oddly with his usually rational behavior but seems at home in this setting.

E.  Socrates feels compelled to deliver another speech, to make up for the impiety in what he has just said. He must make amends to love, a divine force, for presenting it in such a negative light.

1.  This speech is often seen as the philosophical core of the dialogue, in the midst of much that can be ignored.

2.  Madness, he begins, can be a blessing when it comes from the gods; the task is to prove that love is one form of that divine madness.

3.  He then describes the soul, comparing it to a charioteer controlling two horses, one good and one bad. This is another famous use of story or analogy, rather than argument.

4.  The goal of the chariot-soul is to fly upward (fighting the earthbound tendencies of the bad horse) to the regions beyond the heavens, where the soul can gaze upon and contemplate the eternal forms.

5.  As in The Symposium, when the soul sees beauty in this world, that sight stirs recollection of the true and eternal beauty beyond the heavens and brings the soul closer to that true beauty.

6.  To summarize, as in The Symposium, love is an important part of the philosophical life, providing the first impulse for a journey toward the eternal truths.

F.  Thus, in his first speech, Socrates beat Lysias at his own game and, in his second, pointed out the shortcomings of Lysias’s views and offered in their place the more fulfilling pursuit of truth in its ideal form. In short, he has offered philosophy in the place of rhetoric.

1.  The dialogue could end here, with Socrates’s prayer that Phaedrus become a student of philosophy rather than rhetoric.

2.  But Phaedrus does not get it and predicts that Lysias will now have to compose a speech on the new theme that Socrates has developed.

III.  Thus, the conversation continues, with the talk turning to rhetoric and the mechanics of a good speech as taught by the Sophists and the handbooks.

A.  It is at this point that many commentators think the dialogue falls apart, losing its focus, but in fact, Socrates is following in the pedagogical direction required by Phaedrus’s limitations.

B.  Socrates knows all the technical treatises and rules of rhetoric, as he knew how to compose a speech in Lysianic style. The two look back over the speeches they have delivered, analyzing them according to these various rules, and the Platonic speech in Lysias’s style really takes a beating.

C.  But Socrates also knows a better method of communication and persuasion.

1.  The speaker must first know the truth about the subject.

2.  It is also essential to understand thoroughly the audience and the type of speech that will most effectively reach that audience.

3.  In fact, all through this dialogue, we have been watching Socrates apply these methods in his conversation with Phaedrus: First, he corrected what Lysias (and he himself) had been saying about love; then, he altered his presentation, from speeches to discussion of speeches, in order to reach Phaedrus.

IV.  The last subject raised in this conversation is the value of writing. This comes in a story Socrates tells about the invention of writing in Egypt.

A.  When the Egyptian god Theuth presented to the king Thamus the art of writing, the king pointed out its faults.

B.  Socrates is once again reverting to a story, rather than argument, to make his point. The section on writing thus serves as a summation of Socrates’s attempts to bring Phaedrus to the study of philosophy.

1.  Lysias, represented in this dialogue by his written speech, cannot address the particular needs of Phaedrus. At best, Phaedrus will memorize the speech, thereby internalizing someone else’s ideas—and not very good ones at that.
2. Socrates, on the other hand, has revealed a flexibility of both thought and presentation, changing his conversational methods to suit the needs and limitations of Phaedrus.

3. We might say that as the spoken word is superior to the written, so is Socrates’s philosophy superior to the rhetoric of Lysias.

4. We don’t know how things will turn out, but the two men leave together, with Phaedrus emphasizing their friendship.

**Essential Reading:**
Plato, *Phaedrus*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Schenker, “The Strangeness of the *Phaedrus*.”

**Questions to Consider:**
1. Since antiquity, commentators have argued about whether this is a dialogue about love, about rhetoric, or about something else. How would you summarize what it is about? On what basis?
2. Socrates’s long second speech deserves careful scrutiny. In what way does the rest of the dialogue act out the themes and ideas raised in it?
Lecture Thirty-Three
Rhetoric and Oratory

Scope: This lecture builds, in one sense, on much that we have already discussed. From Homer onward, Greek literature reveals a deep interest in the role and power of speeches, and we begin the lecture by considering some examples from other literary genres. By the late 5th century, that interest develops into a formal rhetoric, with teachers, professional practitioners, and its own complex set of rules. We discuss that development here and look at examples from two of the leading orators from the 5th and 4th centuries: Lysias, whose courtroom speeches are not only windows into Athenian life but also models of stylistic clarity and character portrayal, and Demosthenes, the greatest of the orators, whose masterful compositions document both personal travails and political intrigue of the highest order.

Outline

I. Rhetoric and oratory are areas that we might not think of as literary, but they are essential features of all the Greek literature we have been reading.
   A. Rhetoric now carries the connotation of being contrived, artificial, or highly formalized speech, often aiming toward some unpleasant goal or intending to deceive.
   B. But in the polis (especially one as democratic and argumentative as Athens), verbal persuasion was essential to all political activity and, hence, became the foundation of education and a force in almost all literature.

II. Rhetoric became a subject of intense study in its own right during the 5th century, especially in democratic Athens, although origins of the study of rhetoric have been traced back to Sicily.
   A. The activity of the Sophists often centered on the teaching of rhetoric, as we have seen in Aristophanes’s parody of the Sophists (Clouds) and in Plato’s response to them (Phaedrus).
   B. These speakers and teachers produced a great quantity of formal rulebooks about rhetoric. Plato’s pupil Aristotle wrote the most influential of those handbooks. His Rhetoric treats such topics as the form of rhetorical argument, the psychology of the audience, and aspects of rhetorical style.

III. In his handbook, Aristotle divided all oratory into three groups based on the use or venue of the speech, and all three types are evident not only in public life but also in the literature we have already read.
   A. Epideictic oratory, or oratory for show, is a large category of speeches that includes those delivered at funerals, festivals, or other public occasions—outside of the courtroom and the assembly.
      1. One of the earliest examples of epideictic oratory comes from a man named Gorgias, a Sicilian who came to Athens in the late 5th century.
      2. We have already seen one of the most famous examples of epideictic speech, Pericles’s funeral oration in Thucydides.
      3. The speeches in Plato’s Symposium and Phaedrus all fall into the epideictic category.
   B. Forensic oratory is the category of courtroom speeches, for both prosecution and defense.
      1. One famous example of forensic oratory that we have mentioned in this course is Plato’s version of Socrates’s defense speech, the Apology.
      2. The forensic speeches of Lysias, working in the hyperactive Athenian legal system, are also among the best we have. Lysias wrote both for himself and for others who could afford his services.
      3. It was effective forensic oratory that Strepsiades in The Clouds hoped his son would learn in Socrates’s Thinkery so that he could evade the claims of his creditors.
      4. We also saw forensic style in Jason’s response to Medea in Euripides’s play. To her accusations, he set up an elaborate and carefully organized response, as though he were in a court of law.
      5. Another tragic example of forensic oratory is seen in Aeschylus’s Eumenides, which ends in a courtroom scene.
C. The *polis* gave rise to political or deliberative oratory. In public assemblies, the success of a given agenda depended on its persuasive presentation.

1. The 4th-century orator Demosthenes was considered in antiquity as the greatest of all orators; his political speeches warning of the dangers of King Philip of Macedon (the *Philippics*) are among his most powerful.
2. We have seen this type of speech as far back as the assemblies in the Homeric epics.
3. Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* begins with a deliberative speech, as the old priest seeks help in the midst of the plague.
4. We might also recall the assembly scene reported in Euripides’s *Orestes*, when we heard about several different deliberative speeches that shaded into the forensic.
5. Thucydides’s history is filled with deliberative speeches, for example, in the debates at Sparta in Book 1.
6. For a particularly unsuccessful deliberative speech, we might turn to the attempts by Dikaiopolis in the assembly at the beginning of Aristophanes’s *Acharnians*.

IV. Lysias (c. 445–c. 380) was not an Athenian but a resident alien in Athens, with somewhat reduced legal rights. Many examples survive of forensic speeches he wrote for others.

A. His prose is remarkably clear and lucid, and his narrative skill was much admired.
B. He was celebrated for his *ethopoeia*, his ability to create with his language a distinct and sympathetic persona for each of his clients.
C. His speech *On the Killing of Eratosthenes*, written between c. 400 and 380, displays these qualities well.

1. The defendant, Euphiletus, had killed Eratosthenes for having an affair with his wife. Euphiletus argues here that the killing was not premeditated (which would be a crime) but was a natural result of catching the adulterer in the act.
2. Euphiletus describes in vivid detail his preadultery domestic arrangements, leading us step-by-step toward the realization of the truth.
3. He portrays his wife as far more clever than he but saves the worst for Eratosthenes, a professional adulterer who is exposed by a former lover.
4. Finally, Euphiletus presents himself, not as a defendant, but as a righteous agent of the state, with little choice but to kill Eratosthenes, as the law demands.
5. As with almost all of these speeches, we do not know how the case turned out.

V. Demosthenes (384–322) is considered the greatest of Greek orators. Both forensic and political speeches survive from his period of intense activity, c. 355–322.

A. He was born into a wealthy family, and his earliest speeches were forensic, as he went to court to protect his inheritance from unscrupulous guardians.
B. His intense work ethic probably inspired the famous story that he practiced delivering speeches on the beach with pebbles in his mouth to build strength.
C. His style owes much to Thucydides: He gets his point across with conciseness, even as the syntax is sometimes involved, and he avoids the ease and comfort of parallel syntactical constructions.
D. In the 350s, Demosthenes became alarmed at the growing power of Philip of Macedon, the father of Alexander; starting with the *First Philippic* in 351, he delivered several speeches encouraging Greeks to unite against this threat.

1. The central theme of this and many of Demosthenes’s speeches is that the Athenians must overcome their inaction and apathy, make concrete plans, and put them into action. He makes that point bluntly and forcefully early in the speech.
2. Even as he points out the dangers in Philip’s approach, he emphasizes that Athenians can indeed stop him if they take immediate action.
3. He offers concrete suggestions for the deployment of forces, both mercenary and Athenian, to meet the threat.
4. In one memorable passage, he compares the previous Athenian actions to the boxing of an untrained foreigner, responding to each blow with no larger plan in mind.

5. The Athenians did not follow Demosthenes’s advice, but the speech is generally recognized as a rhetorical (if not a tactical) masterpiece, and it seems to have launched Demosthenes’s public career.

**Essential Reading:**
Lysias, *Against Eratosthenes*, and Demosthenes, *Philippic 1*.

**Supplementary Reading:**
Worthington, *Persuasion: Greek Rhetoric in Action*.

**Questions to Consider:**
1. How do you think the jury voted after hearing Lysias’s speech against Eratosthenes? How would you vote?
2. Even if, as historians often argue, the advice in *Philippic 1* is patently impracticable, how could this speech have helped launch Demosthenes’s public career?
Lecture Thirty-Four
Hellenistic Poetry I—Callimachus and Theocritus

Scope: With the next two lectures, we move into a new world in many ways: away from mainland Greece to Alexandria in North Africa, from the democracy of the city-state to far-reaching monarchies, and from public forms of literature to works that demand of their audience more specialized forms of knowledge. Our focus is on Alexandria, a center of learning and the location of the great Library that held all we have been studying so far and much more. Callimachus worked at the Library, organizing its contents, and wrote both prose and poetry in a variety of genres. We discuss several examples of his poetry, noted for its highly refined, even scholarly qualities. The Syracusan Theocritus, who spent part of his life in Alexandria, was equally learned. We look here at selections from his *Idylls*, including those cited as the first examples of pastoral poetry.

Outline

I. We now move from mainland Greece to Alexandria in North Africa, from the city-state to monarchies, and from the Classical to the Hellenistic Period, in which we study the poetry of Callimachus and Theocritus.

II. First, some background about the Hellenistic Period is in order. Despite Demosthenes’s best efforts, Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander did indeed incorporate Greece into their larger empire.
   A. At the death of Alexander in 323, his far-flung empire broke into several kingdoms, and fighting among those kingdoms continued for decades.
   B. Our focus is on one of those kingdoms, Egypt, under the rule of the Ptolemies, and its literary and cultural center in Alexandria.
      1. Alexandria’s Library was a repository of texts, and we have stories about the ruthlessness of the Ptolemies in getting manuscripts for the Library. One of the achievements of Callimachus was to compose an annotated catalogue of the Library holdings; unfortunately, it does not survive.
      2. The Library also functioned as a research center.
      3. Maybe because of all this activity at the Library, or maybe just arising at the same time, we see in the Hellenistic Period a new direction in literature, one that self-consciously looked back to works of the past even as it responded to its contemporary setting.

III. The literature of the 3rd century, as represented in this course by works of Callimachus, Theocritus, and Apollonius, is generally more erudite and polished than what we have seen so far, with a tendency to mix the lofty and the low in the same work.
   A. Antiquarian lore, odd myths, geographical detail, and stories about origins threaten to give some of these works a pedantic feel.
   B. Works are generally on a smaller scale than what we have seen (with the exception of Apollonius’s epic), allowing for a greater attention to word choice and shifts in dialect.
   C. Themes become less grandiose and more personal, with a penchant for burlesque and a new interest in romantic love.

IV. Callimachus (c. 300–c. 240) was a scholar-poet who worked in the Library at Alexandria and was said to have written some 800 works, of which very little survives.
   A. His works included *Hekale*, a poem on an out-of-the-way story about Theseus, two poems on the causes of things, a collection of epigrams, and six hymns that recall, but diverge from, the Homeric Hymns.
   B. His Hymn 5: *On the Bath of Pallas*, contains much that follows the pattern of the Homeric Hymns.
      1. The focus is on a single deity, Athena (sometimes referred to as Pallas Athena), and as in the Homeric Hymns, we find cult names and places included.
      2. Also like the Homeric Hymns, we often have at the center of Callimachus’s hymns a mythical story associated with a god.
3. As well, certain words are deliberately archaic and hearken back to Homer, if not the Homeric Hymns.

C. Athena is the focus of the hymn, which centers not just on her but on a ritual carried out for her, the bathing of an image of the goddess that was done regularly in the Greek city of Argos.
   1. The opening invocation is not to Athena but to the women carrying out the ritual.
   2. There is concrete reference to the sights and sounds of the ritual activity: The singer hears the neighing of the horses and the creaking of the chariot.
   3. The insistent commands make us feel part of the proceedings, as the singer gives instructions to those taking part; calls repeatedly on Athena to be present; and when she finally arrives, addresses the goddess directly.
   4. As the story progresses, we see that Teiresias, our old friend the Theban prophet, is still young, and he happens across Athena bathing in a secluded spring. Athena blinds him—those who see a naked goddess must be punished—but she is bathing with Teiresias’s mother, who begins to cry over her son’s blindness.
   5. Athena tells the weeping mother not to cry and gives Teiresias the gift of prophecy to make up for his lack of sight.
   6. The story about Teiresias—not a common version—increases the sense of urgency in the ritual: Athena cares about its proper performance and will punish those who transgress.

D. The poet thus strikes a balance between antiquarian archaizing and fresh immediacy.
   1. The details of the Argive ritual probably derive from a book in the Library.
   2. The learned would pick up on the many references to Homeric language and the contexts they invoke.
   3. But that learning does not slow the quick pace of the poem and its growing sense of urgency as the goddess approaches.

V. Theocritus (c. 300–c. 240) seems to have been born in Syracuse and spent at least part of his career in Alexandria. He is best known for his pastoral poems—those involving shepherds—but his corpus of 30 or 31 Idyls (depending on which edition you are looking at) is varied. His poems are often called bucolics after the Greek word for “shepherd.”

A. Idyll I, one of the pastoral poems, begins with a goatherd asking Thyrsis, a shepherd, to sing his famous song about a cowherd named Daphnis.
   1. Here, as in other pastoral poems, the setting and characters are rustic, and the themes include love, loss, and song, but the language is often borrowed from epic and reveals the erudition of the city.
   2. The set-up of the scene—with the whispering pine tree, the nearby spring, the immanence of Pan, and the midday heat—might remind us of the ideal rural setting outside Athens in Plato’s Phaedrus.

B. In return for Thyrsis’s song, the goatherd offers a wooden cup, which he describes at great length and in ways that have been seen as a commentary on pastoral poetry more generally: It is a rustic object taken to an unprecedented degree of perfection.
   1. The action of the poem stops as the goatherd describes the cup in great detail. This ekphrasis, a description of an object within a poem, serves as a song in exchange for the song of Thyrsis.
   2. The three scenes on the cup cover the ages of man, as well as his various emotional states.
      a. At first, we see two adult males striving for the attentions of a woman; they are hollow-eyed from their love.
      b. Then, we see an old fisherman who struggles with his catch, laboring mightily.
      c. Finally, we come to a boy who neglects his duty of guarding a vineyard (and his own lunch) as he intently weaves a cricket cage. Like the bucolic poet, he is lost in his world of creation, making a beautiful object from his natural surroundings.
   3. We are far from the shield of Achilles with this ekphrasis, but there is a certain completeness here: the three ages of man that echo the universal completeness of the shield.

C. Thyrsis agrees to sing his famous song about Daphnis, with which he has previously won a competition.
   1. The mention of a singing contest brings a note of professionalism and sophistication into this rustic scene.
2. The song is full of strong emotional expressions, as the cowherd Daphnis wastes away, apparently because of love.

3. The particulars of the story are not clear, but the tone throughout is higher than what preceded: We are in the realm of gods, muses, and references to Homeric heroes.

D. The poem ends with a return to the pastoral setting and concern for the sexual appetite of the goats; all is artificial, but there is a clear juxtaposition of high and low tone.

Essential Reading:

Supplementary Reading:
Fowler, B., *The Hellenistic Aesthetic*.

Questions to Consider:
1. Look back at the Homeric Hymns from earlier in the course. How does Callimachus’s hymn hearken back to them? And how does it differ?

2. Theocritus’s *Idyll 1* likewise looks back to earlier models even as it creates something new. What is Homeric about the poem, and what seems more influenced by lyric? What other influences do you detect?
Lecture Thirty-Five
Hellenistic Poetry II—Apollonius

Scope: The single extant epic poem from the Hellenistic Period is Apollonius of Rhodes’s *Argonautica*, an account of Jason’s quest for the Golden Fleece. This lecture brings us full circle, taking us back to the Homeric epics that so clearly influence this work. While the *Argonautica* is very much a product of its own time, it borrows heavily from Homer in its language, the nature and role of the gods within it, and the focus on a single hero, but Apollonius often adapts his Homeric model to his own ends. In addition, Apollonius’s epic draws heavily on its forebears in tragedy and lyric, especially in the treatment of the affair between Jason and Medea. Thus, as we discuss the qualities of this epic, we will necessarily go back to some of the masterpieces we have read earlier.

Outline

I. Many stories circulated about the life of Apollonius (c. 270–c. 210), but all we can say with any certainty is that he was a contemporary of Callimachus and Theocritus, connected in some way with the island of Rhodes, and at some point in his life, director of the Library at Alexandria.
   A. In addition to the *Argonautica*, Apollonius wrote a series of foundation stories, poems on the legends and the history of the founding of various cities.
   B. As head librarian, he is said to have written several interpretive works about the early poets, including Homer and Hesiod. All of those are lost.

II. In an Alexandrian world that favored the short and refined poem over the long epic, Apollonius wrote an epic, the *Argonautica*.
   A. Both Callimachus and Theocritus clearly revere Homer but make poetic statements against the writing of epic in their world.
      1. Callimachus says he prefers the slender muse and the clear drops of the spring rather than the muddy river. And there is a fragment from Callimachus that finds fault with a *mega biblion*, a “big book.”
      2. A character in Theocritus’s seventh *Idyll* disparages houses as high as mountains and birds who try to crow as loud as Homer.
   B. The tradition thus arose of an argument between Callimachus and Apollonius based on their different views of poetry. There is little evidence for it, and in fact, we have considerable evidence that all three of these poets were working in a similar tradition.

III. Apollonius’s *Argonautica*, divided into four books, tells the story of Jason’s voyage with the Argonauts to get the Golden Fleece in Colchis, at the eastern end of the Black Sea, and bring it back to Greece.
   A. Books 1 and 2 tell of the gathering of the Argonauts and their adventures on the way to Colchis.
   B. Book 3 describes events at Colchis, including the tests set for Jason before he could take the Fleece and the love between Jason and Medea, the daughter of the king.
   C. Book 4 is devoted to the return to Greece of Jason, the Argonauts, and Medea and is filled with more adventure. It ends before the part of the story that Euripides tells in his *Medea*.

IV. Apollonius clearly knew Homer well and knew how to incorporate Homeric elements and how to alter them for his own purposes.
   A. Even though the *Argonautica* is a studiously written epic, it retains Homeric language and some stylistic features of the oral epics, such as the catalogue of heroes at the start.
      1. The meter is dactylic hexameter. In addition, the syntax of the *Argonautica* is far more complex than what we find in Homer.
      2. We find descriptive epithets in Apollonius but none of the repetitions of scenes or speeches that we saw in Homer.
      3. The vocabulary borrows clearly from Homer throughout, but Apollonius borrows from many other sources, as well.
4. Apollonius retains certain structural devices we saw in Homer, such as the *ekphrasis*, the extended simile, and the catalogue.

B. We see the same divine interference as in the Homeric poems, but overall, the role of the gods is much diminished and we get a more domestic view of the gods than we usually see.
   1. At the start of Book 3, for example, Hera and Athena decide to help Jason by asking Aphrodite to cause Medea, the daughter of the king, to fall in love with him.
   2. Aphrodite is willing to help but fears that she cannot convince her wayward son Eros to do the job.
   3. She finds him cheating at dice and bribes him with a golden ball.

C. Jason is at the center of the story, but the epic does not revolve around him, as Homer’s do around Achilles and Odysseus, and he is a different sort of hero.
   1. At the gathering of heroes, he is not the first choice to become leader, and he takes charge only after Herakles has supported him.
   2. In all of the Argonauts’ adventures, Jason is more likely to rely on the expertise of others than on his own abilities.
      a. At the beginning of Book 2, the boxer Polydeuces takes on the inhospitable Amykos, king of the Bebyrians.
      b. Later in Book 2, the winged Zetes and Calais scare away the flying Harpies from the blind prophet Phineus, who gives the heroes detailed information that is necessary for the completion of their voyage.
   3. Jason’s first adventure involves no military encounter but the romantic conquest of the Lemnian queen Hypsipyle. He girds himself for it with a beautifully woven red robe that reminds us in some ways of Achilles’s shield.

D. Much of Book 4, the return to Greece, takes the Argonauts past Odyssean adventures, and in all cases, the treatment is different.
   1. Circe is Medea’s aunt and poses no threat.
   2. They sail right past Calypso’s island and the cattle of the Sun.
   3. Their resident musician, Orpheus, drowns out the sound of the Sirens.

V. Apollonius also draws on tragedy and lyric, especially in Book 3.
   A. As Medea falls in love with Jason, the force of her passion and its physical effects on her recall the poems of Sappho.
   B. The exploration of choices that characters face is reminiscent of what we saw in tragedies, especially Euripides’s *Medea*.
      1. Medea is torn between her loyalty to her family and her desire to help Jason, with whom she is in love.
      2. Jason is often described as being at a loss, or uncertain, when faced with difficult situations, as when King Aeetes first tells him the tasks he must perform to win the Fleece.

VI. In many ways, the *Argonautica* is an appropriate epic for its time, and we can trace some of the changes that have led up to this Hellenistic epic.
   A. The heroic values of the *Iliad* seem best suited for a pre-*polis* setting, and Achilles questioned them even there.
   B. The *Odyssey*, with its emphasis on family, begins to reject some of the self-serving militarism of the *Iliad*.
   C. The tragedy of 5th-century Athens brought the Homeric world into contact with the *polis*, as in Sophocles’s *Ajax* and Euripides’s war plays, and revealed just how much the world had changed.
   D. Now, in the urban, urbane, and self-conscious setting of Alexandria, there is a more explicit call for something new.
      1. Herakles and his brute strength are left behind in Book 1; his immense strength and overpowering desires are at odds with the goal of the group.
      2. Some of the Argonauts hold on to old ideas of heroism and are unwilling to entrust their fate to women and their magie, thinking that shameful.
      3. Jason, though, uses all tools at his disposal, including the abilities of the Argonauts, his own personal charm, and the love of the foreign sorceress.
Essential Reading:
Apollonius, Argonautica.

Supplementary Reading:
Beye, Epic and Romance in the Argonautica of Apollonius.

Questions to Consider:
1. Apollonius and Homer were composing in different ways, for different audiences and different occasions. Read any page of Homer and any page of Apollonius. How does the style of each reflect those differences?
2. Hellenistic literature is notable for its treatment and combination of earlier literary forms and styles. Some claim that makes the literature derivative, even stale in its reliance on old models. Others emphasize the innovation in the response to classics. What do you think?
Lecture Thirty-Six
Looking Back and Looking Forward

Scope: The previous two lectures on Hellenistic literature serve well as an introduction to this concluding lecture on the survival and continued influence of Greek literature. It was largely through the Romans that Greek literature survived antiquity, and it was largely through the literary activity of the Hellenistic Period that the Romans accessed the Greeks. Vergil’s *Aeneid* looks back to Homer by way of Apollonius, and his *Eclogues* owe clear allegiance to Theocritus; the Roman elegists look back to earlier Greek lyric through Callimachus; and the Library at Alexandria itself served as a focal point for the preservation (at least temporarily) and study of most of what remains. We conclude this series of lectures with a brief look at some of the paths of survival, mostly through the Romans, to the present.

Outline

I. In this lecture, we look at the influence of Greek literature beyond the Greek world and into the present.
   A. Most obviously, the collection of works in the Library at Alexandria ensured the survival of much of what we have.
   B. The Library did burn down, but even so, if a text made it into the Library, it had a better chance of survival.

II. Before we look at paths of influence, we need to look at the more general survival through the ages of these ancient Greek masterpieces.
   A. Roman military and political expansion throughout the Mediterranean took the Romans into both Greece and Egypt, the former coming under Roman power in 146 with the sack of Corinth and the latter in 30.
      1. Contact with Greeks in southern Italy and Sicily (*Magna Graecia*) led Romans to recognize and emulate the cultural sophistication of the Greeks.
      2. Roman literature often traces its beginning to a translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* into Latin by Livius Andronicus around 250.
      3. Horace expressed the relationship most succinctly in his statement that captive Greece conquered the savage victor and brought art into rustic Italy (*Epodes* 2.1.156–157).
      4. Vergil also recognized the different provinces of Greek and Roman ability. When his hero Aeneas travels to the Underworld, he hears from his father that others (implying the Greeks) excel in the arts, oratory, and astronomy, but the Roman art will be in ruling and bringing order to the world (*Aeneid* 6.1012–1018).
   B. By the 6th century C.E., the Roman Empire had split into a Latin Western Empire and a Greek Eastern or Byzantine Empire.
      1. As the Latin West was beset by marauding hordes, our Greek masterpieces were better treated in the East, where the Greek language was still used.
      2. Also important for the preservation of some of our material in the East was the Arab interest in Greek thought, especially in Greek science, philosophy, and mathematics.
      3. Things started settling down in the West in the 12th century C.E., and scholars began translating Greek texts into Latin.
   C. It was only with the Renaissance that attention in the West turned to Greek literature.
      1. Petrarch, the 14th-century-C.E. Italian Humanist, was one of the earliest to recognize the importance of reading the famous Greek authors in Greek.
      2. In the 15th century C.E., Florence became a center of Greek learning in the West, supported by the ruling Medici family.
         a. Marsilio Ficino translated Plato into Latin and established an academy in Florence modeled on Plato’s academy.
         b. Another of the great Florentine Humanists and Hellenists was Angelo Poliziano.
      3. With the advent of the printing press in Europe at about this time, the world became safer than ever for the preservation of our Greek masterpieces.
D. We still continue to add to the body of ancient Greek literature on a fairly regular basis.
   1. Papyrus scraps continue to yield new treasures, such as the Sappho poem we read earlier in this course.
   2. New technologies allow us to get more out of texts we already have. One example is the famous Archimedes Palimpsest.

III. Now we turn to the influence of Greek literature. Vergil’s Aeneid, unfinished at the author’s death in 19, is the most Roman of all poems, telling of the mythical founding of the city from the ashes of Troy. But it shows obvious allegiance to its Greek ancestors, especially Homer and Apollonius.

A. The epic begins with a statement of its dual focus: “I sing of arms and the man.”
   1. Vergil thus refers both to the Iliad—and prepares for the militaristic part of the epic—and to the Odyssey, in his focus on the wanderings of one man, Aeneas.
   2. The epic is in 12 books, the first 6 narrating the journeys of Aeneas from Troy to Rome and the last 6 concerned with the battles that awaited him upon arrival at the site of Rome.
   3. During his wanderings, Aeneas has Odyssean adventures, including a trip to the Underworld, and rescues one of Odysseus’s men left behind on the island of the Cyclops.
   4. In his battles, there is a constant reference to Homer’s Trojan War heroes: Is Aeneas now a new Achilles because he is the attacker, or has he met a new Achilles in the form of his opponent, Turnus, in Italy?

B. Throughout, the language, meter, and style recall the Homeric model.

C. But there is also a clear nod to Apollonius (and, through him, to Greek tragedy) in Aeneas’s tragic romance with the Carthaginian queen Dido in Book 4.
   1. Blown off course to the city of Carthage in North Africa, Aeneas is welcomed by Queen Dido, at least in part because Venus has caused Dido to fall in love with him.
   2. Aeneas eventually leaves Dido, driven by his mission to found Rome; she curses him and the Roman race and kills herself.

D. Vergil’s reading of Homer and Apollonius formed the basis of the European epic tradition that has led through Dante’s Divine Comedy and Milton’s Paradise Lost and, more recently, to James Joyce’s Ulysses and Derek Walcott’s Caribbean interpretation Omeros.

E. Thus, epic poetry, at one time the dominant narrative genre, has yielded to another narrative mode in recent centuries, the novel.
   1. The Odyssey, in particular, has been referred to as the first novel.
   2. The Iliad, on the other hand, is considered the source of all that is tragic.

IV. In lyric and pastoral poetry as well, the Romans looked back to and built upon their Greek predecessors, from both the earlier period and from the Hellenistic Period.

A. Greek lyric has found translators, imitators, and admirers in almost every Western poetic tradition. Catullus (1st century) wrote poems in a variety of meters and styles, many of them immediately topical but clearly influenced by Greek models.
   1. His poem 51 is a translation, with an added stanza, of Sappho’s poem on the effects of love.
   2. In his own love poetry, he adds a further nod to Sappho by calling his very Roman lover Lesbia.
   3. His sometimes vituperative attacks on public officials recall both Archilochus and Aristophanes.
   4. His corpus also includes a translation from Callimachus—a poem that served as inspiration for Pope in his “Rape of the Lock”—and echoes the Callimachean preference for the small and refined over the epic.

B. Horace (also 1st century) explicitly models himself on Alcaeus in his meters and his poetic themes.

C. Theocritus’s bucolic poems influenced the European pastoral tradition through Vergil’s Eclogues, written in 37. In the English pastoral tradition, we might think of Milton’s Lycidas, the poems of Spenser and Sidney, and even some of Shakespeare’s comedies.

V. Now, we turn to the influence of ancient Greek drama.

A. Roman comedians Plautus and Terence translated and reworked the plays of Menander; the spinier Aristophanes does not seem to transplant as well.
B. Romans did write tragedy—the works of Seneca in particular were influential—but without the sublime power we saw in Athens.
   1. Since then, tragedy has flourished only temporarily, most notably in Elizabethan England and 17th-century C.E. Paris.
   2. And certainly, the genre continues in the works of Ibsen and the American playwrights Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams.

C. Greek drama still graces our stages but not in any form the ancients would recognize. Recent decades have seen a phenomenal revival of ancient theater onstage, very often heavily adapted, as playwrights and producers recognize the timeless force of these plays.

VI. Historians look back to Herodotus and Thucydides as the founders of their genre.
   A. One tendency in the centuries after these two was to write universal histories, or histories of an entire people or city.
   B. Historians continue to ask the same questions and confront the same problems as Herodotus and Thucydides, for example, how best to handle sources or how to strike a balance between accuracy and entertainment.
   C. Thucydides, in particular, has been influential outside of the field of history. We all can see his continuing relevance, especially to questions of foreign policy.

VII. Rhetoric, especially as practiced by Demosthenes, heavily influenced the greatest Roman orator, Cicero, from the 1st century.
   A. Cicero’s style, in turn, was influential throughout the Renaissance.
   B. But contemporary rhetoric bears little resemblance to the ancient speeches, perhaps because of changed legal and political contexts, perhaps because of reduced attention spans.

VIII. We will not try to assess the influence of Plato’s thought, but what about his philosophical style?
   A. His student Aristotle wrote treatises, and that is certainly the most prevalent format for philosophical writing through the ages, right up to the present.
   B. But the tradition of the philosophical dialogue has persisted in the works of Cicero and some of the early Christian writers and down to the 20th century with Santayana’s *Dialogues in Limbo*.

IX. All of the works we have read are still with us in one way or another.
   A. All of them have shaped who we are because each has, in some way, shaped the world we come from, and that alone is a good reason to read these masterpieces.
   B. The best reason to read these masterpieces, however, is because they are compelling, engaging, and enjoyable, every one of them, each in its own way.

Supplementary Reading:

Questions to Consider:
1. Consider any contemporary adaptation—literary, musical, theatrical—of a Greek work we have discussed. What has the artist retained of the original, what has the artist changed, and with what effect?
2. Looking back over all we have discussed, which of these works is most immediately meaningful to you, and why? Which will you return to and reread? Which do you like less? In all cases, whether the work engages you or not, do you think it merits being called a literary masterpiece?
Bibliography

Essential Reading:

Note: Many translations are available for all of these works. Those listed here work well for this course. Others have other attractions: closer to the Greek, more poetic, more colloquial, already on your bookshelf, and so on. Some are even available on tape. If you have the luxury, sample a few to see what suits you best.


Supplementary Reading:


———. Aeschylus: The Earlier Plays and Related Studies. Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1996. A treatment similar to the one below of Aeschylus’s other plays, including The Persians.


Crane, G. The Blinded Eye: Thucydides and the New Written Word. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996. A reading of Thucydides’s work that focuses on his manipulation of the genre of prose history, not only to record events but to fashion a new civic ideology.


———. “Introduction,” in Euripides: Bacchae, 2nd ed., edited and commented by E. R. Dodds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960. Even though this is an introduction to a Greek edition of the play, it is accessible to those with no Greek (yet) and highly informative on a broad array of topics.

———. “On Misunderstanding the Oedipus Rex,” in Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy, edited by E. Segal, pp. 177–188. In this seminal essay, the author responds, often amusingly, to student attempts to understand the play. Clearly argued and well written.


———. “Tragedy and Politics in Aristophanes’ Acharnians,” in Oxford Readings in Aristophanes, edited by E. Segal, pp. 117–142. The author emphasizes the connection between Aristophanes and Dikaiopolis, both of them questioning the wartime policies of Athens.


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Griffin, J., and M. Hammond. “Critical Appreciation: Iliad 1.1–52,” in *Homer*, edited by I. McAuslan and P. Walcot, pp. 65–82. A close reading of these lines, with good discussion of the ways in which the poet uses them to introduce the entire epic.


Harrison, T. *The Emptiness of Asia: Aeschylus' Persians and the History of the Fifth Century*. London: Duckworth, 2000. A study of the value of the play as a historical document, as a source for events, for the Athenian attitude toward the Persians, and for their attitude about their own expanding power.


Hutchinson, G. *Hellenistic Poetry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. A good overview of the period that includes separate chapters on each of the Hellenistic poets considered in this course.


———. “Introduction,” in *Homer: The Iliad*, translated by R. Fagles. Excellent coverage of topics and themes, well written, and in places, even compelling in its own right.

———. *Oedipus at Thebes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957. An influential study of Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* as a reflection of 5th-century Athenian values


Kurke, L. “Charting the Poles of History: Herodotos and Thoukydides,” in *Literature in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, edited by O. Taplin, pp. 133–155. A survey of the works of the historians, especially as they relate to their historical milieu.

———. “The Strangeness of ‘Song Culture’: Archaic Greek Poetry,” in *Literature in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, edited by O. Taplin, pp. 58–87. A good treatment of the lyric poets we discuss, as well as their context.


Luce, T. J. *The Greek Historians*. London: Routledge, 1997. This book contains good introductions to the historians read in this course, with discussions of their place within the larger context of Greek historical writing.


Miller, A. “Introduction,” in *Greek Lyric: An Anthology in Translation*, translated and commented by A. Miller, pp. xi–xvi. Read together with the introductions to each of the poets in this volume, this very brief introduction helps put the poems into context.


Nightingale, A. “Sages, Sophists and Philosophers: Greek Wisdom Literature,” in *Literature in the Greek and Roman Worlds*, edited by O. Taplin, pp. 156–191. A focus on the performance of wisdom, both written and oral, that takes into account the original audiences and the historical context.


Reinhardt, K. “The Adventures in the *Odyssey*,” in *Reading the Odyssey*, edited by S. Schein, pp. 63–132. A detailed examination of the adventures, with the goal of assessing their relation to the larger work.


Rosen, R. “Homer and Hesiod,” in *A New Companion to Homer*, edited by I. Morris and B. Powell, pp. 463–488. A good treatment of the two authors that notes similarities; particular attention is given here to the question of priority and influence.


Segal, C. “Aristophanes’ Cloud-Chorus,” in *Oxford Readings in Aristophanes*, edited by E. Segal, pp. 162–181. While the focus is on the chorus in *Clouds*, this essay ranges more broadly through critical interpretations of many aspects of the comedy.


Shapiro, H. A. “Coming of Age in Phaiakia: The Meeting of Odysseus and Nausikaa,” in *The Distaff Side*, edited by B. Cohen, pp. 155–164. A discussion of various artistic representations of the meeting, this essay exemplifies well how we might gain insight into a scene from the reactions of those closer in time to its production.


Taplin, O. “Fifth-Century Tragedy and Tragedy,” in *Oxford Readings in Aristophanes*, edited by E. Segal, pp. 9–28. The author compares the two genres in terms of the relation of the world of the play to the world of the audience. Excellent comments on the significance of theatrical self-referentiality.

———, ed. *Literature in the Greek and Roman Worlds: A New Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. The first half is an in-depth survey of the material covered in this course, with essays by leading scholars. The focus is on the literature within the world that produced it, with special attention to the receivers or audience of the literature.

———. “The Shield of Achilles within *The Iliad*,” in *Homer*, edited by I. McAuslan and P. Walcot, pp. 96–115. A discussion of the long description of the shield as it relates to the rest of the *Iliad* and even the *Odyssey*.


Whitmarsh, T. *Ancient Greek Literature*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004. Not a chronological survey but a thematic consideration of the literature. The first section addresses the difficulties inherent in talking about literature of another culture that might not share our idea of what literature is.


**Internet Resources:**


Martin, T. *An Overview of Classical Greek History from Mycenae to Alexander*. Tufts University. www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0009. This is a particularly useful link on the Perseus site, a searchable history of the period covered in this course.