



HUMANITIES SEMINARS PROGRAM

Fall 2018

“SINGING JOY, PERFORMING SORROW — LIVING DYNAMICS OF ANCIENT GREEK DRAMA”

SYLLABUS

Taught by Dr. BELLA VIVANTE
Professor Emerita of Classics

bvivante@email.arizona.edu

Tuesdays, 9 am – 12 pm, Oct. 2 – Dec. 11; No Class Nov. 20, Thanksgiving week

This course explores select ancient Greek plays as dynamic examples of live theater. We begin by exploring the often-spectacular performance aspects, that can rival opera, Busby Berkeley musicals or Cirque de Soleil. We will highlight the role of the chorus and the choral odes, which form the musical framework for the plays. We'll encounter memorable characters presented in highly dramatic, memorable scenes, that are performed to the audience's delight, horror, and edification. The plays dramatically address significant issues of the day that remarkably resonate with modern audiences, proving their perpetual timeliness. Bringing in my own and local theater directors' performance background, by highlighting the performance aspects of the plays, they emerge as dynamic, living entities with much to offer a contemporary audience. Basing the thematic interpretation on the performance aspects yields a rich, multi-textured appreciation of the plays.

REQUIRED TEXTS (the fewest anthologies readily available that provide good translations of the selected plays. You may use any translation of the assigned plays.)

Aeschylus Oresteia, trans. Peter Meineck. Hackett Publishing, 1998. ISBN 978-0872203907.

Plays: *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, *The Furies*

The Complete Aeschylus, vol. II: *Persians* and Other Plays, trans. Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro. Oxford University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0195373288.

Plays: *The Suppliant Maidens*, *Prometheus Bound*

The Complete Sophocles, vol. I: *The Theban Plays*, trans. Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro, Oxford University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0195388800.

Plays: *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*

Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides, edd, Ruby Blondell, et al. Routledge, 1999. ISBN 978-0415907743.

Plays: *Medea*, *Helen*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*

Euripides Bacchae, trans. Paul Woodruff. Hackett Publishing, 1998. ISBN 978-0872203921.

Aristophanes: The Complete Plays, trans. Paul Roche. Penguin, 2005. ISBN 978-0451214096.

Plays: *Birds*, *Lysistrata*, *Women at the Thesmophoria*, *Frogs*

Syllabus:

Date

1 10/2 A. Historical, Ritual and Dramatic Background to Ancient Greek Drama

B. Introduction to Dramatic Performance and Production:

- ◆ The Dramatic festivals
 - ◆ City Dionysia for tragedies and satyr plays
 - ◆ Lenaia for comedies
- ◆ Conditions of Performance:
 - ◆ Physical layout of theatres and stage technology
 - ◆ Daily production activities
 - ◆ Dramatic competition and judgments
- ◆ Composition of actors, chorus and audience; Costumes and masks
- ◆ Stage settings and scenery
- ◆ Forms of Drama:
 - ◆ Tragedy
 - ◆ Comedy
 - ◆ Satyr play
- ◆ The Chorus:
 - ◆ Dramatic role and function
 - ◆ Language and meter of choral odes
- ◆ The Actors:
 - ◆ 2-3 actor convention
 - ◆ Language, meter and nature of characters' scenes
- ◆ Types of discourse
 - ◆ Monologues
 - ◆ Dialogues
 - ◆ Messenger speeches
- ◆ The major dramatists
 - ◆ Tragedians:
 - ◆ Thespis
 - ◆ Aeschylus
 - ◆ Sophocles
 - ◆ Euripides
 - ◆ Comic Playwright: Aristophanes

2. 10/9 The Chorus as Major Character: The Chorus' substantial role as a major character in select plays presents insight into the cultural importance of choral song and dance. These plays illustrate why the Chorus, though alien to modern theatrical conventions, forms a key part of Ancient Greek drama. We will explore the Chorus' function in the play's dramatics, today and *Furies* (4), *Bacchae* (10). Moreover, these plays feature female choruses that openly address gender issues.

- ◆ *The Suppliant Maidens*: As the most direct portrayal of main characters by the Chorus, the play distinctively explores young women's coming to adult status and the problematic place of marriage in their assuming their adult roles.
- ◆ Guest Lecturer, Bryan Falcón, Artistic Director, Scoundrel & Scamp Theatre: "Staging Ancient Greek Drama"

- 3. 10/16 Spectacular Staging:** In two of Aeschylus' tragedies, *Prometheus Bound* and *Furies* (4), the unusual composition of the Chorus as fantastic entities evokes comic choruses. Today we will focus on the 1st (the 2nd next week) and a comedy by Aristophanes. Each Chorus is introduced into the play through spectacular staging techniques intended to amaze the audience. We will explore how the distinctive staging of the Chorus and characters functions in each play's dramatics.
- ◆ Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*: Scholars believe this distinctive Chorus of sea goddesses made a spectacular "Cirque du Soleil" type flying entrance onto the stage. Like the constantly moving female character Io, the ethereally mobile Chorus presents visual, dramatic contrast to the chained, immobilized main character Prometheus.
 - ◆ Aristophanes' *The Birds*: Produced later and perhaps influenced by Aeschylus' play, this Chorus of exotic birds may also enter the stage through aerial, gymnastic feats. The distinctive costumes and staging all contribute to the play's meanings.
- 4. 10/23 Dramatic Trilogy: Aeschylus' Oresteia:** The one surviving dramatic trilogy shows the broad scope of thematic development this dramatic form afforded Aeschylus. We will examine how the arc of the trilogy form functions theatrically and thematically through the three plays: *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Furies*.
- ◆ The trilogy dramatizes the Trojan War myth, a major myth of ancient Greek cultural lore and further developed in many plays of Euripides.
 - ◆ Visual and verbal dramatic motifs convey and reinforce the trilogy's themes, dramatically connecting them across the three plays.
 - ◆ The portrayal of main themes—types of justice, gender relations—greatly influenced ancient Greek and Roman and later Western perceptions of these characters and ideas.
 - ◆ We will consider the dramatic impact of the distinctive Chorus and structure of *The Furies*, which appears more comedic than tragic.
- 5. 10/30 The Hero: Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannos:** through perhaps the most well-known characters from Ancient Greek Drama, Sophocles explores his contemporary ideas about heroism and personal integrity.
- ◆ *Oedipus Tyrannos* (usu. *the King*) dramatizes themes of knowledge, divine prophecy, human intelligence, and a new image of the hero.
 - ◆ In addition, in his *Poetics*, Aristotle describes Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos* as an ideal play in its dramatization of plot, character and action. We will read relevant sections of Aristotle's essay and consider the significance of Aristotle's dramatic standards in Sophocles' play.
- 6. 11/6 The Heroine: Sophocles' Antigone:** All 4 dramatists treat issues of gender, esp. women's roles, status and images in society. This play, and many in weeks 7-9, highlight concepts of the heroine, and the conditions and shape of female heroism.
- ◆ *Antigone*: The play primarily dramatizes the theme of divine law versus royal authority, which Sophocles interestingly portrays through the gender identity conflicts of the 2 main characters, Antigone and her uncle Kreon, the king. This nuanced presentation of gender from diverse angles raises ideas of female agency and empowerment.
 - ◆ Guest Lecturer, Marc David Pinate, Producing Director, Borderlands Theater, who is writing an *Antigone* situated in the contemporary Southwest

- 7. 11/13 Euripides' Dramatic and Mythic Innovations:** All Euripides' plays question some traditional cultural or mythic aspect. The experimentations with dramatic form in these 2 plays' contribute to the innovative portrayals of traditional myths and the questioning of social conventions.
- ◆ *Medea*: Typically regarded as the epitome of the evil woman, this play challenges society's gender roles and issues of honor by recasting traditional heroic concepts.
 - ◆ *Helen*: The distinctive structure of this, Euripides' most innovative drama, is a key vehicle for dramatizing the play's distinctive mythic, gender and heroic portrayals.
- 8. 11/27 Aristophanes' Comedic Parodies:** Challenging society's mores more directly than in tragedy, these comedies employ innovative means to dramatize their social themes.
- ◆ *Women at the Thesmophoria*: Comedically taking place at the most important women's ritual for Demeter, this play creatively interweaves themes of women's identity and poetic creation. Its parodies of whole scenes of Euripides' plays provide evidence we don't otherwise have.
 - ◆ *Lysistrata*: Differing from other comedies by its more "realistic" chorus, this play's nuanced approach to parody distinctively calls into question both the contemporary Peloponnesian War and the "war between the sexes."
- 9. 12/4 Plays at the End of an Era:** Two plays produced posthumously at the end of the fifth century B.C.E., one by Sophocles and one by Euripides, present retrospective views on critical themes raised in earlier dramas. They present a culmination of the century's treatment of the two main mythic story lines from the mature pens of elder playwrights.
- ◆ Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*: Dramatizing Oedipus' death this play is dramatically opposite the ideal Aristotelian formality of his earlier Oedipus play by visibly straining against dramatic conventions and Aristotle's standards.
 - ◆ Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*: Returning to traditional tragic form and mythic subject, the play calls into question male heroic/warrior values through the guise of a young Iphigenia who willingly accepts her own sacrifice for heroic or questionable reasons.
- 10. 12/11 Staging Dionysos:** The god of theater, Dionysos appears in only two extant plays, one a tragedy and one a comedy, both at the end of the century. We will consider how these climactic portrayals of Dionysos address the diverse theatrical conventions discussed.
- ◆ Euripides' *Bacchae*: In this tragedy of the gulf between human understanding and divine power an irate Dionysos seems to comment on the state of the century's drama.
 - ◆ Aristophanes' *The Frogs*: Featuring a comic Dionysos, the play openly assesses the value of the century's dramas by the three major tragedians.