WORLD LITERATURE I (ENG 251)

Greek Drama Study Guide

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GREEK TRAGEDY

Greek theatre was something new in its time; it developed out of a mixture of ancient myths, stories and religious rituals, contemporary lyric poetry, the genius of a remarkably few men, and the Greek love of theatrical spectacle.

This theatre developed in some relation to the god Dionysus. Although scholars disagree about just how classical Greek theatre was involved with the religion of Dionysus, they generally agree that the early forms of Greek theatre stem from poems and dances performed for Dionysus, a rather disorderly god of mixed blessings.

Whether we see the fully matured Greek theatre as Dionysian or not, we can certainly look for and see the elements of Dionysus in Greek tragedy and comedy: insanity, violence, intoxication, wildness--these are properties of Dionysus as well as of the theatre that developed in Greece. And we do know that performances of dithyrambs (poems celebrating Dionysus), as well as satyr plays, tragedies and comedies, took place at the festivals of Dionysus in Athens.

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DIONYSUS

Definitions:

Dionysus	god of wine and madness
Dithyramb	("twice-born") - dance/poems in honor of Dionysus
Satyrs	male worshippers of Dionysus - wore animal skins, horses tails and ears
Maenads	female worshippers of Dionysus - nursed infant male animals; also hunted and ate them raw
Goat ("tragos")	the sacred animal of Dionysus

Dionysus was "the god who gave man wine. However, he was known also as the raving god whose presence makes man mad and incites him to savagery and even to lust for blood...he was also the persecuted god, the suffering and dying god, and all whom he loved, all who attended him, had to share his tragic fate." (W. Otto)

Dionysus had a difficult birth; he was snatched from his mother's womb and secreted in the thigh of his father, Zeus, until he was ready to be born. Because of this, he was called "Dithyramb" or twice-born. His sacred animal was the goat whose Greek name, "tragos" is included in the word tragedy.

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SATYRS AND MAENADS

The satyrs joined the maenads in wild dances in honor of Dionysus.

Many scholars, although not all, trace the development of tragedy back to such wild dance rituals worshipping the god Dionysus.

Bieber suggests that "The worshippers of Dionysus danced around the goat, singing the dithyramb; they then sacrificed it, devoured its flesh and made themselves a dress...out of its skin, or they threw it around their shoulders like the maenads. Then they felt themselves to be goats....the maenads and satyrs....were endowed with goat nature through a change of dress, by taking the goatskin as a costume."

This ecstatic changing into someone else was supposedly the beginning of acting, of playing a character other than oneself.

Not everyone agrees with her and Brian Vickers thinks that whatever was Dionysian in early Greek theatre was gone by the classical period of the fifth century. He also comments that probably the "tragos" goat was the prize for the winning play, not the disguise of the dancers. Whatever the case, these elements were related in some way in the early development of Greek drama.

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STEPS OF DEVELOPMENT OF GREEK DRAMA

1.	Ecstatic dancing and singing in honor of Dionysus (men dressed as satyrs wearing animal skins, horse's ears and tails and animal-like masks).
2.	Satyr play--the leader of the chorus represented someone other than himself, usually a character from heroic saga, but still wore a satyr mask.
3.	The leader of the satyr chorus wore the mask of a god or hero.
4.	The leader of the satyr chorus was entirely separated from the chorus as an actor.

Following Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*

THE FIRST PLAYS

1.	Thespis placed a separate actor opposite the leader of the chorus.
2.	Spoken dialogue developed between this actor and the leader of the chorus.
3.	The subject-matter was taken from heroic saga.
4.	The chorus changed into various citizens of the heroic age according to the story of the play.
5.	Thespis brought this form of drama, probably by wagon, to Athens in 534 B.C.

Following Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*

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INNOVATIONS OF AESCHYLUS, SOPHOCLES AND EURIPIDES

Aeschylus	the second actor (more dialogue); 524-456 BC: a definite actor's costume; large, dignified masks; magnificently decorated theater
Sophocles	the third actor (still more dialogue); 496-406 BC: scene painting
Euripides	a prologue explaining preceding events; 480-406 BC: the *deus ex machina* ending

Following Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theater*

The theatres themselves were out of doors, with seating built around the slopes surrounding a circular arena. Behind this arena was a *skene* or backdrop building, which gradually became more elaborate over the years.

A day of theatre would begin in the early morning and include a series of three tragedies, three separate comedies, and perhaps a satyr play.

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TRAGEDY

Greek tragedies are intensely emotional and focus on the horror of murder and violent death, often within the family. The characters are noble, often kings and queens, not ordinary folk. The chorus, representing the society as onlookers, worries and bewails events, but is helpless in the face of the disasters befalling the main characters.

According to Aristotle, such intense emotions on stage make us experience pity and fear, and hence purge us of those emotions. This process of purgation is called catharsis.

There has been enormous controversy over the centuries as to exactly what Aristotle meant by this term, catharsis, but the only issue we need to think about in this context is: do we feel somehow calmer, if not wiser, after experiencing one of these tragedies? If so, that calmness may be called the effect of catharsis. Or does witnessing one of these tragedies in fact upset us and leave us in a more disturbed frame of mind than before we experienced it?

Today we ask whether or not violence in the media is making people more violent, or in fact allowing them to release their tensions vicariously, so that their actual daily lives are calmer. People seem to be inclining to the position that watching violence in fact makes people more violent.

However, it is important to recognize that while Greek drama dealt with emotional violence, it never showed physical violence on stage. Further, the violence it dealt with was witnessed by a sorrowing society in the form of the chorus, and the plays ended with some form of resolution.

These differences are worth thinking about when asking whether the emotional violence of Greek tragedy is in any way like the emotional and physical violence of modern film and television.

Greek tragedies are often family tragedies: ***Agamemnon***, for example, harks back to the sacrifice of a child (Iphigenia), enacts the murder of a spouse (Agamemnon), and looks forward to the murder of a parent (Clytemnestra). This stress on violence within the family is typical of Greek tragedy and stems from the great importance of the family in Greek life. Brian Vickers points out that since "The Greek expected to live on not in an afterworld so much as in this world, in the memory and continuous homage of his descendants....the most serious crimes for the Greeks were those which struck against the very basis of family existence: parricide, matricide, all `shedding of kindred blood', and incest" because such crimes interfered with the continuity of the family.(110-14)

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GREEK TRAGEDIES AND TROY

After Homer, Greek attitudes towards the Trojan War and its heroes changed. The individualistic behavior and violence of Homeric heroes such as Achilles and Odysseus became less acceptable in civilized fifth century Athens. The wild violence of heroic age women such as Clytemnestra, already a problem in Homer, became even more unacceptable. Yet, the stories remained popular. A number of plays surviving from fifth century Athens are based on Trojan War material. They include:

Aeschylus	*Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides*
Sophocles	*Ajax, Electra, Philoctetes*
Euripides	*Hecuba, Andromache, The Trojan Women, Iphigenia in Tauris, Helen, Electra, Orestes, Iphigenia at Aulis*

Most of these plays are concerned with events before and after the war, rather than with the war itself, and a surprising number center on women, many suffering, some evil, rather than on the ancient heroes.

Greek legends about the heroes and heroines of the Trojan Cycle were plentiful and varied; different stories about the same event or character might even contradict one another, especially in the details. For example, in one version of the legend of Iphigenia, she is sacrificed by her father Agamemnon at Aulis so that Artemis will allow favorable winds for the Greek fleet to sail to Troy. This sacrifice is used in the ***Agamemnon*** as a motive for Clytemnestra's murder of her husband.

In an alternate version of the legend, Iphigenia is saved at the moment of sacrifice by Artemis, who snatches Iphigenia away to Tauris and replaces her on the altar with a sacrificial deer. Euripides wrote two melodramatic plays about this happier variant, ***Iphigenia at Aulis*** and ***Iphigenia in Tauris***. Consequently, although the stories used for Greek dramas were often based on stories about the Trojan War, the treatment of the stories was up to the individual dramatist. The legends of Troy were there for the taking, available to be made into plays that met the needs and interests of Athen's rapidly changing civilization.

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THE ***ORESTEIA***

The ***Oresteia*** by Aeschylus consists of three plays:

Agamemnon	Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, kill Agamemnon when he returns home from the Trojan War.
The Libation Bearers	Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, kills Clytemnestra, his own mother, to avenge her murder of Agamemnon.
The Avenging Furies OR ***Kindly Spirits***	Orestes now must deal with the consequences of his murder of his mother and, with divine help, appease the furies who exact vengeance for matricide.

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THE CHARACTERS OF THE ***ORESTEIA***

Agamemnon	King of Mycenae; husband of Clytemnestra; father of Electra, Iphigenia and Orestes; sacrificed Iphigenia; murdered by Clytemnestra
Aegisthus	lover of Clytemnestra; cousin of Agamemnon
Apollo	god of purification
Athena	patron of Athens; established Court of Aeropagus which voted to set Orestes free from blood guilt for killing his mother
Cassandra	daughter of Priam; war-prize of Agamemnon; speaks truth and is not believed; murdered by Clytemnestra
Clytemnestra	wife of Agamemnon; sister of Helen; mother of Electra, Iphigenia and Orestes; lover of Aegisthus; murders Agamemnon and Cassandra
Furies	ancient demonic goddesses that uphold blood rights, especially those of motherhood

Iphigenia	daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra; sacrificed by Agamemnon to receive favorable winds to sail to Troy
Orestes	son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra; brother of Iphigenia; murders Clytemnestra; driven mad by Furies; cleansed by Apollo; set free by Court of Aeropagus

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THE STORY OF THE ***ORESTEIA***

The ***Oresteia*** tells the story of the resolution of an ancient myth-family tragedy, the blood guilt of the House of Atreus. This conflict started with the two sons of Pelops, Atreus and Thyestes, quarreling over the kingship of Mycenae. Atreus became king and banished his brother Thyestes. However, when Atreus discovered that Thyestes had secretly committed adultery with Atreus' wife Aerope, he hid his rage, inviting Thyestes to return home for a banquet. Atreus murdered two of Thyestes' children and then served their bodies as meat to Thyestes at the banquet. After Thyestes had eaten, Atreus displayed their bloody heads, hands and feet on another dish. Thyestes vomited and cursed the seed of Atreus. Agamemnon and Menelaus are the sons of Atreus.

The curse worked itself out through:

- Agamemnon, who sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia
- Clytemnestra, who murdered her husband Agamemnon
- Orestes, Agamemnon's son, who murdered his mother, Clytemnestra.

The Furies pursue and torment Orestes because he avenged one crime with another more forbidden crime. The Furies are the mythic enforcerers of ancient blood vengeance law, for whom the greatest crime is matricide, since the closest blood tie was between mother and child.

Orestes, seeking purification from his guilt, petitions Apollo, who advises Orestes to seek help from Athena. She sympathizes with Orestes, because she was not born of a woman herself, but sprang from her father Zeus' head. Athena arranges a trial, using Athenian citizens as jurors to weigh the claims of mother blood guilt versus Clytemnestra's crime killing her husband. The Furies agree to abide by the decision of the jury. They put forth their claims of the primary right of the mother.

However, Apollo asserts that the mother is simply a passive vessel, so that the child is really connected by blood to the father alone. This would mean that matricide is not a blood guilt crime at all! His arguments only persuade half the jury, which gives a tie vote. However, the tie frees Orestes, ending his blood guilt. Athena then placates the Furies, persuading them to become the Kindly Ladies, benevolent powerful spirits of the city of Athens, tucked underground, safely out of sight.

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AGAMEMNON

Early Greek tragedy can be difficult for a modern audience to appreciate. Practically nothing happens in *Agamemnon* except an offstage murder of a man we have just met by a woman we don't like.

Because Greek dramas developed originally out of the lyric satyr choruses, they have large sections of lyric poetry (the choruses) interspersed with sections of dialogue. *Agamemnon's* lyric sections are especially long. They are supposed to be especially beautiful in the original Greek; unfortunately, the translations I've read have not been particularly attractive. Frankly, as a modern reader, I wish the choruses of this play were shorter and the dialogue longer. If you have a chance to see a film or play of *Agamemnon,* do so; It can be more accessible with real actors than as a text.

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THE STORY OF AGAMEMNON

Agamemnon is the first of three plays which display the unending and terrible consequences of a private blood feud which continues from one generation to the next until it is finally stopped by instituting a public legal process to replace private revenge.

Agamemnon focuses on Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon. She wants vengeance because Agamemnon sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia at Aulis ten years earlier in order to placate the goddess Artemis. This goddess had been sending contrary winds to prevent the Greek Armies from sailing to Troy. It is easy for us to be horrified at what Agamemnon did and want to excuse Clytemnestra, but the play offers no excuses for her--she is presented as thoroughly dislikeable, wicked, and dangerous.

The play starts at night with a watchman awaiting a fire signal passed from hill top to hill top to indicate that the Trojan War has ended. Clytemnestra has arranged for these fires which cross many miles between Troy and Greece. She is a clever woman as well as a dangerous one, and even worse, she has the heart of a man in her woman's breast, as the watchman tells us at the very start.

There is not much action in *Agamemnon*; the first half of the play is spent anxiously awaiting the arrival of Agamemnon. Here, the real action begins, centered on an argument between Agamemnon and his wife Clytemnestra which displays Agamemnon's conceited pride and Clytemnestra's treachery. She wants him to walk into the palace on a valuable blood-red tapestry; he objects that this would be an act of excessive pride. Their argument, which is the only time we see them together in the play, reveals each of their characters.

Philip Harsh remarks that "the essential weakness of [Agamemnon's]...character is only too apparent in this clash with the strong-willed Clytemnestra.... In attempting to make Agamemnon accept her base flattery and walk upon the blood-red tapestry, Clytemnestra is attempting to cause him to commit an act of insolence ...which will evoke the disgust and hatred of men and the vengeance of the gods." (69)

Agamemnon surrenders to his wife and, walking on the blood-red tapestry, enters the palace, shortly to die. Now the most intense scene of the play occurs, the raving prophecy of the prophetess Cassandra outside the palace, predicting murder most foul, while Clytemnestra, with help from her lover Aegisthus prepares to murder Agamemnon within. Agamemnon's death cries follow and the play is essentially over. Agamemnon has been murdered, but there will be more murder to avenge his death. Murder is not able to solve the problems of this cursed household; indeed that is the whole point of the trilogy. Murder only begets murder; setting up a court of law is the only way to stop the series of bloody feuds. This is a message about the need for civilization, but it is not yet made in *Agamemnon*, so we are left with only darkness and death. For this reason, the three plays of this trilogy should be read as a set; *Agamemnon* is really only the first act of a three act play.

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OEDIPUS REX

Modern audiences appreciate this play, but the more we think about it, the more troublesome it becomes. *Oedipus Rex* is difficult for us to cope with, because we believe so deeply today in the idea of freewill and the potential for both human and divine justice. But these concepts are not particularly relevant to Sophocles' play about a man who was born fated to kill his father and marry his mother. Everything that matters has already happened before the play begins.

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THE STORY OF OEDIPUS REX

Before Oedipus was even conceived, the oracle of Apollo prophesied that Oedipus would kill his father Laius and marry his mother Jocasta, who were the king and queen of Thebes.

This dire warning led Jocasta to give the infant Oedipus to a shepherd to expose to wild animals in the hills. The shepherd felt pity and gave the infant to another shepherd who took him to a distant city where Oedipus was adopted by the childless king and queen and raised as their son.

Growing to adulthood, Oedipus heard a prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. Horrified, he left the city to prevent these awful events from occurring.

On his travels, he met a carriage and several men at a crossroad. The man in charge was rude and threatening and Oedipus killed him, not knowing the man was his real father, Laius.

Oedipus then encountered the Sphinx and answered her riddle; this won him the reward of marrying Jocasta, Queen of Thebes.

The play opens many years after these events. Thebes is being devastated by plague, sent by Apollo because there is pollution

in the city. King Oedipus is determined to find out the source of the pollution and drive it out of the city in order to stop the plague. The play focuses on Oedipus' urgent drive to know the truth. Being an impetuous man as well as a powerful king, Oedipus is rude and hostile toward anyone who seems to interfere with his search, especially the seer Tiresias who knows the truth but does not want to tell it to Oedipus.

The terrible irony of this play is that Oedipus himself turns out to be the source of pollution, the cause of the plague, the murderer of his father and the husband of his mother. He finally discovers the truth, and knowing it destroys his life as king of Thebes.

Oedipus responds to this terrible knowledge by blinding himself and at the end of the play he is prepared to leave Thebes and wander in the wilderness, knowing himself and knowing that his entire life was spent fulfilling his fated destiny.

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IS OEDIPUS GUILTY?

We must be careful not to blame Oedipus for what he did, nor to think of his final exile as punishment. As Rohde points out, the stain of pollution "is not `within the heart of man'. It clings to a man as something hostile, and from without, and that can be spread from him to others like an infectious disease. Hence, the purification is effected by religious processes directed to the external removal of the evil thing." Oedipus must leave Thebes, but that does not mean he is guilty, merely that he is polluted and a source of disease for the city.

Pollution is a fascinating index of a true difference between our contemporary culture and that of classical Greece. Our system of morality and justice is based firmly on the idea that each sane person is or can be responsible for his or her own actions, and that those actions can be "paid" for. E.g., a robber can pay for his crime by going to jail. We simply cannot accept the notion that a person could carry a moral disease like a virus without being personally responsible for it, and that this moral disease could sicken others just as physical viruses carry the flu from one "innocent" person to the next. The only exception we generally make is for insanity, which is why some people tried for crimes plead "insanity" to explain that they were NOT responsible. However, Oedipus is absolutely sane; there is no question here of insanity. It is useful to notice where other times and places are genuinely different from ours and pollution is a good example of such a genuine difference.

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MEDEA

Medea is a revenge tragedy about a woman who murders her own children to punish her ex-husband. This is a difficult situation for us to identify with, yet *Medea* is an easy play to read and relate to because of the powerful psychological presentation of the mad, murderous, yet grieving mother.

Medea is a powerful, dangerous witch. After committing various criminal acts including several murders to help her lover, Jason, Medea has fled into exile with him to Corinth. Here Jason deserts her and marries the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth.

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THE STORY OF ***MEDEA***

The actual play starts at this time. It begins with the Nurse worried about Medea's children; she evidently knows Medea well and fears for their lives. Creon, the King of Corinth and father of Jason's new bride intends to drive Medea and her children by Jason out of the city into exile. Medea pleads with Creon for one day's time before she leaves.

Next comes a really disgusting scene in which Jason, an unbelievably smooth and egotistical rat, says that if Medea had only behaved nicely, she could have stayed in Corinth. He further claims to have married the princess in order to consolidate the position of his and Medea's children. Medea doesn't buy that lame excuse.

Medea schemes to prepare her revenge on Jason. First, she arranges for her own safety by promising the childless King Aegeus of Athens that if he gives her refuge she will enable him to have children.

Next, Medea sends her own children to Jason's new bride, carrying rich gifts of a robe and tiara, supposedly to soften the princess' heart so that she and her father will let Medea's children stay in Corinth, even though Medea must leave. But the gifts are in fact poisoned, and when the princess puts them on, not only does she die, but her father embraces her and he too dies from the poison.

Finally, Medea leaves Corinth in a dragon wagon, taking the bodies of the two dead children so that Jason won't even have the satisfaction of burying them. Not only is this her ultimate touch of revenge, but it is a good example of a deus ex machina ending. Medea's actions had made so much trouble that there was no way she could escape by natural means, so Euripides provided her a wagon pulled by a dragon.

Euripides makes Medea strangely sympathetic in her murderous sufferings. She loves her children and yet she is finally willing to kill them in order to complete her total revenge against their father.

The most disturbing aspect of this play to modern readers is that Medea gets away with murdering her own children as well as Jason's new wife and her father. This was certainly disturbing to playgoers of Euripides' time, too, but they would have been more able to understand the outcome, because Medea was related to the sun god and such creatures did not have to operate strictly in terms of human morality. Niobe is an example of what the Greek gods did to human beings when offended. Niobe was a proud mother of many children and she bragged that she had more children than the goddess Leto, whose only two children were Apollo and Artemis. Leto was offended. To soothe their mother, Apollo and Artemis killed all of Niobe's children.

Morality is for human beings; the gods are always potentially dangerous to impious, unwary, and even totally innocent humans (e.g. the unborn Oedipus). Although the gods, at times, seem to have ideas of right and wrong, these ideas may be quite different from human ideas of right and wrong.

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OLD COMEDY

Old Comedy was the form of comedy written and presented in the fifth century B.C. in Greece. It is quite different from later kinds of Greek Comedy.

STRUCTURE OF OLD COMEDY

1.	Main character conceives an absurd happy idea (e.g. no sex in Lysistrata)
2.	Violent opposition to happy idea
3.	Happy idea conquers opposition in a debate
4.	Test of happy idea in practice
5.	A series of scenes between the main character and various figures who have been affected
6.	A satisfactory climax including a party

Following Harsh, *A Handbook of Classical Drama*, 258-259

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LYSISTRATA

Lysistrata is set in contemporary Athens during the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. This war eventually destroyed the Athenian democracy. The title character, Lysistrata reveals her happy idea of a sex strike to force the men to stop fighting and make peace. She convinces the other women that this is a good idea and the women seize the Acropolis, where the

money for the war effort was kept.

Then two half-choruses enter, one of old women and one of old men. Their clash represents the dramatic clash of the entire play.

Next, the Magistrate tries to get the women to behave. He is a typical pompous Athenian male. After he is thoroughly humiliated, Lysistrata chastises the Athenians for their destructive warlike behavior which is destroying both Athens and Sparta. Then the two choruses clash again providing low comic contrast to Lysistrata's serious advice.

A few days pass and then Lysistrata announces that the women are undermining her revolt. The two half-choruses express their hatred of one another. The men are getting pretty horny by now, and we have the wonderful scene of Cinesias begging his wife Myrrhina for sex, while she teases and refuses him and he finally leaves.

The Spartan Herald arrives and announces that the Spartan men are in the same fix as the Athenian men, and finally a meeting and truce is arranged. Lysistrata makes a moving appeal for pan-hellenism, reminding each side of the debt they owe to the other. Naturally, all ends with a banquet, singing and dancing.

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INTERESTING ISSUES: THREATENING WOMEN:

Lysistrata: organizes a revolt of women against men
Clytemnestra: takes a lover while her husband is at Troy; murders her husband when he returns home
Medea: a witch; murders many people, including her own children; gets away with it all
Jocasta: tries to have her infant son killed; marries her unrecognized adult son; kills herself

The plays *Lysistrata* and *Agamemnon* both make much of role reversal: in both plays women seizing power act as men. In the case of Lysistrata, it is all very amusing, but in the case of Clytemnestra it is the deadliest of dangers, as we saw earlier in the *Odyssey*, where Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon was a constant warning to Odysseus of what can happen to a homecoming soldier if he can't trust his wife.

The actual role of women in classical Greece was extremely limited, especially in Athens where women were not even allowed out of the house to go marketing. They were tightly controlled to insure that the male head of the family had male heirs which were truly his own. Beyond this, women were not much valued. Certainly they did not behave like the women in these plays. It is fascinating to wonder why a culture that so-controlled its women would write plays about such powerful and disturbing women...was it memories of being an infant dependent upon a woman, or was it memories of an earlier time when women had had a more active role in the society?

At any rate, Medea is a powerful, dangerous witch woman. And one cannot feel good about Jocasta although her troubles were largely beyond her control. One gets the feeling that classical Greek playwrights were not comfortable with powerful women. None of these women are in any way normal, and are as much monsters as female in the way they are presented. Lysistrata is an amusing monster; Jocasta a disturbing one; Clytemnestra and Medea intensely dangerous.

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INTERESTING ISSUES: FREEWILL IN ***OEDIPUS REX***

This play is wonderfully controversial. *Oedipus Rex* is probably the single best document we have for thinking and arguing about ideas of fate and freedom in classical Greece. I have selected just a few comments by contemporary scholars to give a sense of the ideas this play stirs up.

"There is no suggestion in the *Oedipus Rex* that Laius sinned or that Oedipus was the victim of an hereditary curse, and the critic must not assume what the poet has abstained from suggesting....we think of two clear-cut alternative views--either we believe in free will or else we are determinists. But fifth-century Greeks did not think in these terms...." (Dodds 40)

"From Homer to Aristotle both poets and philosophers tended to ask not `was he free?' as we might do, but `is he responsible ...?'...the ancient question, is answered in the affirmative if it can be shown that the men involved acted according to their characters..." (Gould 52)

"Sophocles has provided a conclusive answer to those who suggest that Oedipus could, and therefore should, have avoided his fate. The oracle was unconditional (l. 790): it did not say "If you do so-and-so you will kill your father"; it simply said "You will kill your father, you will sleep with your mother." And what an oracle predicts is bound to happen." (Dodds 39)

Oedipus' "lack of freedom in the past needs to be emphasized since it is the assurance of his innocence in the present. Had he had the faintest suspicion of his true identity and relationship to Laius and Jocasta then he would indeed be an `inhuman monster'". (Vickers 499)

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INTERESTING ISSUES: KINGS AND HEROES

Agamemnon in ***Agamemnon***

Oedipus in ***Oedipus Rex***

Jason in ***Medea***

Greek kings were pretty arrogant by modern standards and this was ok under most circumstances. Be careful not to impose our ideas of a nice guy on them. However, Agamemnon was perhaps a little too haughty for his own good, and gets in trouble in the *Iliad* because of his hot temper and pride which incite him to quarrel with Achilles. This pride is important in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* too. As Philip Harsh points out:

> "The pride of Agamemnon...is...spectacularly symbolized by Agamemnon's triumphant entrance in his chariot with followers and fanfare. He is ...too proud of his utter destruction of Troy. His conceit entirely prevents him from properly understanding the veiled warnings of the chorus. From his haughty and contemptuous response to Clytemnestra's hypocrisy, it is obvious that he despises her; but...he pathetically underestimates his adversary. " (69)

Oedipus too is arrogant, but there is no doubt in the play that he has been a good king and is sincere in his attempts to root out the source of plague that is harming his country. And once Oedipus discovers the terrible truth about his life, his arrogance totally disappears. It would be interesting to compare the characters of Oedipus and Agamemnon to distinguish between two kinds of kingly pride, one excessive even in fifth century Greece.

As for Jason, he is a self-seeking, egocentric rat and deserves to die, but of course it is not Jason, but his children, who are killed. His smarmy speeches to Medea explaining why he "had" to marry the king's daughter to protect his and Medea's children are masterpieces of disgusting rationalization that would be perfectly at home in a modern context. Jason could be a villain on a daytime TV show.

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INTERESTING ISSUES: FOREIGNERS AND MONSTERS

Cassandra

Medea

Oedipus

Tiresias

Cassandra and Medea are both female, foreign, monstrous, and closely connected to things sacred. Cassandra has troubles because she deceived Apollo; her punishment is to prophesy truly while no one believes her, which she does while Agamemnon is about to be murdered. She uses her supernatural gift "to draw again and again the connection between crime and retribution, linking past, present and future in the house of Atreus." (Vickers 374) The chorus just listens to her and goes oh woe and such

but nobody takes a step to help Agamemnon or to keep Cassandra from going into the palace to be herself murdered.

Medea, on the other hand, gets away with everything, because she is descended from the sun god. Indeed, "one of the chief difficulties which Euripides faced in writing this play was in the humanization of Medea, for the Medea of popular legend was both the most famous witch of antiquity and the cold perpetrator of barbaric murders." (Harsh 177) For all this, Euripides transforms the mythical witch into a passionate woman who can weep bitterly while she murders her own children.

Oedipus is also foreign and monstrous. He becomes a sacred monster, especially after he blinds himself and prepares to leave the city as a wanderer. In a later play by Sophocles, ***Oedipus at Colonus***, we are told that Oedipus' final death was a sacred event bringing blessings on the place where he died.

Tiresias is an interesting character; he is the seer who gives Odysseus good advice in the underworld about how to get home safely. Tiresias lived part of his life as a man; part as a woman. He was ancient, wise, a sacred monster. In ***Oedipus Rex***, Tiresias is still alive, blind, yet able to see the truth, something Oedipus cannot do until after he loses his physical eyes. Much of the irony of the play lies in the contrast between the physically blind who can see and the mentally blind who cannot see even though their eyes function perfectly.

Indeed, the development of Greek drama out of the rituals of Dionysus suggests much of the foreign and monstrous inherent in the very fabric of the early dramatic ritual. Dionysus was known as the god who came from elsewhere, forcing his way into Greece, overcoming resistance, driving people mad who refused to worship him. This is described at length in *The* Bacchae by Euripides. Dionysus' powerful ritual mixture of ecstasy and suffering, dance, song, wine and death, is eminently suitable for the god of Greek tragedy, a theatre of intense, complex emotion, great suffering and final calm.

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