

Classics / WAGS 38: First Essay

Rick Griffiths, ex. 53555

Ungraded

Due: Oct. 11 by 12:00 noon by e-mail

Office hours: Tues. 10:00-12:00

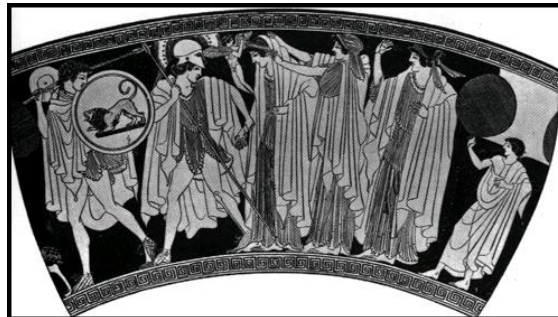
Length: 1,250-1,500 words

Fri. 11:00-12:00

Editorial conferences (sign-up in class):

Wed., Oct. 7, – Sat., Oct. 10

(expected; please e-mail rough
draft in advance in Word)



Paris leads Helen away under the winged figure of Peithō

Homer and Tragedy: Persuasion

Write on one of the following topics. You may also in consultation with me devise your own comparative topic.

Prologue to the topics on Sophocles:

Sophocles authority as a tragedian rests in part in how he translates elements of Homeric narrative to the stage. We can imagine that the Athenians would be startled and engaged when Homeric characters and situations familiar to them from childhood suddenly *play* very differently on the stage. For example,

Hector (lifting Astyanax):

"[A]nd one day let them say, 'He is a better man than his father!'" – (*Il.* 6.571).

Ajax (lifting Eurysaces):

"My boy, have better luck than your father had,

Classics / WAGS 38: Essay 1 (Oct. 11, 2009

Be like him in all else; and you will not be base." (*Ajax* 550-551)

Homer's Hector and Sophocles' Ajax make largely opposite points about themselves.

Drama necessarily works differently from a one-man performance. As a storyteller, Sophocles dared not repeat Homeric narratives too closely. And the values of Athenian *polis* culture were not those of the less urban, democratic, and deliberative towns that the Homeric bards once visited.

One of the most traceable inheritances is the factor of Πείθω (*Peithō*, persuasion), a term that covers both seduction (temptation, bad influence) and the kind of argumentation necessary for social life and especially for democracy. As to the bad *peithō*, often associated with sex, the image on p. 1 from a pot shows the winged figure of *Peithō* hovering over Helen as Paris leads her away, though it's not clear who is seducing whom.

Please shape a topic from one of the following areas, or work out a similar project in consultation with me. With each topic, I suggest a number of possible questions that may open up the topic, but please do not feel limited to them or constrained to answer all of them.

I. Achilles and Philoctetes: Getting to "No"

After Neoptolemus gives the bow back to Philoctetes, the embittered warrior still refuses to give in and assist in the glorious and healing project of winning the Trojan War. In *Iliad* 9, when Achilles is offered everything he had demanded (or so it seems to everyone but himself), he still refuses to fight and indeed persuades one of the ambassadors, his tutor Phoenix, to come over to his side and possibly go home with him, just as Philoctetes persuades Neoptolemus to take him home. In the respective narratives, the war cannot be won without Achilles and Philoctetes. Yet there are contrasts. The mighty Achilles is at the center of heroic society, while Philoctetes is a pariah on a desert island. Achilles embodies the physical ideal of the warrior; Philoctetes reminds us how fragile that ideal is.

► Compare how the *Iliad* and the *Philoctetes* set up these renunciations so as to let them seem both "right" or "true" and, on the other hand, destructive – a combination that often gets called "tragic," in the mystified modern use of the term.

Classics / WAGS 38: Essay 1 (Oct. 11, 2009)

There are many more lines of approach than you can hope to follow. Pursue what seems important and interesting to you:

Achilles may be at the center of things, but how does he perceive and talk about his position? Is his language that of a smug insider? How do the two heroes perceive and describe things differently than do the men around them? What is their performative range? I pointed out in class that Philoctetes alone sings lyrics with the chorus, as well as reciting and talking; is there any such uniqueness in Achilles? Both have claims to superhuman powers; what are the hidden costs of these advantages? What kind of surrounding character types are used to define the natures of the two heroes? That is, with whom do they play their scenes? How are they located in terms of family? How do they balance the claims of friendship/comradeship (*philia*) and personal honor? How is their decision influenced by the bodies in which they find themselves at the moment? How is the nature of their unshakable resolve clarified by the heroes who cause them to give up their refusals to fight (i.e., Patroclus and Heracles, respectively).

II. Priam and Philoctetes: Getting to “Yes”

Among the various mentors and allies available to Neoptolemus as he sets about to prove himself at Troy, Philoctetes is far the worst career choice. In much the same way, in the *Iliad* the enemy king, Priam, is an unlikely candidate for tapping Achilles’ reserve of reasonableness.

► How does Neoptolemus’ interaction with Philoctetes echo and vary the encounter of Achilles and Priam in *Iliad* 24? How does the weakness of these older men – in an heroic culture that despises weakness – strengthen their power to persuade?

Again, the factors similar to those mentioned in the preceding question should be considered. Again, you can’t do everything. Some questions: What registers of language do the characters use in their interaction? What are the operative values in the discussions (adding in kinship as one of the forms of *philia*)? How do the powerful young man and the frail old man switch roles? How does the contrast of youth and age draw in the element of memory? How do the gods intervene?

III. Andromache and Tecmessa



Tecmessa covers Ajax

“Woman, a woman’s decency is silence.”
– *Ajax* (293)

Ironically, it is Tecmessa herself who reports this dismissal from Ajax, and she does so to an audience, the sailors, who are anxious to hear for her account. In the first part of the *Ajax*, she has more lines than any other actor, a number of them adapted from Homer’s ideal wife/widow, Andromache, as well as from Hector. Lacking their birth families, both women derive all their social identity and well-being from their husbands and, like most women, have no social power other than persuasion.

► **Within the larger similarities of the wife/widow role, how does Sophocles use Tecmessa’s *differences* from Andromache for theatrical impact?**

Background considerations: Tecmessa is again the perfectly loyal wife of the endangered husband, but in this case not, like Hector, an ideal husband. How do these differences underscore the unique qualities of Ajax? How does Tecmessa already confront the nightmarish circumstances that Andromache fears? What kind of role does Tecmessa create for herself out of the bad treatment she gets from Ajax? How do the arguments that she marshals to persuade Ajax variously parallel, go beyond, or fall short of what Andromache can use with Hector? How does an actor have ways of indicating power and vulnerability different from what a bard can indicate for a narrated character? How do they function as widows? Be sure to address

Classics / WAGS 38: Essay 1 (Oct. 11, 2009)

Andromache's role in *Iliad* 22 and 24, as well as in *Iliad* 6. There are good observations on this topic in the questions sent in for September 28 (posted on *Rikipedia*); these, and the class discussion, give you the baseline you need to get beyond.

IV. Priam and Odysseus (*Ajax*): Honoring the Dead

In their final movement, both the *Iliad* and of the *Ajax* present a dispute about whether to bury a dead enemy. Both works explore the limits of "helping friends and harming enemies" as that ethic violates common decency and divine law, among other things.

► **How does the situation in the *Ajax* recast and comment on that in the *Iliad* in ways that correspond to the new realities of the *polis*?**

Some possible considerations: The hostility of Achaean vs. Trojan in the *Iliad* is supplanted in the *Ajax* by conflicts in just one camp. Does this change lead to greater consensus about values? What are the values that lead to resolution of the conflict? What is surprising about having Priam and Odysseus, respectively, play this crucial role in the resolution? Does the *Ajax* present anything equivalent to the intense bond between Achilles and Hector? How do the two works handle the paradox that to bury an enemy is to create distance, while to leave him unburied maintains a connection? The *Ajax* looks back to a greater and now lost generation represented by Achilles and Ajax; what, for Achilles in the *Iliad*, is the inner experience of being that heroic paradigm? Does the *Iliad* have any equivalent to the chorus of sailors in the *Ajax*? Be sure to look at the good observations on Odysseus in the questions submitted for September 28.

Prologue to the topic on Euripides:

As we shall see in *The Trojan Women*, Euripides sometimes goes back to the Trojan War myths, but often from disturbing new angles. In the *Medea* he does not recast Trojan myths, but does present a study of heroic will in a female character.

V. Achilles and Medea: The (Internal) Battle of the Sexes



Achilles bandaging Patroclus

*My mood, which just before was strong and rigid,
No dipped sword more so, now has lost its edge –
My speech is womanish for this woman's sake;
And pity touches me for wife and child,
Widowed and lost among my enemies ...*

— Ajax (*Ajax* 650-54)

Either expressing (or pretending to voice) a new capacity to be persuaded, Ajax figures his new malleability in gendered terms. Similarly when Patroclus comes to Achilles about their dead and wounded comrades, Achilles asks, “Why in tears, Patroclus? / Like a girl, a baby running after her mother ... ” (Il. 16.8-9). Men who pity, like women who kill, may be perceived as crossing gender lines, or perhaps the poet is exposing how artificial those lines are.

As the most admired of Greek heroes, Achilles, may be at a polar remove from the child-killer Medea, but they are the two most divided characters we have encountered and willing to harm themselves to get revenge. Both end up flaunting dead bodies from their chariots to torment the survivors.

► **Compare how the gendered dimensions of the “two Medeas” resemble and differ from the warring sides of Achilles.**

Be explicit about how you define feminine and masculine attributes. The male and female roles in tending and mourning the dead are crucial in interpreting the end of the *Iliad*. You may find insight into Achilles from his relationship with the androgyne Athena. As a larger-than-life character, Achilles intersects with the realm of the immortals (by his privileges, by the fire imagery), of animals (by similes and his own self-description), and of the dead (by stalking his own death). Does he also cross over into the realm of the female? How is Medea herself, in the eyes of observers, outside of the human realm? How does Achilles pull back from those extraordinary identities by the end? Does Medea? Keep in mind that the poet of the *Iliad* may see gender in different terms than does Euripides.

This intriguing area will need much shaping and narrowing, since there are too many variables. In all likelihood, Achilles will take considerably more work than Medea.

General issues:

Aim:

Take up from where our class discussions leave off and work closely with textual evidence. You are writing for me, not the general reader. Tell me what I do not know. That is, this essay is not a book report or review. Do not feel obliged to spend the first page justifying the project or restating the assumptions behind the assigned topic.

Classics / WAGS 38: Essay 1 (Oct. 11, 2009)

Be concrete. Please restrict “tragedy” and “tragic” to the Athenian art form, rather than using them to invoke a literary essence or view of the world.

Feel free to work from any theoretical basis you find appropriate, but flag it clearly for me.

Economy:

Waste no space summarizing plots or embedding extensive block quotation. Apart from short quotations, cite lines rather than quoting them, as in the reading questions. Use this format: *Il.* 4.81-84 or *Ajax* 693-718. Please do not use page numbers.

Intellectual honesty:

Please consult *Intellectual Honesty* on the course CMS page. Use of secondary sources, including the Internet, is not required or encouraged. All sources used should be cited. The reading questions and material from discussion can be taken as common knowledge and need not be cited. I refer any suspected plagiarism to the Office of the Dean of Students. When in doubt, please contact me.

Editorial conferences:

Please sign up in class for a consultation between Oct. 7 and 10. I can be most helpful if you e-mail me a rough draft in advance of the block of appointments in we are meeting (first thing in the morning if possible).

Writing Center:

Another pair of eyes can often be helpful, and sustained, systematic work with a tutor is a great way to become a better writer.

The one kind of problem that neither they nor anyone outside the course can solve is “I don’t understand the essay topic.” It’s my responsibility to take care of that, and the various possible reasons for the disconnect are things I should know about (e.g., the phrasing of the topic, the delivery of the course, or the way the student is approaching the reading).