Classics / WAGS 23: Essay Four
Plato and Drama

Essay 3: 1,250 – 1,500 words.
Due electronically by 12:00 PM noon on Wednesday, May 11
(moved back by a day from the syllabus).

Office hours:
May 4 (Wed.) 1:00-2:00
May 6 (Fri.) 1:00-3:00
May 7 (Sat.) 11:00-12:00
May 8 (Sun.) 2:00-4:00
May 9 (Mon) 9:00-11:00
May 10 (Tues.) 10:00-12:00

This assignment asks you to devise a comparison that involves Plato and two playwrights and that explores some important difference in outlook: philosophy v. drama; heroic myth (i.e., tragedy) v. contemporary society (i.e., dialogues and comedy); conservatives (Sophocles and Aristophanes) v. iconoclasts (Euripides) — Plato might be in either camp.

For this assignment you will need to shape and focus all the topics proposed below, and I welcome other proposals. These three-way comparisons can be hard to organize. See if you can locate the authors along a continuum (two poles, with someone between), get them into two camps, or arrange them in an historical progression. Do not just catalogue the authors' respective outlooks without relating, comparing, and cross-referring them.

Please keep in mind that I evaluate essays in terms of the difficulty and originality of what the writer is attempting and for the value of what the writer has established rather than for what's missing in addressing these vast questions, as long as the particular texts are represented reasonably.

4.1 *Education, is it Possible?*

As we see in Thucydides, the sophists were controversial, as were the prospects for what we would call "education." In a culture so based on debate and litigation, the ability to manipulate language had much value, even if just for self-defense. Yet the sophists themselves could excite distrust in often being outsiders (non-Athenians) who took money for their instruction and in aiming at persuasion rather than truth. Modern readers are often baffled to find our teacher-archetype Socrates insisting in the *Apology* that he's not a teacher.

>Compare the views of teaching and its possibilities in *The Clouds* ("Socrates"), *The Bacchae* (Dionysus with Pentheus and Thebes), and the Socratic dialogues (Socrates with the Athenian jurymen and/or the symposiasts, or with Alcibiades in the latter's misguided account of their relationship).

Some questions: What constitutes "wisdom" and where does it come from? That is, can "wisdom" be taught? What is the point in having it?

4.2 The *Myth of the Return*

The *Odyssey* narrates how a king comes back in disguise to reclaim and restore his kingdom and family. In the war years and after, when the political leadership did not seem sufficient to save Athens, hopes for some such salvation from without became popular.

>Discuss how *The Bacchae*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and the Socratic dialogues provide variations of that myth. Keep in mind that the saviors (or anti-saviors) are outside the power structure in various ways and come with different intentions for the city. What is each writer saying about the prospects for restoring the city? (Let Euripides' Thebes stand allegorically for Athens.)

4.3 *Female Sexuality*

In our earlier readings, female desire has either been avoided (*Iliad*) or seen as dangerous (*Odyssey*).

>How do Euripides (*Trojan Women, Medea, Hippolytus*), Aristophanes (*Lysistrata*), and Plato (*Symposium*) variously present the power – both benefit and danger – of female desire?

4.4 *Androgyny for Men*

No, it's not a perfume, but we've seen only traces of such androgyny earlier in our readings and mostly in the negative terms of being *unmanned*: defeated warriors in the *Iliad* (disempowered, penetrated), Thucydides' Nicias, Oedipus' sons in *OC,* and Euripides' Admetus. In this process of unmanning, femininity amounts to a kind of absence of power, courage, honor, or other forms of worth. (In this tricky area, we need to recall that the same texts often credit the female powers of fertility and ritual.) Most poignantly, we haven't seen much fashion sense in these guys, other than perhaps Admetus' panache as a funeral planner.

The re-emergence of the primordial figure of the well-dressed and well-coifed Dionysus, scrupulously avoided in epic and in earlier tragedy (other than in satyr plays), brings a sharper assault on the vulnerable underbelly of masculinity. He did, after all, emerge from Zeus's thigh. As god of theater, with all his affinities to the disguise and tricks and sensual indulgence of comedy, he also threatens to bring the disembodied sublimity of tragedy (where no one ever eats) down to earth. Behind his mask, he is the quintessential boundary breaker: between god (father Zeus) and mortal (mother Semele); male and female; human and animal (seen as a bull); reality and illusion. Where Athena, born from Zeus's head, enforces hierarchy, Dionysus, from below the belt, stirs things up. But views differ about whether he is empowering the downtrodden or destructively creating anarchy.

> **How do Aristophanes (*Acharnians*, *Lysistrata*), Euripides (*The Bacchae*), and Plato (*Symposium*) variously present the male gender breaker? In particular, how is the Dionysian impulse shown as inspiring or inhibiting destructive political behavior? In cases where this impulse is seen negatively, what other and truer forms of vitality are suggested?**

This area will take considerable narrowing and shaping, particularly with Aristophanes. Dionysus in *The Bacchae* leaps out at us, and the drunk and disorderly Alcibiades in the *Symposium* is not hard to spot as devotee (or perhaps a travesty) of the god. Though the Dionysian spirit in Aristophanes is palpable, tracing out the workings of androgyny may involve added conceptual steps to account for stage production (i.e., male actors dressing up as women). And in any of these authors you may or may not find a step beyond the female-as-absence view crudely summarized above.

4.4a *Androgyny for Men (Dionysus-free Version)*

A permutation on 4.3 is to deflect from the complex figure of Dionysus in *The*

Bacchae in order to concentrate on the "parts-missing" model of the unmanned-male, in particular, the male virgin Hippolytus.

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Notes on all topics:

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, material from discussion, and e-mailed questions/comments 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. Once you start the essay, it is probably best to work up to the topic by a process of your own rereading and rethinking.

Editing:

Citation: Again cite rather than extensively quote the texts and do not summarize plot. Cite by book and line number, as in the reading notes. For the Euripidean plays in Vellacott's translation cite by page. For the Platonic dialogues, cite by chapter (embedded in square brackets in the text) or by binder page.

Please tell me what topic you are writing on. Offering your own title is also recommended as a way to give a clue where the essay is going.

Rough drafts:

I'll contact first-year students and some others about submitting a draft and having a conference.