

**Heyman Center Friends/Carl Hovde Colloquium -- Fall 2021**  
**A Philosophical and Literary Treatment of Aeschylus' *Oresteia***  
Christia Mercer, Gustave M. Berne Professor of Philosophy  
Thursdays, 6-7:30 p.m.

**Brief Description:**

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* was a hit when first performed in Athens in the 5th century BCE, and remains one of the most riveting and obscure ancient tragedies. The trilogy treats the violence and impact of war, the instability of justice, the far reach of revenge, and the fragility of goodness. The plays are moving, bizarre, frustrating, and beautiful. This course will contextualize the trilogy, and then explore the fascinating complications of the drama, which will be framed within philosophical questions about the nature of love, justice, power, and communal responsibilities. We will track metaphors, analyze language, and do close readings to excavate some of the profound richness of the plays.

**Thursday, September 23:** Introduction to the course, its main philosophical questions and methodology. How should we approach this ancient literature?

**Thursday, October 7:** Please read *Iliad* 1 paying attention to Agamemnon as king and leader. Recommended: The BBC podcast, *In Our Time*, discussion of the *Iliad*:  
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0bh5x1y>

**Thursday, October 21:** In our book, *Aeschylus II*, read all the Introductory materials (pp. 1-18) and the entirety of the first play *Agamemnon* (pp. 21-79, Lines 1-1675), although we will focus on Lines 1- 474. Explore the wonderful Lit Hum website's material on the trilogy.  
<https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/oresteia>

**Thursday, November 4:** Reread and rethink *Agamemnon*, Lines 475 to end. Recommended: The BBC podcast, *In Our Time*, discussion of the *Oresteia*:  
<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3m7gaz>

**Thursday, November 11:** *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides* with special focus on the former.

**Thursday, December 2:** Focus on *The Eumenides*. Concluding thoughts about our philosophical questions.

**Required Text:** Aeschylus, *Oresteia* (Aeschylus II, Chicago, tr. Lattimore)

**Recommended Text:** Homer, *Iliad* (Chicago, tr. Lattimore)

**Recommended Listening:**

The BBC podcast, *In Our Time*, discussion of both the *Iliad* and *Oresteia*.

**Amusingly Related:** *The Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller (not great lit, but very amusing take on Agamemnon, not to mention Achilles).

**Questions to ponder as you read *Agamemnon*:**

1. The play opens with a call to the gods by a "Watchman," whose behavior and speech are difficult to understand. How is this significant? What does he represent, do you think?
2. That speech is followed by one by the chorus, here constituted of elderly men. What are they saying? How do they set the scene for what happens?
3. Lines 218 to 237 describe the tragic sacrifice of Iphigenia by Agamemnon, her father. Why is she sacrificed? What makes this scene so dramatic? How do you think this may have impacted Clytemnestra, her mother?
4. How does Aeschylus introduce us to Agamemnon?
5. Animal images are used throughout the play to describe various characters and feelings. In this play, e.g., consider lines 716-736.
6. As you know the ancient Greeks called excessive pride "hubris." How do you think hubris ebbs and flows in this play?
7. Cassandra's speech beginning at line 1214 provides insight into her enslavement and curse. She says, "What does it matter now if men believe or not?" How does this relate to the plays' central themes?
8. Pay attention to Clytemnestra's speech as a conclusion to this play, "Do not heed their empty yappings; come now, dearest, you / and I / have the power; we two shall bring good order to our house at / least" (lines 1673-1676).

**Questions to consider as you read: *The Libation Bearers***

1. How is Orestes described? How does he justify matricide? Is he clear about what to do?
2. Do the gods agree on what is just, right? What's the argument?
3. What's the family become here?
4. How are animal images used throughout this play?
5. What are the gender politics here?

**... and the *Eumenides*:**

1. What is the justice that Apollo represents? What is the justice that Athena represents?
2. What purpose do the Furies serve in society after the trial?
3. The peace reached at the end of this play is uneasy. How else could things have gone?
4. What do you think of Apollo's arguments? His gender politics?