

Hum 110: *The Oresteia*

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Discussion Questions:

1. *Historical Context.* In 458 Aeschylus presented the *Oresteia* in Athens. What do we know about the cultural climate of Athens during this period? What are the main political and social concerns? (For example, one of the hallmarks of this era is that it was a time when the state was trying to transfer the population from aristocratic households to city states. How does Aeschylus' play reinforce or undermine these goals? What are other historical concerns besides this one?)
2. *Genre: Tragedy.* What is an event or incident that has occurred in your life or in your lifetime that you would label "tragic"? Look of tragedy in a dictionary of literary terms. What about your incident is "tragic" according to the dictionary's definition? What about the play *Agamemnon* is tragic? What is the role of irony in this play? What moments are ironic and why?
3. *Setting:* The *Oresteia* is set in the mythical past. After 480 BC, the victory at Salamis replaced the battle of Troy in the Greek imagination. Why does Aeschylus return to this moment here, then? Next semester we will learn that Livy thinks that history is the "cure for sick minds." How does Aeschylus use the past to heal the woes of the present? (To answer this you will need to answer question #1 above.)
4. *Characterization:* Write a character sketch of Agamemnon using only the *Iliad*. Write a character sketch of Agamemnon using only the first play of the *Oresteia*. How do these sketches compare? Can you explain the differences using the historical context of the play? (See question #1 above.) Write a character sketch of Clytaemestra and the Furies. How do these images of women compare to the depictions of women we have read in the texts by Herodotus, Hesiod, and Homer?
5. *Philosophy/Ethics:* The 6th century was marked by the discovery of the significance of human intention as the basis for moral responsibility. Are Agamemnon, Clytaemestra, and Orestes responsible for what they have done? Should they be? What are comparable situations today?
6. *Themes:* Make a list of the themes we have discussed in Greek culture to date. Add to this list any new themes that you see arising in the *Oresteia* (the introduction is useful for this). Next to this list jot down key passages that develop these themes.
7. *Structure.* We have discussed how Herodotus shapes time through imposing narratives and structure upon events. How does Aeschylus shape time in his trilogy. What is the movement of the trilogy? (To answer this you will have to answer #6 above: part of the question is how themes or issues develop over time.)
8. *Politics.* Some readers have suggested that the Athenian empire is the constant subtext of Herodotus' *Histories*. How would you characterize Athens based on the *Histories*? What does Herodotus implicitly predict for her future? How would you characterize Athens based on the *Oresteia*? What does Aeschylus predict for her future?