

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# GREEK LITERATURE

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## 1. POETRY

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**Overview** The great epics of Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were parts of a vast ‘epic cycle’ which was composed in early Greece, on the whole perhaps somewhat later than Homer’s work, which was first written down in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Though these epics—the *Cypria*, the *Aethiopis*, the *Ilioupersis*, and several others—remain only in fragments, we know both from those fragments, many of them appended to Homer texts in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E., and from scattered references in Greek texts from the time of the Library of Alexandria on, that the material of this ‘epic cycle’ was largely concerned with the events around the besieging and taking of Troy, and the returning home of the Greek warriors, post-war. From the existence of this cycle, we conclude that there was a loose confederation of oral bards, of whom Homer was one, who plied their trade to aristocratic audiences up and down the Asia Minor coast and the eastern Mediterranean in early Iron Age Greece.

Why did the texts of Homer survive, inspirational and funny to our time, while serving for their own culture as foundations of art, law texts, history books, and guides to the nature of the gods? We have to guess that the reason why Homer alone survived, of the many poems that composed the ‘epic cycle,’ is his genius, and mastery of the dactylic hexameter, though we cannot be sure of that. Whatever the now lost explanation for Homer’s survival we can feel sure that the qualities that drove his text were of unique and universal importance.

In the *Iliad*, Homer deals—and on the highest artistic level—with ‘eternal themes’: war, lust, battle, heroism, love, self-sacrifice. The same poet who can introduce us to the volatile brilliance and passion of Achilles, can rub our noses in the nitty gritty of cavalry warfare, or the humble pie Priam must eat, in order to beg Achilles for the return of the body of Hector.

Homer’s *Odyssey* is as rich as the *Iliad*, in universal values, and for many listeners and readers strikes home more intimately than do the martial themes of the *Iliad*. In the *Odyssey* we track the ten year homeward journey of one of the Greek warriors at Troy, Odysseus. This man ‘of many wiles’ must pass through fantastic challenges on his ocean return, not the least of which is a multi-year sojourn on a goddess’ island, barely fending off the promise of immortality. In the end Odysseus must show himself capable of the ultimate show of strength, by stringing and shooting the bow that none of the suitors in his household could deal with. Odysseus, wily, subtle, cruel, faithful, remains one of western literature’s keystones of literary power.

#### Readings

Gilbert Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic*, Oxford, 1924  
Burgess, Jonathan, *The tradition of the Trojan War in Homer and the Epic Cycle*, Johns Hopkins, 2003

#### Discussion questions

What, about Homer’s two epics, would qualify them to become a kind of ‘Bible for the Greeks,’ in the later pre-Christian centuries? There are many practical messages in Homer’s work, but is there a religious message, a wisdom about the gods?

Samuel Butler's work, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897), makes a startling claim for the feminine authorship of that epic. Please investigate his book. First, though, give some thought to his proposition: do you see some evidence, in the *Odyssey*, of a female creator?

## Homer, The Iliad

**Homer and his tradition.** The Greek epic imagination launches with the genius of Homer. We are still not certain of the identity of this creator, or whether he composed in writing or orally, but we know that in the late eighth century B.C. he wrote down some version of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the two greatest milestones in Greek literature—and in fact in Greek culture. It was not, of course, that this creation emerged out of the blue, for in fact Archaic Greek culture had by 700 B.C. been developing for at least a millennium on the Greek mainland, and there had long been a rich oral epic tradition in northern areas of what would later become Greece. And that is only a short sighted view of the epic tradition that was 'behind' Homer. Behind the Greek epic tradition was a mighty volume of Ancient Near Eastern epic texts, many of them lost in the sands of the Middle East, which included such masterworks as the Babylonian Creation Story (*Enuma Elish*) or *Gilgamesh*, a literary exploration of fundamental human themes—immortality, lust, personal integrity-- composed one millennium before Homer's work. That Mesopotamian background clearly empowered the epic imagination which grew from the various culture creative people who occupied the Ancient Near East. *Language growth* was another factor in making the Greek epic imagination effective. The great ancient epics were originally created by massive feats of oral memory, but by the time of the Homeric 'recension,' putting these texts together in the late eighth century, an elegant and efficient alphabetic system, like the Greek, was available and had been found invaluable for communication. The development of that code system, out of an ancient history leading through cuneiform and hieroglyphic traditions, eventually into a Phoenician waystage, required millennia of experiment and ingenuity. Even a native genius like Homer was dependent on the tireless creative efforts of his language making predecessors.

**The narrative of the Iliad.** We open with arguably the greatest of Homer's works, the *Iliad*, or the epic about the 'Fall of Troy.' The historic 'Fall'—traditionally located by the Greeks as from the twelfth cent. B.C.—brought together a set of local Greek power lords and retainers, whose interest was in the wealth and shipping control of Troy itself, strategically located on the shores of the Bosphorus. A myth, which dominates Homer's account of the Greek commercial/military venture, holds that Alexander, the son of the King of Troy, stole Helen, the glamorous wife of the Greek warlord Menelaus, and carried her off to Troy as his love-toy. The story of the subsequent expedition against Troy, and the defeat of the city and its rulers, would by this myth be a byproduct of commercial adventure; only by Homer's vision transmuted into a powerful story of action, military courage and brutality, sexual passion, and ultimately regions of self-sacrifice that touch the lives of all of us. The *Iliad* can be read as pure absorbing fiction in dactylic hexameters, or as an account of the historical movement of peoples in the mid second millennium, an account referring back to an event six to eight hundred years earlier than Homer's own time.

**The hexameter.** The final preliminary note should concern the dactylic hexameter. A long epic line, typically broken in two parts, was the vehicle of Homer's creation and of the professional bards who recited epic tales as entertainment throughout Greek antiquity. The hexameter itself is an easily memorizable line, with infinite subtlety for tone and implication. We are to imagine the epic typically performed to the strumming of the lyre, and by a highly experienced professional, who measured his success by the muscular acclaim of his all male upper class warrior audiences. Imagine it, veteran warriors quaffing their Samnian wine as they delight in sung poetry of great finesse!

## Reading

Taken from the internet on 12 24 12 , the following mini-blog indicates the currency of the continuing effort to translate Homer into living English. [www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2011/11/englishing-the-iliad.htm](http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2011/11/englishing-the-iliad.htm)

There is a brilliant legacy of Homer translations in English, dating back to Chapman in the Renaissance, and, two centuries later, Alexander Pope, whose superb *Iliad* bristles with the elegances of his own time's classically educated language. Among the fine contemporary English translations of the *Iliad* known to me, the best are those of: Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1951), Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1974), and Robert Fagles (New York, 1990).

These translations are all made by accomplished Greek scholars, and fine poets. Please outfit yourself with one of these translations, and read the whole *Iliad* this week!

### *Discussion*

The central question raised by the epic is this: what leads Achilles to return the body to Hector to Priam at the end of the epic? Is there here a breakthrough into compassion and pity? (If so, does this seem a unique expression of pity for the *Iliad*? Or are there other examples of pity in the poem?) Or if not into pity, is there here at the epic's end a softening in the heart of a brilliant, doomed, and hypersensitive hero, who is part divine? We can use touchstones like this question to evaluate the kind of moral achievement valued by the ancient Greeks. When you get to the tragic hero, and his/her ultimate encounter with death and finitude, will wisdom in a wide sense take over? What is wisdom for the ancient Greek mind? Is it anything like 'religious understanding,' as we might term it?

### **Homer** *The Odyssey*

**Narrative of the Odyssey.** Among the Greek warriors at Troy, who came from different aristocratic walled centers on the Greek mainland, came many leaders who felt themselves aggrieved by the 'rape of Helen,' or the 'rape of their commercial vigor,' however the loss is described. Among these independent warriors was Odysseus, lord of the manor on the island of Ithaca. As a supporter of Agamemnon, the overall head of the Greek expedition, Odysseus was a team player, until Troy fell; but after that Fall—once again the date given by the Greeks to the event was the twelfth century B.C., the Bronze Age—the Greek warriors dispersed, heading back toward their homeland and local communities. In the accounts of this return Homer collects memories lodged deep in the Greek folk memory, recollections of periods of naval adventure, seafaring trade, and commercial rivalry; Homer blends these memories into a coherent whole around the half-'real' half-fictive adventures of a warrior whose courage, sense of irony, and passionate life-love have made him for subsequent world literature a brilliant symbol. You will see, as you follow the narrative of *The Odyssey*, that Homer exposes this fictive personage—whose name means 'the angry one'—to trials which bring out his character, and with it the salient value traits of the Bronze Age Greek world, the world known to us through archeological discovery and the vast remains of those Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations, which were the formative social/political units in Greece, during the perhaps six hundred years between the Trojan War and the time of the writing down of the Homeric epics in the eighth century B.C.

**The human content of the Odyssey.** Without spoiling the text by retelling stories here, we may draw your attention to a kind of dimension, prevalent in the *Odyssey*—also in the *Iliad*—which is behind the universal greatness of this text. Odysseus is at one point a guest in the kingdom of the Phaeacians, an idyllic culture given to dance and music and the gentle life; he has just survived a harrowing battle with the waves at sea. Seated next to the King, at a vast board of victuals, Odysseus is delighted to hear the bard—for there was always musical entertainment at grandee feasts—recount the details of a hero's wandering, a hero who turns out, as the song proceeds, to be Odysseus himself. The reader/hearer of the epic thrills to the dimensionality of the text, where Homer winks at us across the character of Odysseus who is winking at us across the irony of listening in delighted silence to a validating tale of himself at sea, a tale which rescues the hero from all the anonymity of endurance on the fishy brine.

**The hexameter as core of the poem.** Once again the hexameter is the unsung hero of the epic, the base against which the music of the tale is told. Since we are in this course reading great literature in translation, and thus perforce responding repeatedly to the 'great vision and theme,' it is appropriate also to remind ourselves of the precise product we are passing across. The hexameter is a line of six cola—six metrical units—of which the basic foot is long/short/short, where length refers to length of time required to produce the syllable in question. There is great variation in the blend of cola lengths, with the result that the tale sung in dactyls is flexible and lengthy. Among the devices chosen to hold the line under control are the cesura which divides the line in two, and continually falls at a different place, and the insertion of formulaic material, which is a hallmark of the Greek epic, and provides for ready made half cola, guarantees of recurrence and traditional repetition. The translations we will use, in the epic section of this course, will to some extent capture the logistics of the Greek epic forms. You will see from our comments on Week Five, on Pindar, what different strategies came to be used by the masters of the epic imagination.

Reading

Robert Fitzgerald's translation of the *Odyssey* (New York, 1974) is my own favorite, for its precision and beauty and cared for sentiment. But there are a number of outstanding modern translations of this epic—how better could the poem prove its greatness?—and you might even sample the prose version by A.S. Kline, online, a recent and practical version. *Highly recommended*: Stephen Mitchell (New York, 2011) and Robert Fagles (New York, 1990). Also highly recommended: *The Odyssey* of Homer, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York, 1987). (Please read the entire epic this week.)

### Discussion

*The Odyssey* has always been your instructor's favorite work of Greek literature! Why? It is dramatic, funny, adventurous, alert to the energy and ingenuity of life, deeply poetic: and rewarded, because throughout Western cultural tradition Odysseus has persisted as the most germinal source for new understandings of the human possibility. Does any 'figure' in the *Iliad* catch your attention with his/her humanity in the manner of Odysseus?

### Hesiod Works and Days; Theogony

**The epic poet as Muse possessed.** The epic imagination, as tracked in the creations of Homer, had been passed down for centuries by rhapsodes, professional singers of the sort we noted in connection with the Phaeacian tale in *The Odyssey*. During this long period, it was customary for the epic creator to address his poem, at the beginning, as if he were not an individual creator but a channel for the inspiration of the Muses. (The Muses themselves were offspring of the goddess Mnemosyne, which means 'memory.') Thus the *Iliad* opens with 'menin aeide thea'... 'sing to me goddess of the wrath of...' while the *Odyssey* opens with 'andra moi ennepe, Mousa...' 'of that man sing to me, O muse...' But that initiatory formula is not the only pattern available to the Greek epic poet, though it is a pattern reminiscent of a culture world in which individualism is sharply subordinated to the codes of the whole culture. The epic poet Hesiod (seventh century B.C.), creating in the same formulaic hexameter as Homer, speaks to us as an *individual* voice with no pretensions to channeling inspiration. It is not that he has no higher pretensions, for in fact he believes the Muses have given him the power to 'sing the story of things, the future and the past,' but he is quite clear that he, a Boeotian herdsman and narrator from a wretched farmland near the village of Ascra (Boondocksville!), *has been given his power by the Muses*. The Muses do not sing through Hesiod, but empower *him* to sing.

**Import of Hesiod's epics.** What remains to us, from that empowerment, is two small epics, *The Works and Days* and the *Theogony*, both of which you will read this week. The *Theogony* describes the origins of the universe out of chaos, the gradual power take-over by the Olympian gods, the struggles that pit Ouranus against Cronos, and fitfully usher in the current interrelated pantheon of the Olympian gods. As you read this poem, which may seem arid in the way (to many of us today) we find the genealogical lineages in the first books of the Old Testament, you may want to reflect on the fruitfulness of this work for the growth of the first Greek philosophy, which (ahead Week Six) will employ, in its search for a first principle (*arche*), the same kind of research thinking that generates Hesiod's *arche* of Chaos, his first principle, from which all else grew. But that fruitfulness is not the only cultural value of Hesiod's work. He packs into this epic not only a mythography of the lineage of the gods, but he enriches his argument, that reason and justice on the whole, in the end, prevail, with a counter vision of the progressive decline of the state of mankind from an original Golden State to the condition of Bronze in which humanity currently finds itself. In other words Hesiod is creating a conscious and analytical—if somewhat inconsistent—theology from within the center of the Greek mythical perspective. You will at once distinguish this personal statement, of an individual representative of his society, from the on-high channeling of the great epic poetry of Homer, and while you will (doubtless?) be swept up by Homer's narrative, and hardly by Hesiod's, you will reflect that the pathways of personal individuation, which were to lead into the 'modern world' of fifth century B.C. Athens, were trodden by free thinking individuals (like Hesiod), more than by singers in the great epic tradition.

**Tenor of Hesiod's epic work.** *The Works and Days* narrates out from a grudge argument against a brother who has dealt inequitably with the narrator, Hesiod, and from there the poem continues to discuss issues for the agricultural householder of the time: when to plant, when to plow, how to use the knowledge of the stars for sea travel, how to bend to the unavoidable dictates of fate. The tenor of this poem is that of a Yankee farmer writing in formal hexameter lines, bowing his head—as do all farmers—to the fate the environment provides them, and writing with sustained fealty to the plans of the gods. We can hardly imagine a perspective less Homeric, less regally formulated.

Nor are we sure whether to include Hesiod, as well as Homer, under the rubric of epic imagination. The hexameter is the force that binds Homer to Hesiod as part of a distinctive genre for seeing the world.

**Hesiod's imagination and that of the Romantic Movement.** The point comes right here, in offering the introductory material of this syllabus, when we have to face the issue of 'imagination,' as bannered in our presentation of our major categories. Explaining what we mean by these categories was made more difficult by the meaning of *imagination* established during the critical thought of the Romantic movement in Europe. What Wordsworth and Coleridge meant by imagination, as they promoted the term in the early nineteenth century, was work done, in the artistic creator's mind, which gathers, joins, and recreates vestiges of the experienced world—especial emphasis here on the world of nature—which are then recast in a new 'imaginative' form, transformed the way a country road is transformed by being calling a 'ribbon of moonlight.' The ancient Greeks—like most ancient culture people-- not only did not have a term with the modern meaning of 'imagination,' but inclined to describe literary works in terms of their formal qualities. Thus the epic imagination, as the Greeks understood it, was marked above all by its use of the dactylic hexameter, while the lyric and dramatic, and for that matter the prose genres like philosophy and history, were also distinguishable by the formal vehicles that generated them—the choral odes of tragedy, the distichs or anapests of lyric, the paratactic structures of the prose historians. The dactylic hexameter, consequently, is the first line of affinity between Homer and Hesiod, and a sufficient reason to see lyric and dramatic forms as separate from the epic. It is therefore essential for you to expose yourself both to the sound and the analysis of that dactylic verse form. By choosing Fitzgerald and Lattimore among our translators, not only of Homer but of Hesiod, we come as close as we can in living English translation, to appreciating the sound and import of this epic line.

#### *Reading*

*Works and Days, Theogony, and The Shield of Heracles*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (Ann Arbor, 1991.)  
(Please read in entirety.)

#### *Discussion*

There is considerable dispute over the unity of 'Hesiod.' (In fact, also over the unity of Homer's work. Did he compose it all? Is composition the right word, or were the Homeric epics strands of traditional material which were woven together in the late eighth century by an editor or editors?) Do you see a common thread binding together the two epic works of Hesiod? Do you see in those works the marks of a single and singular genius? Or rather of an educated 'man on the street'?

*General point:* the written papers are where the work of this class takes muscular form. We see what we are doing when we write. Have you started writing? Do you see the larger form of your whole perspective in this class, even though we are barely launched? (Have you read *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*? Covey argues for starting at the end, in any project. Can you do that in this course?) *Remember: suggested paper topics are listed as the ends of Weeks Five, Ten, and Sixteen, but should be consulted well in advance, as aids in your planning.*

#### **Pindar The Odes**

**Is Pindar an epic poet?** Still in the section of our course devoted to the epic imagination, we come with the poetry of Pindar to an animal difficult to classify. Epic, in a sense, the vision of Pindar certainly is. This Theban poet (522-443 B.C.), born well over a century after the writings of Hesiod, and perhaps twice that since the 'Pisistratean recension' that recorded the works of Homer at the end of the eighth century, is in one sense the new individual of the Athenian fifth century, a distinctive stylist, a praiser of glory in the individualist games and races that focused the attention of his contemporaries, and yet at the same time—and here is where the 'epic' comes in—a celebrant above all of the heroic commitment to excellence, and of the heroic male ideal underlying that commitment. The in-between position of Pindar is illustrated by the use he makes of myth in his poetry. Myth there is, everywhere in his *Odes*, and of a consistent piece with the godlike verbal affiliations we find in both Homeric epics, but as often as not Pindar tweaks myth in such a way as to make private use of it.

**The texts and performance of Pindar.** The remaining texts of Pindar have come to us from many manuscripts and palimpsests, and though what remains to us constitutes work carried out over a long period (498-444 B.C.) the

totality of what is left is only a fragment of Pindar's huge 'output,' work firmly lodged in the age of writing and parchment replication, and continuously expanding through Pindar's life-role as an invited praiser-poet at games, races, and regal celebrations. (His work was largely occasional, and devoted to praising the *arête*/excellence of victors in contests; doing so for audiences of the educated and wealthy, who were the ones able both to support his creativity and to read and understand his difficult work.) It will not be a surprise, given this performative nature of Pindar's work, on the spot and admiring, that the language structures of that work differ profoundly from those required for Homer and Hesiod, who were (very differently from one another) retailing the epic perspective to audiences far removed from the events or ideas about which they were hearing.

**The conditions of production.** We have mentioned the dactylic hexameter as the vehicle of epic in its initial phase, but in Pindar we face a complex metrical world suited to the music and dance which (we gather) were the production-setting of Pindar's work. The melding of that distinctive metrical world with the thematics of a Pindaric ode represents a new societal world, in which not only were great tales told, but were told in a manner germane to a discursive and democratic society. A look at the first Olympian Ode, for Hiero of Syracuse, should uncover the packaging of such productions.

**The choral dance performance of the First Olympian Ode of Pindar.** The language of this performance, first of all, is not based on a single kind of 'foot,' like the dactyl, but on a counterpoint of iambs with anapests. This counterpoint is distributed by a dance chorus according to the dance steps performed by the presenters of this great ode, which is designed to celebrate the victory of Hiero's chariot in a major chariot race. (It is not the charioteer but the chariot owner who receives the praise here.) The distribution of the contrasting metrical patterns is coordinated with the moves of the dance—during which the ode in question is recited. Those moves are triadic, consisting of three different turns—*strophe* (meaning *turn*), *antistrophe* (meaning *a turn in the opposite direction*), and *epode*, a *stationary summative choral move* in which the tale being narrated/presented is advanced to a new theme.

**The Content of Pindar's First Olympian Ode.** In the case of Pindar's First Olympian Ode, for instance, the challenge is to celebrate the victory of Hiero in a major chariot race at Olympia—one of the first Peloponnesian sites at which the greatest games and festivals of Archaic Greece were held. The ode consists of four triads—four combinations of the three dance modes—and moves through them with a daring brilliance of allusion, which—*please note this carefully*—refers extensively to the nature and fate of the divine Pelops, name giver to the Peloponnesus, whose ivory shoulder is explained in detail, in such a fashion that the divine background of Pelops is brought to an explanation of his own astounding gifts as a charioteer, gifts which, we are given to understand by the end of the ode, apply equally to the charioteer of Hiero, on whom the implications of more than human skill rub off. (There is a detailed account of this detailed narrative in Knox, *The Norton Book of Classical Literature*, pp. 251-258; I recommend that dense but readable survey for insights into how the Pindaric ode is put together.) The conclusion of this ode, noble praise of both King Hiero and of the poet himself, raises the mortal events of a horse race to an epic level—celebrating human greatness which intersects with the immortal—which we noted in placing Pindar in the same category as Homer. In that regard, however, it is also worth noting that while in Homer events of athletic prowess are described in some detail—as in the encounter of Odysseus with the Phaeacians, which we described in Week Three—in Pindar the actual athletic performance being celebrated is hardly mentioned, embedded as it is in ennobling myth and the drama of the ode dance.

### *Reading*

Pindar, *The Odes*, trans. Bowra (London, 1982).

Pindar, *Odes for Victorious Athletes*, trans. Burnett (Baltimore, 2010).

(Please read all of the Pindaric odes.)

### *Discussion*

Does Pindar belong to the epic tradition, or he is a product of a 'new society,' that of fifth century Athens, in which individual achievement—that of great athletes and great impresarios—is of foremost importance?

The concept of *arête*, ‘excellence,’ is central throughout Greek culture. The flaw that brings down the victims of tragedy—which we will read shortly—is the flaw of missing the mark (as in shooting an arrow at a target); while the ability to hit the bull’s eye is the mark of the excellent marksman. Skill, precision, training all go into the making of *arête*, and are exemplified in the skills Pindar sees in his athletes, patrons, and himself as poet. Where do you find that trademark concern with *arête* in Homer?

And, by the way, do we still value that *arête* in contemporary society? Where do you see it? In the Olympic Games? In the Special Olympics?

*Is it right to consider Pindar part of the epic tradition? Is his perspective congruent with those of Homer and Hesiod?*

*Do the Iliad and the Odyssey seem to spring from the same poet? We have treated the two epics as offspring of a single Homer; were we right to do that?*

*What makes the hexameter an appropriate line for the Greek epic? How do you compare it, as a vehicle of expression, with the iambic pentameter line, which is the classic vehicle of extended English language poetry?*

## GREEK LYRICS

Archilochos  
Sappho  
Solo  
Herondas

**Overview** The explosion of lyric poetry, in early Greece, is a sign of the emergence of a new culture of individualism. (The lyric bears its maker’s stamp directly, unlike the epic or drama, which mediate the maker’s voice through characters and plots). Among the many brilliant lyric poets, who remain to us from as early as the seventh century B.C. four can represent the wide range of this lyrical achievement.

**Archilochos and the remains of his work.** We know one date in Archilochos’ life, 648 B.C., the occasion of a total eclipse of the sun over the Aegean: ‘Nothing in the world can surprise me now...for Zeus, father of the Olympians, has turned midday into black night by shielding light from the blossoming sun, and now dark terror hangs over mankind...’ Apart from that event, what we know of Archilochos comes from his own poems. The evidence we deduce from Archilochos’ poems themselves suggests he was a mercenary soldier, that on one occasion he had thrown away his shield and fled from battle, that he had a great love for Neoboule (not ‘romance’), that he preferred short tough individualistic fighting men to aristocratic pretty boys, and so on: from his remaining poems and fragments we can create the profile of a Thasian fighting man with such and such traits.

**Sappho and her work.** Like Archilochos, Sappho (630?-570 B.C.) is hard to reconstruct. If we can take our texts at face value, we presume that Sappho was a lady of distinguished rank, living a privileged life on the island of Lesbos, and that she was a member of a coterie of sophisticated female peers, with whom she shares strong passions—perhaps in the setting of the awaiting of marriages, which will separate them. Hence, much longing, much concern about loss, much delicate feeling interwoven with the metrical form we call Sapphic. The rest, as they say, is pure poetry, standard setting for all time, and untranslatable.

**Solon.** In 590 B.C. Solon was appointed Chief Magistrate for the year, in Athens, and tasked to bring harmony between the rival social groups—rich and poor—whose mutual hostility threatened to break out into Civil War. Solon describes his efforts, to pursue this policy, in largely grave and self-reflective iambs—again regular and organized in pattern—and in a discursive style which foreshadows the dialogue of characters in Greek tragedy a century later.

Self-reflective irony of this stripe is totally unfamiliar from earlier Greek poetry. In the Homeric epic there is no room for authorial voice, because the narrator is cloaked behind the vast panoply he cedes to the Muse. Poets like Sappho and Archilochos display many ranges of subtle feeling, but they do not include reflection onto the voice expressing that feeling. Solon strikes a note that all of us today will recognize as a move toward ‘the modern tone.’



**Herondas.** Like Solon, Herondas, writing three centuries later, has his creative eye on the social scene. But while Solon was a poet/law giver/ reformer Herondas is a sophisticated observer, worldly to the last iamb. The first of his poetic mimes—short, poetic plays--shows you how Herondas touches the depths of society; bawdiness, lust, and innuendo flowing through every word. In his manner of presenting this material, Herondas speaks for an artistic age, the Hellenistic, which pushes the limits of art, addresses the retro, self-involved pleasures of the artist in an age which *follows* the great achievements of classical culture. Herondas is creating at a time when genre *sculpture* abounds. Hellenistic sculptors portrayed subjects unknown in the high classical period...foreigners (such as the dying Gaul), drunkards, battered athletes, wrinkled old people. The pristine age of idealized nude sculptures has given way to the unique/eye-catching, just as the lyric of Solonian Athens, grave and yet artful, has given way to the mime poetry of an age full of curiosity, libido, and *interest*.

### Reading

Santos, Sherod, *Greek Lyric Poetry: A New Translation* (New York, 2006).

Campbell, David, ed. *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Bristol, 2003).

Davenport, Guy, *Seven Greeks: Archilochos, Sappho, Alkman, Anacreon, Herakleitos, Diogenes, Herondas* (New York, 1995).

### Discussion questions

Do you feel you can come in contact with Archilochos and Sappho as ‘persons,’ and not just as formal poets, whose work has survived for us in fragmentary form? Is the formidable distance, that separates us from these individuals, crossable?

What do you think of the translations of these poets you are reading, They are important vehicles, no? Are you on the side of literal translation? Have you checked out several different versions of the same poem?

Would Herondas’ kind of camp social critique have been possible at an earlier stage of Greek culture than his, or was his critique tied to the sophisticated, ‘post-classical’ high-culture tone of the Alexandrian Age? What about reversing the question, to apply to Solon? Would his fairly stark, though artful, poems about justice and civil war have been possible at the time of Herondas? Or were they tied to the formative stage of the Greeks when a father-figure thinker was needed to lead the way into a new cultural stage?

### Archilochos and Sappho

**Lyric imagination and its historical setting.** We have devoted some attention to what we called the epic imagination and the philosophic imagination in ancient Greece. In so doing we have sacrificed chronology and orthodox history, leaving it to the inventive student—armed with a good brief political/social history of ancient Greece—to put the pieces together, observing that Homer’s world is very different from that of Pindar which is equally different from that of Plato. With the present week’s work we return to the so-called Archaic stage of Greek culture, seventh to mid sixth centuries, when the establishment of Homeric poetry in writing was already a fact, the spread of literacy, writing, and accordingly individualism was starting to make itself felt, and the economic and social structures of the fifth century polis were anticipated on the horizon. Archilochos (seventh century B.C.) and Sappho (late seventh--middle sixth century B.C.) will be our guides into this transitional world, and into the world of lyric expression, which is the surest indicator of social and cultural change. We are, ‘suddenly,’ face to face with distinctive and passionate *individuals*, and though they are addressing us in meters as formalized as those of the epic hexameter, these individuals are not channeled by the Muse, but are clearly exposed to us.

**Archilochos as lyric presence.** In discussing the epic tradition we have stressed the importance of the dactylic hexameter (in Homer and Hesiod) and the choral ode (in Pindar), the latter proving to be an innovation rooted in dance and music accompaniments to praise poems. With Archilochos (and the other lyric poets we discuss here) we come into a pluralistic metrical world, in which, though there is ‘direct expression’ of the individual, there are multiple prosodic vehicles for that expression: the *iambic* meter (often, in Archilochos, used for ‘attack’ or

‘invective’ poetry); and various lyric meters, declarative (*trochaics*), *anapestic* (tripping and springing), and *dactylic*, an echo from the epic. This variety of meters, fully exercised in Archilochos, mediates personal expression; we remain far from free verse in the modern sense. And yet we remain immersed in the passions.

**Archilochos and the remains of his work.** We know one date in Archilochos’ life, 648 B.C., the occasion of a total eclipse of the sun over the Aegean: ‘Nothing in the world can surprise me now...for Zeus, father of the Olympians, has turned midday into black night by shielding light from the blossoming sun, and now dark terror hangs over mankind...’ Apart from that event, what we know of Archilochos comes from his own poems—and in that he hardly differed from the Athenians of the fifth century; their lives have to be reconstructed by comments from others, often embedded in texts/papyri reduced to a line or two. The evidence we deduce from Archilochos’ poems themselves suggests he was a mercenary soldier, that on one occasion he had thrown away his shield and fled from battle, that he had a great love for Neoboule (not ‘romance’), that he preferred short tough individualistic fighting men to aristocratic pretty boys, and so on: from his remaining poems and fragments we can create the profile of a Thasian fighting man with such and such traits. Yet as we are looking at the lyric of personal expression, here, we had better take a sharp look. It is true that, in his lyrics which are mostly incomplete, Archilochos gives us content-lines which purport to be autobiographical glimpses, but self-expression in the lyric is not that transparent. The reliability of information given in a lyric is suspect, and must be read in terms of the speaker and the tone of the whole piece. In most cases, if we look closely at the ancient lyric, we will find many reasons to doubt that it is personally revelatory. (Please review the shrewd discussion of this issue by Knox, in the *Norton Book of Classical Literature*, pp. 202-203). Finally, what do you think you can learn about a man from a little poem like the following?

The fox knows many tricks, the hedgehog only one.  
One good one.

**Sappho and her work.** Like Archilochos, the person Sappho (630?-570 B.C.) is hard to reconstruct. (Here, even in the midst of the first expressions of personal feeling in Greek culture, the job of rediscovering whole identities behind the mask is almost impossible.) We get the general picture, from the numerous remaining pieces of her intricate lyrics. If we can take our texts at face value, we presume that Sappho was a lady of distinguished rank, living a privileged life on the island of Lesbos, and that she was a member of a coterie of sophisticated female peers, with whom she shares strong passions—perhaps in the setting of the awaiting of marriages, which will separate them. Hence, much longing, much concern about loss, much delicate feeling interwoven with the metrical form we call Sapphic. The rest, as they say, is pure poetry, standard setting for all time, and untranslatable. And yet we try, as did the American poet and classicist Richmond Lattimore, who boldly tackles the Sapphic stanza form:

Like the very gods in my sight is he who  
sits where he can look in your eyes, who listens  
close to you, to hear the soft voice, its sweetness  
murmur in love and

laughter, all for him. But it breaks my spirit;  
underneath my breast all the heart is shaken.  
let me only glance where you are, the voice dies,  
I can say nothing,

but my lips are stricken to silence, under-  
neath my skin the tenuous flame suffuses;  
nothing shows in front of my eyes, my ears are  
muted in thunder.

And the sweat breaks running upon me, fever  
shakes my body, paler I turn than grass is;  
I can feel that I have been changed, I feel that  
death has come near me.

*Reading*

Santos, Sherod, *Greek Lyric Poetry: A New Translation* (New York, 2006).

Campbell, David, ed. *Greek Lyric Poetry* (Bristol, 2003).

Davenport, Guy, *Seven Greeks: Archilochos, Sappho, Alkman, Anacreon, Herakleitos, Diogenes, Herondas* (New York, 1995).

(Read all of Sappho and Archilochos! Then explore the poets!)

### *Discussion*

Do you feel you can come in contact with Archilochos and Sappho as ‘persons,’ and not just as formal poets, whose work has survived for us in fragmentary form? Is the formidable distance, that separates us from these individuals, crossable?

What do you think of the translations you are reading, here and throughout this course? They are important vehicles, no? Are you on the side of literal translation? Have you checked out several different versions of the same poem? (That could be a good paper topic!)

### **Solon and Heronda: The Political Lyrics**

**Solon and Herondas. What joins them?** With these two poets, we press to the limits the checkerboard quality of the timeframe of this course. But we can turn the oddity into an advantage, by highlighting the dramatic changes Athens underwent from the mid-seventh to mid-sixth century (Solon) to the first half of the third century (Herondas.). In other words, from the very beginning of the Classical Period to the late Hellenistic wind-down of classical Hellenism. We have already looked at the cultural chasm separating, say, the mind of Hesiod (seventh century B.C) from that of Plato (d. 348 B.C.) three hundred years later. What did we find there? Hesiod works wholeheartedly inside an integral, archaic and formalized tradition of expression, while Plato—and this appears even in our limited readings, *The Apology* and *The Republic*—works out into a wide ranging and daring topography of new thoughts and theories, his voice, even through the dialogue form, coming across as subtly aware of the ‘modern person-world.’ Something of the same contrast links Solon and Herondas, both of whom were poets, and concerned, though very differently, with the landscape of social behavior. Solon, as distinguished lawgiver/poet, wrote in curried elegiac couplets about the new laws he instituted for the city of Athens, and the benefits he brought to civil order, self-control and rule of law—all of which he actually did; while Herondas, long after Athens had shown what a marvelous democracy it was capable of mounting, though for a brief century, looks with a jaundiced *oeil critique* at the foibles and oddities of his own time, as they are reflected in his home island of Kos and (probably) in travels to Egyptian Alexandria, a center of culture and trends.

**Solon.** The outburst of fine lyric, in the thawing Archaic Age of Greece, seventh century, largely took place outside Athens: on the Asia Minor coast, on the Greek islands—Lesbos and Paros, in the cases of Sappho and Archilochos—while Athens remained behind in this development. It was the Athenian victory over Megara, for possession of Salamis, that brought Solon and the Athenian lyric to the fore. In 590 Solon was appointed Chief Magistrate for the year, in Athens, and tasked to bring harmony between the rival social groups—rich and poor—whose mutual hostility threatened to break out into Civil War. Solon describes his efforts, to pursue this policy, in largely grave and self-reflective iambs—again regular and organized in pattern—and in a discursive style which foreshadows the dialogue of characters in Greek tragedy a century later. For the range in Solon, consider the following:

*This man Solon is a shallow thinker and a fool;  
for the gods give him great goods, but he does not take them.  
He throws a great net around his prey, but then does not draw it in,  
He has neither good sense nor the will to use it.  
If I came to power, I'd grab all I could,  
tyrannizing the Athenians if even for one day only,  
even if I and my family were later to be flayed into a wineskin.*

Self-reflective irony of this stripe is totally unfamiliar from earlier Greek poetry. In the Homeric epic there is no room for authorial voice, because the narrator is cloaked behind the vast panoply he cedes to the Muse. Poets like Sappho and Archilochos display many ranges of subtle feeling, but they do not include reflection onto the voice expressing that feeling. Solon strikes a note that all of us today will recognize as a move toward ‘the modern tone.’

**Herondas.** Like Solon, Herondas, writing three centuries later, has his creative eye on the social scene. But while Solon was a poet/law giver/ reformer Herondas is a sophisticated observer, worldly to the last iamb. Mime One, which is fascinatingly translated by Douglass Parker in Knox, pp. 566-571, shows you how Herondas touches the depths of society, bawdiness, lust, and innuendo flowing through every word. In his manner of presenting this material, Herondas speaks for an artistic age, the Hellenistic, which pushes the limits of art, addresses the retro, self-involved pleasures of the artist in an age which *follows* the great achievements of classical culture. The work of Herondas is baroque, as distinguished from Renaissance, or camp as distinguished from naïve, or postmodern as distinguished from modern. Herondas is creating at a time when genre *sculpture* abounds. Hellenistic sculptors portrayed subjects unknown in the high classical period...foreigners (such as the dying Gaul), drunkards, battered athletes, wrinkled old people. The pristine age of idealized nude sculptures has given way to the unique/eye-catching, just as the lyric of Solonian Athens, grave and yet artful, has given way to the mime poetry of an age full of curiosity, libido, and *interest*.

### | **Reading**

The following website offers the Solon translations by John Lewis. They are pretty good. (Plenty of other choices, though, as you will see by brosing the web). [www.classicalideals.com/Solon%20Poetry.htm](http://www.classicalideals.com/Solon%20Poetry.htm)[http://www.bing.com/search?q=solon poems in translation&pc=conduit&ptag=G445-A2B968EED61704F77B3F&form=CONTLB&conlogo=CT3210127&ShowAppsUI=1r](http://www.bing.com/search?q=solon+poems+in+translation&pc=conduit&ptag=G445-A2B968EED61704F77B3F&form=CONTLB&conlogo=CT3210127&ShowAppsUI=1r)

For Herondas, cf. Davenport, *Seven Greeks*, which we used in our reading for the preceding week.

Please read all that remains of these two poets!

### *Discussion*

Would Herondas’ kind of camp social critique have been possible at an earlier stage of Greek culture than his, or was his critique tied to the sophisticated, ‘post-classical’ high-culture tone of the Alexandrian Age? What about reversing the question, to apply to Solon? Would his fairly stark, though artful, poems about justice and civil war have been possible at the time of Herondas? Or were they tied to the formative stage of the Greeks when a father-figure thinker was needed to lead the way into a new cultural stage?

*Are you convinced that early epic and early philosophy spring from the same root? Or do you see the epic and the philosophic imaginations as from the beginning seriously different?*

*Do you see a connection between Socrates’ thought and that of the Pre Socratics? What is it?*

*To what extent do the early Greek lyric, and the political poetry of Solon and Herondas, give insights into the personalities of their creators?*

## 2.DRAMA

### Contents

*Aeschylus*  
*Sophocles*  
*Euripides*  
*Aristophanes*

**Drama and the other arts** Drama is one of the three vivid vehicles for a culture's literary self-expression. Epic is the master vehicle, in which the society takes a panning shot of its whole breadth, and tries to name it; lyric is the mode in which the individual says what the culture is like from his or her small corner; drama is the vehicle for presenting the essential conflicts and interpersonal relations that constitute a social whole. The ancient Greeks excelled in all three vehicles of cultural expression: drama, for them, was the art-form in which the people as a whole were most robustly brought together.

**Remains of Greek drama** Four tragedians and one comic author are the principle makers of Greek drama—which is to say, of course, that the partial remains of those four masters hugely outnumber those of their many competitors, whose texts are left to us in only scattered fragments.

**Aeschylus** Aeschylus (525-456 B.C. ) represents the earliest stage of classical drama, simplest in the uses of chorus and actors—both stripped down—and most archaic in the use of the inherited mythical material that formed the substance of Greek tragedy. In his finest work the themes of revenge, reconciliation, and the struggle for justice receive unrivalled treatment.

**Sophocles** Sophocles (497-406 B.C.), like Aeschylus, is left to us in only a few plays, seven in each case. While Aeschylus reached into archaic themes, and did so with relatively archaic ritual staging, Sophocles added a second actor to the stage, and dealt with themes—the tragic irony of fate; honor and madness, pride and isolation—which inevitably strike us as more 'modern' than the themes of Aeschylus; modern in the sense of generated by a more complex social situation, in which reflection onto the older values of, say, the world of Homer, is bearing fruit in historicism.

**Euripides** Euripides (480-406 B.C.) is represented today by some seventeen remaining dramas, and by a modernist achievement which shatters the classical sheen of his two great tragedian predecessors. (He was almost a generation younger than Sophocles.) He opens his text to the problems of his contemporary world, still using but now totally reshaping the fund of classical myths on which his predecessors focused. The issues of women's rights and injustices, of psychological deviance, or of madness acquire attention alongside brilliant studies of selflessness (*Alcestis*) or revenge (*Hecuba*.)

**Aristophanes** Aristophanes (444-385 B.C.) is the only comic playwright of whom we have significant knowledge. Eleven of his plays remain, and with them a vivid reminder of the Athenian tastes for broad humor, political satire, and sharp social critique. Among other themes weighing on Aristophanes are those of political corruption, the elusive nature of peace, and the absurd pretensions of philosophers and lawyers. There is no mistaking the milieu of warfare, dirty politics, and social turmoil in which Aristophanes wrote.

### Readings

Konstan, David, *Greek comedy and ideology*, Oxford, 1995.

Gregory, J., *A Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Oxford, 2005.

### Discussion questions

Which of the three Greek tragedians, remaining to us, seems to you most available for reading today? Whom can you understand? Who is discussing issues that matter to you?

Sophocles, partly thanks to the views of Aristotle in the Poetics, is traditionally considered the ‘greatest’ Greek tragedian. Can you see why that case might be made? Would you accept that view point?

Comedy, it is often said, relies on a background of stable social norms, and on ridicule of those who break the norms. Does this account apply to the comedy of Aristophanes?

## Aeschylus

**Aeschylus** (525-456 B.C.). In seven extant dramas, produced in the first half of the fifth century B.C., the playwright Aeschylus takes us from the mythical imagination of the epic tradition into mimetic action aimed to engage the newly self-directing democracy of Athenian citizens. We move squarely into the world of the *dramatic imagination*.

**Greek drama and the dramatic imagination.** We may seem to be hurtling from one form of imagination to another, and from one time period of antiquity to another. And in fact that is what we are doing. Why? We want to display, above all, the stunning richness of the expressive powers of the Hellenic literary mind. To this point we have glanced at the epic, philosophic, and lyric imaginations—diverse as they are even within themselves—and can say of them all that they are the creations of virtual worlds, the world of vast epic story tale, the speculation of the mind on the nature of the world, the expression of the self in its inmost feelings. When we come to the drama, however, the realm of what Aristotle first spoke of as ‘bodies in motion,’ we are in a fresh new cross between ‘reality’ and ‘fabrication.’ We are thus impacted with a direct power unknown to other genres of literature! Where did this genre come from?

**The origins of Greek tragedy.** Unlike epic and philosophy, though not unlike the lyric, Greek tragedy seems to have grown out of dance and choral music. While the fifth century is the great period for both tragedy and comedy, there was an Archaic creative period, deep in the world of Hesiod’s time, when rural/religious dance festivals, which mesh with the origins of lyric, began to create early forms of choral action. We see a form of this, not really a drama, in the celebratory paeans of Pindar. In the course of the sixth century, a first character or group spokesperson split off from the body of the dancers, and began to dialogue with them. This split-off figure became the first actor, and by century’s end had been joined by a second actor. (Two actors plus chorus were the basic ingredients throughout the course of classical Greek drama, tragedy *and* comedy; but though we know such basics from our own observation, and from Greek commentators like Aristotle, we have only the sketchiest outlines of the sixth century developments that led to the great sophistication of fifth century tragedy.) We do know that significant theatrical structures were created during the sixth century B.C., and that by the time of Aeschylus the Theater of Dionysus served as a centerpiece of Athenian municipal life, built against the slopes of the Acropolis, and drawing to it large crowds on the occasion of major religious festivals.

**Now back to Aeschylus.** Aeschylus is the first classical dramatist we know, a writer of great vision and depth of human understanding, who took the choral-actor ingredients of the sixth century drama, and powerfully raised the expressive power of drama, as well as enriching the on-stage relationship between the chorus and the main, and eventually a second, actor. Though we have only seven remaining plays, out of some ninety he wrote, those works span a twenty-five year period during which Greek drama was evolving at a meteoric rate, and give us a perspective onto the whole genre. The oldest remaining play of Aeschylus, *The Persians* (472 B.C.), concerns the defeat of Xerxes in the Persian Wars, and (remarkably) puts itself empathetically inside the minds of the pitifully defeated Persian widows. Of the remaining Aeschylean plays we will this week read *The Oresteia* (458 B.C.), the only intact Greek trilogy, a three-play unit involving a climactic engagement with a single mythical theme.

**The Theme of the Oresteia.** The three plays of the Oresteia (that is, the tale of Orestes, son of Agamemnon) are based on themes from Greek mythology, and like most Greek tragedies form what the Greeks called ‘slices from Homer’s banquet.’ In the first of these plays the Greek leader of the War against Troy returns home, his concubine with him, to find a furious wife (and her lover) and to be slain by her outraged son Orestes. In the second play, which would be watched on the second day of the display of Aeschylus’ work in the annual competition, we see Orestes paying the price for his unholy mother-murder, and the Erinyes, hag-like spirits of divine revenge, assaulting Orestes and driving him crazy. In the final play the Gods, led by Athena, hold a trial of Orestes at the law court on the slopes of the Acropolis, and in a very close decision exonerate the murderer. This powerful, supra realistic, immensely metaphorical and verbally structured drama—one might almost say ‘opera’—deals overwhelmingly with

issues of revenge, justice, honor and law. May it be left to you, o student, to explore into the finer points of the meter, dance, costuming, and scenographia which generate this unique memorial to the Greek dramatic imagination.

### **Reading**

Hughes, Ted, *The Oresteia of Aeschylus: A New Translation* (New York, 1999). (Read all seven of Aeschylus' plays, if possible!)

### **Discussion**

Can you make personal sense of the last play of the *Oresteia*? (Maybe I am the only one struggling with this issue!). The movements and reactions of the characters, in the first two plays, seem sufficiently 'realistic,' if 'distanced' from the ordinary. But the last play turns out to be a divine law-drama. Why was this the appropriate conclusion for the trilogy? Do we face here some profound cultural difference from the Greek sensibility? Don't the gods come across as mere counters, vehicles of votes? (Remember the interplay of costume, stilted shows, megaphoned voices, all those details we have had to pass over quickly, but which are so essential to the makeup of the Greek drama! Should we view the last play of this trilogy as an oratorio?)

### **Sophocles**

**Sophocles as master dramatist.** Sophocles (496-406 B.C.), often considered the greatest master of the Greek tragic form, died a half century after Aeschylus, leaving a legacy of seven extant dramas—well over a hundred plays in fragmentary condition, or simply 'referred to' by others-- and an unmatched record of successes in the annual theatrical contests at Athens. Sophocles competed in thirty annual competitions, and won twenty four-- defeating Aeschylus himself in more than one instance--while Aeschylus won fourteen times and Euripides, the third of the great tragedians extant to us, won only four times. (Yes, victory in these contests was a 'popularity contest,' but the fifth century Athenian theater goer, adult male citizens, was the central figure in a polity of unrivalled brilliance; no usual Broadway habitu , but heir to an already rich mythical/thematic tradition, and to a language which many centuries had by now polished.) You will see, this week, what was the ineffable secret of Sophocles' greatness: his Olympian perspective, his intricate plots focusing on a single crucial event, his irony, and in the end, while retaining his skepticism about the universe, his granting to Fate a dignity, and spirit of justice, which ennoble even violent and beaten protagonists. We will read two plays, the early play *Antigone* (hard to date exactly) and the mature *Oedipus the King* (401 B.C.), which are arguably Sophocles' greatest works, and which both concern tragic events in the royal House of Thebes.

**A word on the historical setting of Sophocles.** Sophocles created his plays during the second half of the fifth century B.C., while Aeschylus, as we have seen, created his during the first half. (We are playing a little loose with dates, but you can quickly Wikipedia out the relevant details, so far as we know them.) You will have seen, from your *Ancient Greece* by Martin, that both the highest brilliance, and the gradual unraveling of Athens take place in the second half of the fifth century B.C. Whereas the first half of the century saw the rapid development of political democracy, individualism in lyric and theater (Aeschylus), and above all the astonishing victories over the huge Persian Empire, the second half of the century was dominated by intra polis conflict on the Greek mainland, the breaking down of traditional values during the Sophist intervention in Athens, and above all the long-lasting Peloponnesian War (431-404 B.C.), with its devastating consequences for economic and social development. (I am putting a burden of history reading on you; if possible, give yourself time to read about the Sicilian Expedition, 415-413, which shows the fatal recklessness which was gripping Athenian 'foreign policy' at the time.) It was in this turbulent—if brilliant—second half of the great century that Sophocles created his masterpieces. And what do you know? They are masterpieces of classical *serenity*!

**What to look for in reading Sophocles.** Please continue to keep the chorus in mind. From the spectator's point of view, watching from the banked stone seats of the Theater of Dionysus in Athens, the dance—turn, counterturn, standstill: intricate dance steps meshing with the highly refined prosody of the language--and the stilted, costumed appearance of the all male actors—all this would have exercised a startling operatic effect. (Mental reconstruction is essential here. The same with the classical Temple, like the Parthenon, which was brightly painted in its time, but from which the colors have all faded away, leaving the beautiful but misleading surface of gleaming marble, which we now associate with the public buildings of ancient Greece and Rome.) Above all, of course, look for the central

theme or crisis, around which the drama is thrillingly disposed: the struggle, in *Antigone*, between tradition (traditional burial practice, so central to archaic culture) and the Realpolitik of state government (Creon's province); the terrifying struggle of Oedipus to locate a polluting murderer who he himself is, and eventually, horribly, discovers.

#### Reading

*The Complete Plays of Sophocles*, translated by Robert Bagg and James Scully (New York, 2011). (We will read *Antigone* and *Oedipus The King*. If you can add *Oedipus at Colonus*, you will have read the entire Sophoclean treatment of the House of Thebes.)

#### Discussion

In his *Poetics* (350 B.C.) Aristotle develops a (subsequently much debated about) theory of *catharsis*, by which he means the effect proper to the experience of high classical Greek drama—and especially to the experience of Sophocles' Theban plays. In some sense the catharsis in question must have been like a spiritual purging, arousing certain feelings, then driving them out, leaving the soul cleansed. Does this say anything to you? Do you feel 'exalted' by a play like *Oedipus the King*, despite its lethal conclusion?

#### Euripides

**The new turn in tragic drama.** You will note that the life and work of Euripides (485-406 B.C.) overlap the work of both Aeschylus and Sophocles. You will also notice the startling difference in Euripides. We will read three of his dramas—should we call them melodramas?—this week, and will rapidly grasp the new turn given to the tradition by this prolific dramatist, of whom fate has left us nineteen plays.

**The historical setting again.** Before looking into the three plays assigned for this week, we need to revert to the historical setting. All that we have said of the setting of Sophocles and Aeschylus—those second half of the century geniuses—belongs in spades to the ambient culture of Euripides. The Sophists are important. These teachers of wisdom—including public thinkers and discussers like Protagoras and Gorgias—were of great influence in the second half of the fifth century. Why were these figures needed and turned to, and what did they offer? We have seen that there is a tradition of question-asking in Milesian philosophy, and that that tradition burgeons richly into the work of Plato. The Sophists were perpetual raisers of questions, and often underminers of traditional belief. Euripides was very alert to these voices. We have noted that, in connection with the recitation of the Homeric epics there was a tradition of itinerant bards, public reciters who drew public crowds around them. By the fifth century Athens was itself ready for public discussion in every sense. There was a buzz on the streets. With the advent of a democratic polity, in the early fifth century, the energy of public outdoor life grew vibrant in Athens—especially around the central Agora or market place, the Theater of Dionysus, and the Law Courts, not to mention the sacred sites on the Acropolis. In all of these senses Athenian culture was being freed up into a passion for ideas and discussion. The Sophists, ultimately lethal foes of Socrates, were natural components of this social ferment. And into this fermenting cultural matrix Euripides emerged, writing dramas in great numbers, touching on 'melodramatic passions,' raising controversial issues, striking a 'modern' tone.

**The themes of the *Medea* (431 B.C.), *The Hippolytus* (429 B.C.), and *The Bacchae* (405 B.C.).** These three plays show us Euripides at his most powerful, daring, and showmanly.

**The *Medea*.** You will see at once that *Medea*—a slice, of course, from the rich archive of mythical material available to every Greek writer—is par excellence two things typically minimized in fifth century Greek culture: first, a *foreigner*, second, a *woman* who is fully invested with women's needs and attitudes. (Would you say the same of *Antigone*, or of *Cassandra* in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*?) Brought back to Greece from the exotic East, and by a conventional and deceitful mainstreamer, Jason, *Medea* finds that her marriage and her children have been supplanted by a new bride, and her own exile. She takes the terrible revenge you are to read about! Et voilà! What has changed here, from Aeschylus and Sophocles? The outsider has been drawn into the Hellenic dialogue, with fierce consequences. We are growing away from the still nobility of the archaic classical posture—and Euripides is taking us there.

**The *Hippolytus*.** The intricacies of jealousy, insinuation, betrayal of innocence, melodramatic finale—all these elements of pop psychology become the raw material of this 'modern' drama, which bathes in the questioning, discussion-rich atmosphere of a literary culture which is conspicuously public. As in the *Medea*, Euripides



penetrates, here, into the feelings which undergird those *ritual/mythical* behaviors which were the stock of epic, and of the two tragedians we have studied before Euripides. The fixed world of myth has been opened out to reveal the boiling humanity myth was initially created to temper.

**The Bacchae.** The Athens of the end of century was concerned not only with the new importance of women and foreigners, the foreign in general, but with psychologically ‘modern’ modes of feeling, emotional experimentation and quest, and passion breaking out from the mythical mold—where it is confined in the cases of Cassandra, Clytemnestra, or Antigone—square into the midst of Greek society. Pentheus, of course, is the perfect middle class bureaucrat foil against which to read the unlicensed and uncontrollable fury of the Bacchantes, exaggerated representatives of a strain of the demonic, which lurks throughout Greek culture, even when what we most expect is form and reason.

### *Reading*

*Ten Plays by Euripides*, translated by Paul Roche (New York, 1998). (Our assignment will be to read the three plays discussed in this week’s syllabus.)

### *Discussion*

We are struck, from the start, by Euripides’ attention to women and their psychology. We have seen powerful and fascinating women in Aeschylus and Sophocles—Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Antigone—but these characters are driven and one-dimensional, whereas Euripides’ women (Medea, Andromache, Phaedra) are women in an historical situation, trying to cope, as we might say. This seems a clear case of Euripides wanting to bring everyday reality onto the stage? Am I right here? Or not?

### **Aristophanes**

**The dramatic imagination: comedy.** We are at a turning point in our review of Greek drama. We have spent three weeks on tragedy, and now are turning to a week on Aristophanes (455-385 B.C.), the premier Greek comedian. Are we still dealing with the same dramatic imagination we introduced with Aeschylus?

Yes and no. We are still dealing with public performances, held at major religious festivals in Athens, in the Theater of Dionysus. The same intense competition for prizes, the same lively and personally involved audience. But from the first glance we note a change in the kinds of theme presented. With Aristophanes we find no mythical titles, no actions based on ‘slices from Homer’s feast,’ and total involvement with contemporary issues—the folly of war, the vagaries of the legal system in Athens, the mundane dimensions of rivalries between competing dramatic poets, the practice of ‘selling wisdom’ in public (the practice imputed to the Sophists.) We have seen dramatists concerned with ‘actual events’—*The Persians* of Aeschylus, for example---or with contemporarily relevant events—the practice of Euripides—but with Aristophanes and Greek comedy we see the veil of the mythical totally stripped away. You may want to pursue the historical background of this genre difference, which will take you into theories of the kinds of dance festival tragedy and comedy split off from, in Archaic Greece. (That byway of historical investigation will bring you to the door of the satyr play, the ‘extra play’ the tragedian would insert into his trilogy as an entertainment, and in fact a conduit back into another kind of bumptious and erotic rural archaic past.) The secret to the peculiar *reality-driven* character of Greek comedy may lie hidden in the archaic roots of the genre.

**Is the comic drama ‘conservative’?** Yes. Another trait of Greek comedy is implicit in the historical suggestions of the previous paragraph. Comedy, while dealing with the foibles of the real present, works from a position of assured value, generally the rightness of the old ways, and sees the present as falling away ‘comically’ from the standard occupied by the comedian: who believes in old fashioned wisdom, the traditional dispensation of justice, the dignity of the creative artist as derived from the Homeric model. Greek comedy, like comedy in general, looks down from a confident view point. How else can you mock?

**The Clouds** (423 B.C.) takes aim at precisely the ‘public selling of wisdom, or argumentative skill,’ of which the Sophists were accused. In fact Socrates, who was in no way guilty of such ‘public selling,’ is the butt of the joke in this drama about an ambitious farmer, whose son has racked up a huge debt, and whose dad is facing an angry law court. The son is sent to Socrates’ ‘Thinkery,’ a thought-house where one learns not only to forget about the

traditional values of the Athenians, but how to trick the law courts, and pull the wool over juries' eyes. The ensuing turmoil is hilarious, but not innocuous, for in fact the bias against Socrates, which we see the results of in Plato's *Apology*, is being established right here in this play, written a quarter century before Socrates' death. There could be no more compelling argument, that comedy bites hard into the social fabric—in contrast to tragedy, which generates discoveries in mythical outreach.

**Lysistrata** (411 B.C.). The downward spiral of Athenian political life, toward the end of the exhausting Peloponnesian War, the growing influence of women in social life, and the delights of bawdy sex: all these conditions converge to support this hilarious/biting comedy. Basically, the women of Athens are fed up with war, and with male ineptitude, and in a series of moves take over the Acropolis, the sacred center of Athens, and read the riot act to their husbands. No sex until the war ends. The way this torture plays out is as phallic and uproarious as Athenian public amusement could be, joining serious points to outrageous fantasies.

**The Frogs** (405 B.C.). Dionysus, the god of the theater for the Athenians, is disgusted at the low quality of dramatic presentations in Athens, Sophocles and Euripides having died the previous year. He decides to descend into Hades and to bring back Euripides, his favorite poet. However when Dionysus arrives in the underworld he finds himself in the midst of hubbub and a literary duel between Euripides and Aeschylus, over which is the better poet. In the end Dionysus returns from Hades with Aeschylus, but what brings down the house is not that outcome, but the subtle/raucous debate, between Euripides and Aeschylus, over which is the better poet. It is this debate that I stress, *the subtleties of literary points aired to a delighted citizen audience!*

#### *Reading*

*Four Plays by Aristophanes: The Clouds, The Birds, Lysistrata, The Frogs*; translated by Arrowsmith, Lattimore, Parker (New York, 1994). (Why not read all four plays?)

#### *Discussion*

Are you too amazed that Aristophanes (in *The Frogs*) can display, in the highest spirits and to the evident delight of his audience, debates on subtle literary points, illustrations of this or that great tragedian's stylistic skills or foibles? Does this not imply a literate audience, and one for which the experience of the theater is a central entertainment? Have we any similar collective experience in modern cultures? What about televised national sports events? As for the theater itself, has it lost its central power, in the Industrialized West?

### 3.AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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#### Overview of Autobiography in Classical Greek Literature

Classical culture in the West is divided into two separate but jaggedly continuous parts: Greek culture and Roman culture. The origins of Greek culture take us back to the Mycenaeans, the Phoenicians, and Ancient Near Eastern and Egyptian culture; culture worlds of which we know more all the time—from archeology and epigraphy-- but which still remain outside the founding presence of our own culture. That Western founding level continues to be the Greco-Roman, which pervades our references and institutions.

What we find, when we enter Greek culture at the historical level of Homer (9th/8th cent. B.C.)—or of the contemporary Greek sculptures of the Cycladic period, or of the architecture of Crete or Mycenae—is imaginative creation we can relate to from where we are today, in our contemporary world swirling with the new but with a capacity for hearing its own past inside it. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, therefore, remain the great autobiography of the Greek people. But that is autobiography in the widest possible sense, and not in the narrower sense relevant for the present syllabus. In the widest sense all great literature is someone's autobiography.

Ancient Greek culture presents no easily identifiable set of self-awareness skills, and hardly produces a text we would today call autobiography in the commonest sense of the word. (However many Greek writers hold the mirror to their faces and in those glimpses, sometimes prolonged, we can discern the profiles of our forefathers' bony images.) As we will see, in the following samples, life-writing might often be a more comfortable description than autobiography for what the Greeks give us as self-image; indeed the Romans too, who divide our syllabus with the Greeks, will rarely give us full face-portraits, but rather, as in the case of the lyric poets of both Greece and Rome, intense cameos of feelings in action. (It will not be until the *Meditations* of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.) and the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (354-430 A.D.) that we begin to see full length self-portraits which are deeply intelligible to us.) Greek culture, in particular, needs careful scrutiny to bring out its self-reflective, or self-revealing traits, and, because that culture was 'plastic,' as deeply as it was verbal, we should ideally employ our perceptiveness for portrait sculpture as richly as our inner literary ears, when we go out to recapture the Greek experience of self.

Another challenge to thought—as we construct this syllabus-- is that which leads us out of the classical age altogether into the heady air of a new cultural expression. The transition from the 'old' classical world (both Greek and Roman) into the more familiarly subjective world we know today, is heralded by the writing and thinking of Marcus Aurelius, whose *Meditations* open up the page to a mature human, at the crosshairs of world history, subtly portraying himself as a texture of concerns, anxieties, and moral convictions. (We will have to feel, already here, an intimacy to us which is new among the texts we will have so far read in this course.) With Marcus Aurelius we encounter a spiritual guide no less modern, and far more subtle, than the latest self-help book in Barnes and Noble. That text opens the first dawn of modernity. That is a beginning. But only a beginning. Saint

Augustine, two centuries later, is the first Christian in our study, and a founder, in the tradition of Platonic and neo-Platonic thinking, of the deepest themes of a new religion. His small book, *The Confessions* (397 A.D.), distills the intensity of a new life perspective, opens a vibrant and penitent person to us, and gives us the sense, for the first time, that the ancient classical world is the other. With Augustine we open onto the kind of autobiography to which the western tradition is now accustomed—the opening of the heart, the disclosure of personal details, the personal response to the impersonal world.

Readings: Mary Beard and John Henderson, *Classics: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2000)

### **Hesiod** *Works and Days*; *Theogony* (7th century B.C.)

While the shadow of Homer lies over all subsequent Greek culture, and indeed over the entire Western tradition, we can hardly begin with him in a history of Ancient Classical Autobiography. Were we to do so we would need to approach with great subtlety, watching how Homer the blind bard characterizes blind bards, in his poetry, or how Homer nods his head to the reader with a wise aside like 'men always love to hear about the newest and freshest events to come to their ears.' Or we could go to the opposite extreme, and see in Homer's whole epic achievement, which embraces the canvas of human experience, a kind of autobiography, a 'writing of himself by Homer.' With such a broad perspective as that, of course, we would lose any definitional crispness for the term autobiography. We would be no better off than if we were gathering disparate fragments of hints, from an author, about the nature of himself. Both of these interpretive extremes, the macroscopic and the indirective, come into play in our syllabus discussions, but we will try directing our attention to firm and substantive expressions of self. We will, so far as possible, be looking for autobiography in the sense the West has preferred to give it, a 'disclosure or presentation of self, embedded in a life world.'

So what will Hesiod offer us, that we could not have extrapolated from Homer? We will have to read both short epics—*The Works and Days*, an old farmer's Almanac, instructive for the Boeotian peasant life; *The Theogony*, a narrative account of the generations of the Gods of 'Greek myth'-- to get a sense of Hesiod's self- presentation. (We will need to consider that Hesiod, like all the Greek and Latin poets considered here, creates in what seems to us a formal stylized prosody—it is called dactylic hexameter, in the case of epic poetry—and that he, thus, thinks, feels, and sings in conventions in which his creative language is embedded. You will note, in the bibliography, reference to Halporn, et. al., *The Meters of Greek and Roman Poetry*. It is highly recommended, here at the start of this class, that you at least introduce yourself to this important issue, of the kind of language in which classical poetry was created.) In order to analyze autobiographical material up close, in these epics, you will want to look at the few and cursory 'concrete events' that Hesiod offers us in commenting on the quarrel between his brother and himself, in *The Works and Days* ll. 27-41, and in recounting his 'encounter with the Muses', ll. 22-35 in *The Theogony*. We will have recourse to finicky detective work, in uncovering the *autos*, the self, in these autobiographies. In one of our readings—the historian Herodotus, Week 4--close attention to language issues will be our only key to the autobiographical theme. There will be little concrete self-presentation, but much of that self-positioning in language by which we present ourselves as identities. That is, we will in a few cases, throughout this syllabus, not be dealing with full face autobiography, or even with life-writing, but with the intricacies of the language by which we establish ourselves as persons in a literary text. It will be one of your challenges to determine whether this kind of analysis is an encounter with autobiography.

Reading: Hesiod: *Theogony, Works and Days*

Suggested Translation: Richmond Lattimore, *Hesiod Works and Days; Theogony, The Shield of Herakles* (Ann Arbor, 1991).

Questions:

1 Hesiod, like all the Greek epic poets, composes in a highly stylized meter, the dactylic hexameter. Of what relevance is that fact to the kind of autobiography Hesiod constructs for himself? Are we accustomed to verse autobiographies today? Can you name one?

2 Hesiod believes that man's condition is getting worse all the time; his own Age, the Age of Iron, is a dark one. How does Hesiod's view of the human condition as a whole impact Hesiod's view of himself as a person? Do we know him as one who considers himself part of the Age of Iron?

3 Autobiography is a portrayal of oneself in language. When you consider how you speak and how you present yourself verbally to others, do you feel that those zones of your behavior are where an interested person should go to find your autobiography? Is autobiography that tightly linked to the language act?

**Sappho, Archilochos, Solon Lyrics** (6th century B.C.)

With the emergence of these three characterful individuals (and a number of others), speaking in their own voices about their hopes, responsibilities, and loves, we are snatched away from the relative facelessness of the narrator of epic (Homer, Hesiod), and immersed in the human voice, shaped in melodic and intricate poetic structures—now we are in 'lyric,' now 'epic' metrics-- telling of the person behind them. (Each of these poets has his/her own thematic: Sappho reports passionate longing for her female lover, and at the same time portrays what seems to be a coterie of sophisticated ladies in whose company she lives on the island of Lesbos; Archilochos, by career a mercenary soldier, reports a world full of masculine pleasures and daring, yet threads his disciplined lyrics with his own passages of hot anxiety; Solon, the first law giver for Athens and its greatest early statesman, writes about the legal protections and governing attention he provided for the Athenian people in this formative period of the city-state, while at the same time he is reflecting on himself, and introducing a new level of conscious self-awareness into the early Greek lyric. (This kind of self-awareness from within the lyric, as we see it in Solon, is different from the self-dramatization peculiar to the writing of Sappho and Archilochos.) Rich and self-expressive lyricists like these three speak of a world transition from the epic into the beginnings of a new social and cultural world: the world of the polis, with its democratic values, its stress on the individual, and its new 'freer-market' economic traits.

Reading:

Lyrics of Sappho, Archilochos, and Solon

Suggested Translations:

Diane Rayor, *Sappho's Lyre: Archaic Lyric and Women Poets of Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, 1991). Contains translations of Sappho, and at the time of newly discovered texts of Archilochos and Sappho.

Guy Davenport, *7 Greeks* (New York, 1995). Contains translations of Archilochos and Sappho, among others.

John Lewis, *The Poems of Solon of Athens*, 2006: online.

Questions:

1 Do you think it likely that the development of lyric poetry is related to the conditions of the society in which it takes place? What exactly changed, in sixth century B.C. Greece, that enabled a new genre, lyric poetry, to come to the fore of the culture?

2 We in the West, especially since the Romantic Movement, are used to lyric poetry as an expression of emotions. Do you see that trait of lyric poetry in the poems we have read this week? What emotions are expressed by the three poets we are reading? How are these emotions expressed?

3 Were the lyric poets of Ancient Greece performers of their work, and if so in what settings? (You might want to do some research on this question.) What role do you think musical accompaniment played in their work? Dance? What is the significance, to the autobiographical dimension of these poets' work, of the multiplicity of art-skills incorporated into their work?

**Herodotus** (484-425 B.C.) *The History* (5th century B.C.)

The first historian/anthropologist to have come down to us from Greek literature, Herodotus was born in Halicarnassus, on the coast of Turkey—and was thus, at that time, a citizen of the Persian Empire. Though we know little about the details of his life we can deduce, and back up, facts about his travels in Egypt and Babylon, and about his unsuccessful efforts later in life to become an Athenian citizen.

The work he creates from his life is what in Greek means 'an inquiry'—*historeuo* is the Greek verb for 'to inquire' and 'historia' is a broad inquiry—thus a work less fact-fettered than what we would mean by a 'research study,' and open to the discovery of philosophical implications in the world it reveals. That kind of wide ranging work is just what we find in this only writing left to us from Herodotus. As an 'inquirer' he ranges widely through the world of his time, with particular attention both to the events of the Persian Wars (499-449 B.C.), in which the Greeks first defined themselves as a vigorous and unified culture, and to the character of the cultures in which the Greeks and Persians, and other residents of the Eastern Mediterranean, found themselves at Herodotus' time. Herodotus at once regales and instructs us with stories of Kings and concubines, seers and fakirs, bizarre and fascinating cultural insights from throughout the Eastern Mediterranean; while at the same time he develops a philosophy of history, primarily based on the notion of cyclical repetitions, as cultures come into conflict and replace one another through the processes of revenge and retaliation.

In the course of this large text Herodotus is not voluble about himself, but in the verbal maneuvers by which he narrates his history he turns himself into a distinctive individual talking about himself; by such minimal strategies as we tracked in Hesiod, a self-directed remark here, another there, Herodotus is building toward the full fledged notion of autobiography.

Readings: Herodotus, *The History*.

Suggested Translation: David Grene, *The History of Herodotus* (Chicago, 1987).

Questions:

1 Herodotus, as we said above, writes into his history many bizarre and fascinating Eastern

Mediterranean episodes, which establish him as a kind of anthropologist/historian. Does his use of narrative tales, which entertain and also support his account, mean that he is still, basically, working in the tradition of epic poetry? Or has he broken through the 'epic veil' to address us as 'fellow persons'?

2 Herodotus describes his work as an inquiry, a *historia*. Does this description, as we use the term 'inquiry' today, seem to fit what Herodotus created? Or do you view his history as a work of art? Does his history resemble what we customarily view as history today?

3 Herodotus narrates his entire history as a friend to Athens and a critic of Persian culture. How does this intrinsic bias pervade the self-image Herodotus is constructing through this inquiry/autobiography? Does his 'bias' play a role in the construction of an autobiographical personality?

4. Ancient Greek culture is considered a major foundation of later Western culture—in literature, philosophy, social organization, plastic arts and architecture—and yet, as Misch observes (in his *History of Autobiography in Antiquity*), the Greek tradition in autobiography is weak. The Greeks—and Misch puts it this way—have great sense for the general, the universal, but a deficient sense for the individual, which results in a weakness in the self-expressive mode that generates literary autobiography. What do you think of Misch's view?

5 In the introduction we alluded to the questions of genres, as formative factors in literary creation. We have, to this point in our quest for autobiography, been confronted with two epic texts, extensive pieces of lyric poetry, and a vast history of the known world. Has the autobiographical element in each of those texts been determined or shaped by the genre of the text? Is there a profound link between one's preferred genre and one's self-image?

6 What do you think of the flexible use we are giving to the term autobiography? (We are taking the term in both the broadest sense, to cover any expression of the self in language, and in the most detailed sense, to cover the fine points of linguistic expression by which we represent our distinctive personalities, by which we mark off whatever is ineffably us.) Do you think this 'flexible approach' enables the term autobiography to retain its usefulness?

### **Xenophon (430-354 B.C.) Anabasis (399-375 B.C)**

Xenophon was born near Athens, into an aristocratic family. This was at a moment of anxious peace in the polis, after the Athenians' brilliant victory in the Persian Wars—recounted by Herodotus—and near the start of the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404), which will be the theme of the history of Thucydides. Unlike these two other historians, however, Xenophon was essentially a soldier and writer of diverse texts—on topics as widespread as hunting, royal pedagogy, political philosophy, romance fiction, and military strategy. Of his many works the most widely read is the *Anabasis*. Schoolboys, then as now, got their first taste of literate Greek prose from this text; only scholars range far out from this text, into the wide and fascinating range of Xenophon's whole oeuvre.

In Xenophon's *Anabasis*, written in the first quarter of the 4th century B.C., and concerning events from 400 B.C., we hear a field general and adventurer reporting at length on a mercenary expedition to help Cyrus, claimant to the throne of Persia, to recover his royal power. This report reads like lengthy but dramatic exhortations to the Greek troops, as Xenophon prepares to lead them first to Persia and then from Persia back to Greece through the mountains of Armenia to the Black Sea and finally to the Mediterranean. Not only do we tap into an epic adventure tale, a 1500 mile march over rough terrain--but

every step of the way involves the narrator's presentation of himself as narrator. This of course is where the autobiographical element of the text enters. In the course of many reported conversations—reported by himself—Xenophon skillfully comments on himself, establishing a zone of self-consciousness which draws us into him. You will want to analyze that zone of self-consciousness, for it is where we as readers feel in the presence of a narrator. (We have already discussed, in connection with Herodotus and especially Hesiod, the way in which an aspect of autobiography is created by the way the narrator manipulates language about himself.) You will want to look closely at some of the many passages in which Xenophon's manner of speaking about himself reveals him as a person. A kind of example could be *Anabasis* III, 1, 1-19, in which Xenophon presents to us the despondent mercenary army on the brink of defeat by the Persian monarch, wondering desperately where to turn and how to get home. In Section 4 Xenophon writes that 'there was a man in the army named Xenophon,' a stiff and mechanical approach to bringing forth his own identity. (I think of the kind of defamiliarization of self we sense when a painter like Breughel includes himself as a tiny figure in the lower corner of one of his canvases.) Then Xenophon recounts his discussion with Socrates about the kinds of sacrifice to the gods Xenophon should now arrange, in order to further a propitious return of the army to Greece. Xenophon the narrator is talking about himself in an important negotiation, as though he was both a teller and the one told about at the same time. (Georg Misch, as we noted in the previous week, says that the Greeks, unlike the Romans, had no sense of the concrete individual, but directed their thought and feeling toward the general, the 'abstract.' Do you see any grounds for that view, as you look into a Greek autobiography like Xenophon's?) It is particularly interesting to note Xenophon's account, in sections 11-12, of the dream in which he became convinced that he and his men need to move fast in order to avoid annihilation. 'It seemed to him that there was a clap of thunder and a bolt fell on his father's house, setting the whole house ablaze.' How disturbing the dream's disclosure, yet how dispassionate the narrator's account of the disturbing dream.

Readings: Xenophon, *Anabasis*

Suggested Translation: H.G. Dakyns, Xenophon, *The March up Country* (available on line or in many commercial editions).

Questions:

1 Herodotus and Xenophon both write extensively about human affairs—political-social-military affairs—and in doing so each writer infuses his own 'personality' in his text; though neither of them enters into anything like a discussion or display of personality. Which author do you come to know best, as a shaping force in his text?

2 Does Xenophon have a sense of the concreteness of the individual—the unique traits that make a person what he/she is, and that make fictional characters like those of Charles Dickens burst into life from their first appearance on the page? What kind of fullness of personality does Xenophon himself acquire in his own self-portraiture?

3 The notion of 'autobiographical space' derives from the notion that in literary self-expression the narrator establishes some 'distance' between his narrating act and the self whose presence he conjures into his text. That distance, it might be held, could be viewed as the space of consciousness, in which we are invited to touch the self-generative level of the autobiographer. Do you see some validity in this set of thoughts? Do they seem to apply to the operation by which Xenophon is creating an autobiography?



## 4.ESSAY

### Contents

#### THE HISTORICAL IMAGINATION

*Herodotus, The Histories*

*Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War*

#### THE PHILOSOPHIC IMAGINATION

*Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes*

*Socrates*

*Plato, The Dialogues*

**Overview** The historical sense is less old than group memory, which we suppose coeval with the first organization of a society. Ancient Greek society opens to us in the Homeric epics, which though (especially the *Iliad*) they seem on the whole to be ‘historical’ are infused with imagination, creative design, and the interests of poetic technique. It would be hard to find other written work, between Homer and the fifth century, which was more narrowly ‘historical’ than Homer’s. The lyric poets, the Milesian philosophers, and above all the dramatists: all these writing groups processed the past, but as myth or imagination. It is first with Herodotus and Thucydides, in the fifth century B.C.E., that the genre of ‘history proper’ begins to be written in Greece. This genre, though inflected by interests of poetry, imagination, philosophy, is meant to memorialize (not simply archive) a swathe of the past of Athens (and other Greek colonies and city-states of the time.)

**Herodotus (484-425 B.C.E.)** Herodotus was the first Greek historian. In his *History* he recounted the events and pre-war build up of the Persian Wars, in which the Athenians, and some other city-states, discovered their identity and group pride by defeating an army and naval force much larger than their own. In the course of recounting this life and death struggle—which has many elements of drama and poetry in it—Herodotus stops often along the way, to tell us of the curious and unfamiliar customs of the regions—Egypt, Persia—through which his main narrative takes us. He thus becomes the anthropologist, too, a figure attractive to many historians to come.

**Thucydides (460.B.C.E.-398 B.C.E.)** Thucydides wrote his great work of history about the Peloponnesian Wars, that struggle that broke out, after the Persian Wars, between the *poleis* of Athens and Sparta, the two pillars of Hellenism against the Persian invasion. Taking off where Herodotus left off, Thucydides worked from a realistic, first-person inquiry sense of *Realpolitik*, from which, in a style that was always careful, dry and pithy, he created a work that contrasted sharply with the style of Herodotus. While Herodotus is out to celebrate the glorious achievements of Athens, and to do so in an often folksy and anecdotal fashion, Thucydides packs tense international relations into sharp dialogue and aphoristic commentary, cutting to the bone and taking care not to take sides.

**Other historians** Mention should be made of two later Greek historians. **Xenophon** (430-354 B.C.E.), a pupil of Socrates, is familiar to most students of the Greek language, who teethe on the *Anabasis* (370 B.C.E.), a thrilling account of the return of 10,000 Greek mercenaries—Xenophon was one of their generals—from Persia to Greece. As a practicing historian, Xenophon is known especially for his *History* of the declining Hellenism of the late fifth and early fourth centuries. **Polybius** (264-146 B.C.E.), writing in another era, gives his attention to the early formative period of the Roman Republic, excelling in his accounts of events like the sack of Carthage by the Romans (146 B.C.E.). It marks Polybius’ work that he thinks in terms of admired models, like Philip of Macedon, from whom the reader can derive life-lessons.

### Reading

Luce, T. James, *The Greek Historians*, London, 1997.

Parmeggiani, Giovanni, *Between Thucydides and Polybius, the Golden Age of Greek Historiography*, Cambridge (Mass.), 2014.

### Discussion questions

What elements of Hellenic imaginative literature do you see in Herodotus? Has he anything in common with the view points of tragic (or comic) drama?

What is the difference between the attitude of Herodotus to Athens, and that of Thucydides? Do their attitudes differ because they wrote about different moments in Athens' history?

Herodotus is called both 'the father of history' and 'the father of lies.' Which name do you think fits him better? Explain.

### HERODOTUS

**Herodotus The Father of History (490-425 B.C).** Herodotus wrote the first significant history of Greece and of his travels both in Greece and in other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. Is he the father of history or, as some ancient critics claimed, 'the father of lies'? (Or, as more than one wit has queried, are history and lies the same?)

**The historical imagination.** By contemporary standards it might seem that epic, lyric, and drama clearly belong to the literary imagination, while questions could be raised about philosophy and history. I think that we can quell such doubts about 'philosophy,' by showing that it rose from an inquiry tradition seeking the central meaning of reality, and that right through Socrates and Plato Greek philosophy belonged to a restless inquiry distinctively targeting both the nature of physical reality and then, at its peak, the nature of ethical relationships, knowledge, and logic. Is not this kind of inquiry a close kin to the kind of 'address to the world' fundamental to epic, lyric, and drama, all of which propose, and observe, models of the world we live in? And is not history, at least in the Hellenic sense, just such an inquiry? The Greek verb *historeo*, *I inquire*, lies at the root of the word 'historia,' and while today, among scholars of history, there may be fierce debate about whether history is a science or simply a special kind of language, there is no doubt that for the Greeks of Herodotus' time history was just one more offspring of the Muses. Clio, after all, was the Muse of History, and took her place beside her sisters, all of them wellheads of the arts.

**What kind of history does Herodotus write?** The underlying purpose of Herodotus' work is to create a history of his time, with an end point at the Battles of Marathon (490 B.C.) and Salamis (480 B.C), that is at the point where the Greeks triumph over the vast Persian Empire. To achieve that historization of his own time Herodotus concentrates on the peripeties of the Persian monarchy from the time of Cyrus in the mid-sixth century to that of King Xerxes whose fleet the Greeks defeat at Salamis.

**Digressions.** In constructing his history Herodotus digresses constantly—he declares that digression is his plan—drawing on his own extensive travels in the Near East and Egypt, on travellers' tales, and on earlier Greek world historians, like Hecataios. While his digressions are never pointless, and are almost always amusing, they contribute only indirectly to the construction of his overall history. It will be well to look at a sample of Herodotus' historical thinking.

**How Herodotus thinks as an historian.** We need to consider the kind of mind work Herodotus carries out, in presenting a history. Take the story of Gyges and Candaules. (Book One, the beginning.) What does the telling of that story have to do with furthering Herodotus' history timeline? Start with this. Herodotus wants to locate King Croesus of Lydia in terms of his own lineage. Why? To construct the true architecture of known time. And why Croesus? Because Croesus is the King who, by capturing and subduing Greek city states in Asia Minor, first generated conflict between the Greeks and their neighbors to the East. So how to present the line of descent that led from the first Lydian King, Candaules, 'down to' Croesus, more than a century later? The way Herodotus 'chooses'—in fact the thought movement congenial to him throughout his history—is to start by dramatizing the events that led to the kingly transition from the first Lydian monarch, Candaules, to his successor, Gyges. We are talking, of course, about the 'story' of Gyges and Candaules. Herodotus moves the timeline through 'episodes.'

**What do you think about this kind of historicizing?** The kind of story-writing history, which Herodotus loves, is one way of building a time line. In a sense the tale of Gyges and Candaules is a 'date' on a list of time periods. In every sense of the word 'imagination' Herodotus is one with the other 'literary minds' who create ancient Greek culture.

## Reading

### Primary Source Reading

Herodotus, *The Histories, Revised*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt, 2003

OR

<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Herodotus/Herodotus1.html>

### Secondary Source Reading

Evans, J.A.S., *Herodotus, Explorer of the Past: Three Essays* (Princeton, 1991).

### Further Reading

De Selincourt, A., *The World of Herodotus* (London, 1962).

### Suggested Paper Topics

Herodotus sets out to trace the development of the Persian monarchy, from its origins in the mid-sixth century to its defeat under Xerxes at the hands of the Greeks. Are you able to follow this underlying history through the maze of tales and reports that make up the bulk of the history? Does it seem important, to Herodotus, that you should keep the fundamental timeline in mind?

Does Herodotus ever talk about himself? Or do you feel he reveals himself without talking about himself? How would he so reveal himself?

EXCERPT Book One Herodotus History <http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Herodotus/Herodotus1.html>

[1.0] *THESE are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feuds.*

[1.1] *According to the Persians best informed in history, the Phoenicians began to quarrel. This people, who had formerly dwelt on the shores of the Erythraean Sea, having migrated to the Mediterranean and settled in the parts which they now inhabit, began at once, they say, to adventure on long voyages, freighting their vessels with the wares of Egypt and Assyria. They landed at many places on the coast, and among the rest at Argos, which was then preeminent above all the states included now under the common name of Hellas. Here they exposed their merchandise, and traded with the natives for five or six days; at the end of which time, when almost everything was sold, there came down to the beach a number of women, and among them the daughter of the king, who was, they say, agreeing in this with the Greeks, Io, the child of Inachus. The women were standing by the stern of the ship intent upon their purchases, when the Phoenicians, with a general shout, rushed upon them. The greater part made their escape, but some were seized and carried off. Io herself was among the captives. The Phoenicians put the women on board their vessel, and set sail for Egypt. Thus did Io pass into Egypt, according to the Persian story, which differs widely from the Phoenician: and thus commenced, according to their authors, the series of outrages.*

[1.2] *At a later period, certain Greeks, with whose name they are unacquainted, but who would probably be Cretans, made a landing at Tyre, on the Phoenician coast, and bore off the king's daughter, Europe. In this they only retaliated; but afterwards the Greeks, they say, were guilty of a second violence. They manned a ship of war, and sailed to Aea, a city of Colchis, on the river Phasis; from whence, after despatching the rest of the business on which they had come, they carried off Medea, the daughter of the king of the land. The monarch sent a herald into Greece to demand reparation of the wrong, and the restitution of his child; but the Greeks made answer that, having received no reparation of the wrong done them in the seizure of Io the Argive, they should give none in this instance.*

[1.3] In the next generation afterwards, according to the same authorities, Alexander the son of Priam, bearing these events in mind, resolved to procure himself a wife out of Greece by violence, fully persuaded, that as the Greeks had not given satisfaction for their outrages, so neither would he be forced to make any for his. Accordingly he made prize of Helen; upon which the Greeks decided that, before resorting to other measures, they would send envoys to reclaim the princess and require reparation of the wrong. Their demands were met by a reference to the violence which had been offered to Medea, and they were asked with what face they could now require satisfaction, when they had formerly rejected all demands for either reparation or restitution addressed to them.

[1.4] Hitherto the injuries on either side had been mere acts of common violence; but in what followed the Persians consider that the Greeks were greatly to blame, since before any attack had been made on Europe, they led an army into Asia. Now as for the carrying off of women, it is the deed, they say, of a rogue: but to make a stir about such as are carried off, argues a man a fool. Men of sense care nothing for such women, since it is plain that without their own consent they would never be forced away. The Asiatics, when the Greeks ran off with their women, never troubled themselves about the matter; but the Greeks, for the sake of a single Lacedaemonian girl, collected a vast armament, invaded Asia, and destroyed the kingdom of Priam. Henceforth they ever looked upon the Greeks as their open enemies. For Asia, with all the various tribes of barbarians that inhabit it, is regarded by the Persians as their own; but Europe and the Greek race they look on as distinct and separate.

[1.5] Such is the account which the Persians give of these matters. They trace to the attack upon Troy their ancient enmity towards the Greeks. The Phoenicians, however, as regards Io, vary from the Persian statements. They deny that they used any violence to remove her into Egypt; she herself, they say, having formed an intimacy with the captain, while his vessel lay at Argos, and perceiving herself to be with child, of her own free will accompanied the Phoenicians on their leaving the shore, to escape the shame of...

## THUCYDIDES

**Who was Thucydides?** This observer of the grandeur and fall of the Athenians, during the second half of the fifth century, served as a general in the north of Greece, but apart from that evidence of his personal experience remains known almost solely for one book, his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In that great work—some would say it, not Herodotus' *Histories*, was the first true History--Thucydides (middle fifth Century-399 B..C.) proved himself a drier, more analytical, more philosophical historian than his predecessor and on the whole admired model, Herodotus. Thucydides probes the causes and resolutions that created the Peloponnesian War—up to the year 411 B.C.-- in the last thirty years of the fifth century. He writes his history largely by means of constructed (remembered, reported) speeches, by a careful sifting of evidence—in conscious difference from Herodotus, who, as we have seen, was often considered the 'father of lies'—and by sticking closely to his topic, unlike Herodotus, who was the master of the digression which fitted into his plan. And Thucydides develops a narrative style, as well as a view of mankind, which makes him a true cross between the epic creator and a seasoned and relatively pessimistic judge of human affairs.

**How does Thucydides establish a history?** Thucydides creates his history out of defined vignettes in which events of the Peloponnesian war are cameod, usually with little, or very spare, commentary from the author. (As a participant general in the army of Athens, Thucydides sticks to the detail of military affairs, and—in this like Herodotus, too—makes almost no reference to himself, with the exception of a famed reference, in the third person, to a certain Thucydides who 'fought in the north.')

**The Melian debate.** After the debacle of the Sicilian Expedition, in 415 B.C., the Athenians decided to add to their Aegean possessions, and proposed a takeover of the small island of Melos, which had so far maintained a neutral posture in the Peloponnesian War, despite historical ties to Sparta. It will be worth your while to examine Thucydides' account of the debate between the Athenian envoys to the Melians, and the leading Melians who are chosen to discuss the Athenian proposals. (By this time the Athenians and their island allies have already been ravaging the island of Melos; their debate proposal is strictly from power.) The dry reliance on force, which the Athenian representative displays, is 'brilliant':

*Melian:* 'But must we be your enemies? Would you not receive us as friends if we are neutral and remain at peace with you?'

*Athenian:* 'No, your enmity does not injure us as much as your friendship; for your enmity is in the eyes of our subjects a demonstration of our power, your friendship of our weakness.'

Never has *Machtpolitik* been so simply and clearly dissected. And so goes the description of the Melian episode, the interlocutors reduced to namelessness by Thucydides—not his usual practice—and the ruthless determination of the Athenians screwed tighter and tighter, but in the coldest possible language of diplomacy. It is no wonder that many 'modern historians' have turned back to Homer, for the model of the Thucydidean historian: as you will have seen, the *Iliad* is full of formally expressive delegations, carefully crafted hard-talk, and brutal resolutions. It hardly needs to be said that, at the end of the Melian debate, the Melian males were slaughtered and the women and children sold into slavery.

**The Funeral Oration of Pericles.** It being the custom in Athens that the elected leader of the Athenians should provide an oration for the military dead, each year, Pericles undertook this challenge after the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War (431 B.C.). At that time Athens seemed manifestly in control of military affairs in Greece; the Long Walls were strong protection against invasion, trade was strong, culture was at its peak: men had been killed, of course, but it was time to frame those deaths fittingly. You will want to contrast the tone of Pericles—as Thucydides recreates it—with the tone of the Athenian representative at Melos; cold, logical, crushing. The mastery of such tone differences is the mark of Thucydides' brilliant inner ear for the sounds of history, and the true indicator of his allegiance to the tradition of epic narrative in Greece.

### Reading

*Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War*, ed. M. I. Finley, translated by Rex Warner (London, 1954). (Please read the whole text.)

## Discussion

From the viewpoint of our focus, on types of imagination in Greek literature, the key question is: is Thucydides part of the epic or of the historical tradition? He memorializes, like a historian, but he does so (like Herodotus) in vignettes which are like ‘scenes in a play,’ often involving dialogue, and usually providing opposing sides of a given argument. His language is artful, strict, perceptive, hiding the person of its narrator but sensitive to the nuances of style that constitute character in language. An historian? An epic poet?

Are you happy with the analysis of Greek literature in terms of types of imagination? Do you see a genuine connection among the five types of imagination we isolated?

Aristotle commented that poetry is more philosophical than history, because poetry is concerned with what might have been rather than with what was. Was he right?

Despite the sharp differences, between the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, do you think they converge in their use of short stories and vignettes to move the timeline along?

## Greek PHILOSOPHY

**Two groups of thinkers** From ancient Greek philosophical thought there remain to us two different blocks of creativity, that of the Milesian hylozoists in the sixth through fifth centuries, B.C.E. and that of the three fifth-to-fourth century thinkers--Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle--of whom Socrates was the teacher of Plato, while Aristotle was the pupil of Plato.

**The Milesian philosophers** Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes usually get first attention in this group. They were speculative materialists, living on the coast of Asia Minor, whose thinking appears to have been triggered by observations of nature or natural phenomena. Contemporary with the early Greek historians, lyric poets, and political theorists like Solon and Pericles, these Milesian philosophers probed to the causes of the observable world, and theorized fruitfully over the ways events play out in human environments. We usually attach a tag, to each of the Milesians, identifying a key principle by which he chose to interpret phenomena: Thales (624 B.C.E.-546 B.C.E.) worked around water, a subject omnipresent on the Asia Minor Coast; Anaximenes (6<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.E.) attended to the principle of the infinite air, a formative substance, from which his thinking inclined to derive the principal forms of matter; Anaximander (610-546 B.C.E.) theorized that ‘the undefined,’ to *apeiron*, was the material substrate from which the cosmos is formed. In each case, the key concept chosen became a wedge for inquiry into the labyrinthine paths by which the first principle generates a meaningful universe.

**Socrates and Plato** A subtle and complex progression of ideas joins the three philosophers—Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.), Plato (428-348 B.C.E.), Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.)—who write off the end of the classical moment of ancient Greek culture, and who ultimately offer very different interpretations of the interrelations among morality, analysis, and the intelligibility of the world. Socrates, still part of an oral and ethically inquiring social context, throws his weight behind dialectical argument, and thought chains by which the listener in conversation is led to discover the truth from within his own responses. Plato, whose thought interlocks with that of his teacher, Socrates, readily moves the discussion into epistemology and political theory, unfolding through a vast series of dialogues a theory of ideas whose reality occupies meaning on many levels of human being. His universe crackles with metaphors for insight and super sensuous awareness. Aristotle, instinctively analytical, carries the Platonic thought tradition into scientific researches and social/aesthetic inquiries, opening paths, in metaphysics and literary theory, which still jump out of the classroom into our daily lives.

**The character of Greek philosophy** If any single trait joins together the main traditions of Greek philosophy, it is restless and free-spirited inquiry, robustly addressing the essential questions of life: what are we made of? how should we act? where are we going? Western civilization still lives these inquiries, and in ways set down for us by Greek thinkers.

## Readings

Freeman, Charles, *Egypt, Greece, and Rome*, Oxford, 1996.

Nightingale, Andrea Wilson, *Spectacles of Truth in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge, 2004.

### Discussion questions

Make an effort to see the connections between the Milesian and the Socratic-Platonic movements in philosophy. Has the Milesian movement contributed to the shaping of Western thought?

Do you see in ancient Greek philosophy a potential for the development of scientific thought? Is Milesian thought promising for the disclosure of the ways nature works?

Is ancient Greek philosophy manifestly related to the poetry and the political thinking of the Greeks? Is Homer, who dominated all subsequent Greek thinking, in a recognizable sense a philosopher?

### Early Greek Philosophy: The Milesians

**Epic poetry and the early Greek philosophy of Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes.** The epic imagination privileged comprehensive poetic visions of the order of the cosmos and of the passions displayed by the noble figures of adventure and folk thought. In other words the epic vision, even in a sometimes prosaic writer like Hesiod, inclines to imagine the big picture. While sharing this big picture concern, the philosophical imagination took a different path into the description of what the world is. We may best consider that path as one of analysis, the taking apart of the experienced world, to see what makes it tick, as distinct from the epic poet's embrace in formalized language of the outflowering meanings of the human and natural world. We can see the *philosophical* dimension of thought in the earliest Greek rational analysis, emerging from the Greek speaking cultural centers of Asia Minor. While it may seem that the three Milesian 'philosophers,' working from Asia Minor in the sixth century, created kinds of mythology of the chief elements of the physical world--*air, fire, water*—we will find, upon looking further, that the *analytical* impulse is what prevails in the thinking of these men.

**The analytic imagination.** Epic poetry delights in narratives built on narratives, and on extensive—and of course meaningful—adventuring into implication, meaning, and interpretation. The earliest forms of philosophy in Greece grew up through the mists of Greek cultural awareness, and in the forms of mythology, the complex of tales the Greeks worshipped and fabulated through, meanings of the physical and spiritual world were constantly put into play. (The dance of fantasy with hard thought is what makes a great mythology like the Greek of lasting interest.) But mythology is only a step toward analysis...and rarely pursues its narratives to a conclusion. With the Milesians, from the cultural center of Miletus in Asia Minor, with its face toward the older and more sophisticated cultures of the East—Babylonian, Egyptian—the mythic impulse began to assume the form of a reflective address to the tales told by the Greeks from immemorial time. Into these world narratives was inserted a question: *what is the essence of the dramatic life epic and myth bring before us?* And above all, as the Milesians were basic inquirers, and lived on a coastline where material elements were conspicuous, *the question of essences directed itself to the phenomena of nature.* We are ready to address the particular answers the Milesians gave, to the question of essences, but we should not hurriedly move beyond the mere fact that a question of this sort was posed. The intervention of a question onto narratives interrupts the flow of telling, and organizes a demand on the listener.

**Thales (ca. 585 B.C.) and his question.** Thales' question was apparently *what is the first principle of reality, that from which all derives?* (Apparently: the few fragments that remain to us from Thales are embedded in the writing of other philosophers, especially of Aristotle, and can be very cryptic.) Aristotle gives the following, in explanation of Thales' answer: *Over the number, however, and the form of this kind of principle they (the Milesian philosophers) do not agree: but Thales, the founder of this type of philosophy, says it (the first principle) is water, and therefore declared that the earth is on water... (Metaphysics 983 b 6).* Thales' water-answer falls in line with the cosmological thinking of those Babylonian and Sumerian speculations—indeed with the perspective of the Book of *Genesis*—for which our just created world is imagined floating on a body of water, the mists from which gradually clear to reveal the firm contours of a landmass. In any case, we clearly see the difference between Thales' imagination, in addressing the meaning of the world, and that of the other two Milesian thinkers frequently joined to him.

**Anaximander (610-546 B.C.) and Anaximenes (585-528 B.C.).** Anaximander was a disciple of Thales. His imaginative turn was to pose to himself many questions about the nature, shape and movements of the earth and heavens, and above all about the first principle of all he observed on the earth. ‘He says that it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but some other indefinite nature, from which came into being all the heavens and the worlds in them.’ (The Greek word, *to apeiron*, means ‘the indefinable,’ and is often translated as ‘the cosmic infinite.’ All things pass into and out of that *apeiron*, in a constant circular sequence of births and destructions.) Anaximenes was a pupil of Anaximander. Here is his view, as stated by a later Greek commentator: ‘Anaximenes ...also says that the underlying nature is one and infinite like Anaximander, but not undefined as Anaximander said but definite, for he identifies it as air...being made finer it becomes fire, being made thicker it becomes wind, then cloud, then (when thickened still more) water, then earth, then stones...’

**Is this Milesian thinking a form of imagination? Is it literature?** In this syllabus we are putting pressure on the terms *imagination* and *literature*. By *imagination* we mean, here, style of conceiving and reporting on the world. The epic poet’s style of doing this is different from that of the Milesian philosopher. The epic poet elaborates an artistically formalized account of the world; the Milesian philosopher cuts the richness of the world back to its essence. Is the word *literature* large enough to cover both of these kinds of action? The word *literature* will suffice, if we interpret it as the Milesians interpreted their world-stuff. Literature means a creation out of *litterae*, letters, and is one of the ways humans express themselves in sound and writing. The literary act is the act of working in letters, the language you are, to inflect your expression of the world. Interpreted in that way, the term *literature* expands to cover a variety of actions—epic poetry, philosophy, and other fields, like dramatic expression, lyric expression, and historical expression.

#### *Reading*

*Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle*, ed. Reginald Allen (New York, 1966.) (Read the section on the three pre-

Socratic Milesians. Then explore farther in any of the several relevant works listed in the Collateral Reading at the end of this whole syllabus.)

#### *Discussion*

When I am asked what ‘philosophy’ is I find it hard to answer. Too many answers come into my mind. Tracking philosophy to its historical roots, in a kind of inquiry, is useful for me. It helps me to understand some basic impulses of what today we call ‘philosophy.’ *Inquiry* itself is already a kind of mind-turn which leads to a distinctive kind of ‘imagination,’ as we are using that term here.

To note, and keep in mind. When we get to ‘history,’ the last of our five imagination-types, we will find that the word *history*—the Greek word *historia*—derives from the Greek verb meaning *to inquire, historeo*. *Please remember to ask yourself how the inquiry that takes place in ‘history’ differs from the inquiry that takes place in ‘philosophy.’*

#### **Socrates**

**Socrates (469-399 B.C.) as an Athenian.** Socrates, the most prominent Greek philosopher of the fifth century, saw the century out with his death. He belongs to his own time fiercely, as an ambulatory thinker and ‘gadfly,’ known for his lifetime of conversing with his fellow citizens. But he had other reasons to respect himself: as a military man who performed yeoman service in the many wars Athens fought in the mid-fifth century; as a senator from his district; as a householder with sons; in short as a full-complement citizen of Athenian democracy. His death, known to all, is a shame to Athens, but ‘makes sense’ from certain perspectives.

**Socrates and his place in Greek analytic thought.** Throughout his public life Socrates, who was a follower of Anaxagoras (500-428 B.C.), remained in or near Athens, often teaching and discussing in public. (Prefatory note: the life and thought of Socrates, who never wrote, is preserved for us by his pupil, Plato, and it is very hard to distinguish Socrates the man from the figure of Socrates who is an essential character in Plato’s work, appearing continually as a key figure in Plato’s dialogues. We will be reading, as our week’s assignment, three dialogues of Plato which document ‘the last days of Socrates.’) The main themes of his own teaching are simple, but his gift both



for poetry and argumentation lifts those themes to world importance. Above all, Socrates remains true to the questioning tradition which dominated Milesian thought, and which we have seen marking out a path sharply different from the mythological thinking of archaic Greek epic poetry. (Chronology matters here. The Milesians we read flourished in the first half of the sixth century, Socrates in the second half of the fifth century: over a century passed here, in which early Milesian thought was being supplemented by a lineage of distinguished thinkers—Heraclitus, Parmenides, Pythagoras—who were all formative for Socrates. Socrates found himself at the end of a distinguished line of ‘analytical’ thinkers.)

**Socrates’ argument.** It is important to start with what Socrates did not do as a philosopher. He did not lay down doctrines, positions that could be repeated and analyzed by others. Instead, he argued out the implications of ethical decision, by challenging interlocutors to examine what was involved in their beliefs. For example, when those who talked with him expounded ideas of what constituted virtue, he led them to examine those ideas and, in every case, to show themselves up as not knowing what they meant and not knowing the implications of what they said. In mock humility, Socrates subjected himself to the same ruthless kind of critique. He referred—in the *Apology*, the trial statement which we will read this week—to the widely known response of the Delphic oracle that Socrates is the wisest of men. This verdict seemed to Socrates to be indefensible until he began to query men who considered themselves wise, and found that they had no understanding of, for instance, what constitutes virtue or courage. And in what did Socrates exceed these other candidates for wisdom? He knew that he was not wise, while all the others thought, mistakenly, that they were wise. This method of inquiry, by which the interlocutor is invited to trap himself in admissions of ignorance, is the basic form of Socratic argument, and was by subsequent critics called his *elenchos*, or cross-examination, technique. It will already be apparent, perhaps, that other philosophical positions will build from this *elenchos* work; it is clear that for Socrates an evanescent *truth* is the essence against which inquiry takes place. From that implication we may already site the influence of Socrates on the huge written opus of his pupil Plato.

**Who was Socrates?** Socrates remains a mysterious figure. He wrote nothing, and so we are dependent, for our knowledge about him, on others who wrote about him. (There are three main sources of this kind: Xenophon, the memoirist and military historian, who lived Socrates’ world; the comic writer Aristophanes, who pilloried Socrates in contemporary plays like *The Birds*—see readings for Week Fourteen--and Plato, for whom Socrates became a leitmotif for increasingly refined dialogues of thought.) What most grounds Socrates is his trial, his reaction to it, and the place he played in his time. The trial in question stemmed from a culture suspicious above all of religious unorthodoxy; and the initial charge was that Socrates was indifferent to traditional religious practices. The world in which Socrates was put to death, for suspicions of this sort, was one in which public self-confidence was at a low.

**The historical setting of the trial and death.** A history of Ancient Greece (like the text by Thomas Martin, recommended for our course) will help to guide you through the rapids of Greek cultural history from 700 to 350 B.C. Socrates died in 399 B.C., as you know, Plato (next week’s assignment) in 348 B.C., Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., Aristotle in 322 B.C. During the three centuries prior to Alexander’s death Athens—remember our emphasis is falling on *Athens*, though a coherent (if less interesting) history could have been written about Thebes, Corinth, Sparta, and other city-states—passed through many social/political turns: during the seventh century the city-state defined itself slowly off from the epic clan and family world of Homer, making possible the growth, by the sixth century, of early forms of democracy, a coinage economy, a useable legal system, and a cohesive military force. The fifth century debuts with a huge challenge, The Persian Wars, which provide tumultuous victory followed quickly, in mid-century, by conflict and then War between Athens and Sparta, the two allies active in defeating the Persians. The teachings of Socrates occurred in an Athens which was on the verge of its eventual defeat by Sparta, and the death of Socrates coincided with post war confusion, and a shaky alternation between tyranny and return to democracy. In the midst of such rapid change, Athens found itself hungry for its old traditions, suspicious of new and tricky teachings like those of the Sophists—which Socrates had nothing to do with—and ready for a kind of Joseph McCarthy purge of unorthodox thinkers. Into that vortex Socrates fell.

### **Reading**

*The Last Days of Socrates: Euthyphro; The Apology; Crito; Phaedo*, trans. Tredennick (New York, 1993). (Read all four dialogues. You may well want to explore more Platonic dialogues this week: try *The Phaedo* or *The Symposium*).

## Discussion

How do you understand the cultural climate that led to the death of Socrates? Was his gadfly questioning so offensive to that many people of power? What were they afraid of? Did the Milesian philosophers, who queried the essence of nature, not equally disturb people? (It did not). Was it that Socrates went to the heart of the person, and stirred up internal anxieties? Would Socrates in any way resemble Jesus Christ, in his disturbing mission?

Have we any parallels to Socrates in contemporary society? Have you heard of I.F. Stone? Have you read H.L. Mencken? What do we do with gadflies?

## Plato

**The philosophic imagination and historical context.** By concentrating on imaginative styles, in this syllabus, we have had to limit our attention to ‘historical context.’ We are discussing styles of expression and thought in Ancient Greek culture, but at the same time, inevitably, sacrificing an analysis of the historical bedding of the uses of the imagination. It will be well to comment, no matter how briefly, on the world of post fifth century Athens, the world which saw at its beginning the tragic execution of Socrates.

The prosperity which had so buoyed Athens by the mid-fifth century, especially after the defeat of the massive Persian naval force at the Battle of Salamis (480 B.C.), found itself gradually eroded by such nagging calamities as the Peloponnesian War (finally lost conclusively to Sparta in 404 B.C.), the exhaustion of the Laurion Silver Mines, which had been a major source of military wealth for the polis, and politically reckless moves like the Sicilian expedition, on which the Athenians wasted money and manpower. The history of the fourth century in Greece will lack the clear cut drama provoked by Athenian brilliance a century earlier. The first forty years of the fourth century saw the major city states--Athens, Sparta, and Thebes--interlocked in family power-games and warfare, the old spirit of democracy slowly leaching from the political Athenians. When Philip II became King of Macedon, in 359 B.C. the profile of Greek history veered, giving way to the power of Greece’s northern neighbor, and to the powerful monarchical tradition that culminated in the reign of Alexander the Great, who from 333 B.C. to his death in 323 B.C. created a vast Empire which included Hellas within it, and reached to India. It is significant to our course, that even inside the turbulent fractures that disturbed the Greek polis during the fourth century, two of the greatest Western philosophers unfolded extensive commentaries on the nature of life. Plato died in 348 B.C., while his pupil Aristotle died in 322 B.C.

**Life of Plato.** Plato was born in 428 B.C., and was thus a young man during the Peloponnesian War, the public teaching of Socrates, and many of the greatest achievements of Greek tragedy and comedy. Born into a distinguished family, he naturally gravitated to the intellectually intense public life of central Athens, where he encountered the Sophists, and became a friend of the forty-years older Socrates, a conspicuous public figure and a contentious but admired gadfly of the society. Drawn to Socrates, for his wit, wisdom, and daring, Plato dedicated his own earliest writing—for he was from the start a thinker and man of letters—to dramatizing the implications of the death of Socrates. (Plato’s dialogues called *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Euthyphro* all treat of that death.) With those texts, and others, Plato launched a career of dialogue writing which was to grow in richness and depth until the end of his life. From that huge opus of dialogues we will, in this course, be devoting our attention to *The Republic* (389 B.C.), arguably Plato’s most realized and influential work. (We will have to content ourselves with a few references to other works.) He was by no means only active in writing, however. In 388 B.C. he traveled throughout Sicily and Italy, returning to Athens the following year to a period of intense writing—the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium* and other dialogues were composed at this time—only to return again to Sicily in 367 B.C. and again in 361 B.C., at the invitation of Dionysius II. The purpose of these visits was to make a philosopher-king—the ideal ruler in Plato’s *Republic*—out of the young ruler of Syracuse. The results were hugely unsatisfactory, and Plato finally returned home to Greece, to care for and direct the extraordinary ‘first University in the West,’ the Academy of which he was the founder. He worked there, tutoring students of such global significance as Aristotle, until his death. (Interestingly enough the Academy itself survived all manner of geopolitical turmoil, to remain intact until 529 A.D., when the Emperor Justinian closed it down.) It was while directing the Academy, in the last twenty years of his life, that Plato wrote the deepest of his dialogues—*The Theatetus*, *The Sophist*, *The Timaeus*, *The Laws*.

**The perspectives of Plato’s philosophy.** The analytic trend, in which we have found the signature of Greek philosophy, beginning with the Milesians, developed alongside the practice of question-asking—which from the start we contrasted to the accumulative, generative thought practices of the epic poetic tradition. We have seen that

the Milesian penchant for questioning the essential components of the universe translated, in Socrates—and through a formative tradition linking Socrates to his Milesian background—into a remorseless querying of individuals on issues of ethical values. That social turn of Socrates was always strong in Plato, for whom the dialogue form was naturally a dramatization of kinds of relations among individuals. With Plato, the dialogue form becomes a springboard into ever widening philosophical inquiries, *epistemological* (how do we know?), *metaphysical* (of what ultimate sort must reality be, for us to live it as we do?), *aesthetic* (is there such a thing as beauty itself, apart from beautiful objects?), and ultimately, into the intelligible foundations (the Forms) of the meaningfulness of the world we inhabit. Plato's depth and ingenuity, in tracking these fundamental issues of philosophy, led one of the twentieth century's great thinkers, Alfred North Whitehead, to say that all Western philosophy subsequent to Plato was a series of footnotes to Plato. One of the most accessible and influential of Plato's dialogues, *The Republic*, will give us the idea of Plato's depth and artistry. In that dialogue he uses Socrates as his mouthpiece—a Socrates far different from the Socrates we see in the *Apology*—to lead the lengthy discussion into the deepest nooks and crannies of political philosophy. What makes this discussion of the ideal state unique is that in order to ground the very idea of that state the argument must be ramified enough to include the Forms, the ultimate principles of justice, reason, and beauty. We are as far from the Milesian areas of questioning as we are from the level on which politics and the polis are discussed today.

### **Reading**

*The Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W.H.D. Rouse (New York, 2008). (Our assignment will be to read *The Republic*.)

### **Discussion**

Does Plato's thinking, in the *Republic*, seem to build on the fundamental insights of Socrates' teaching? What is Socrates' political philosophy, as far as you can tell?

What relation do you see between the actualities of Athenian democracy, in the fifth century, and the ideal Republic Plato envisages? Is Plato fond of some aspects of democracy?

What do you think of the dialogue form as a vehicle of argument? Does this vehicle provide advantages over the single narrator form of philosophizing we tend to know today? Are there examples, even in modern philosophy, of effective use of the dialogue for argument? Bishop Berkeley? David Hume? Kierkegaard?