

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Theme in Sophocles.

HONOR

PREFACE. From Homer on Greek literature is pervaded by a sense of the importance of honor, which by and large means 'what other people think of you.' The Trojan War itself sprang from the Greek need for honor, in the case of the abduction of Helen. Paris' intrusion, into the aristocratic stratum of hero centered Greek society demanded a collective response, an honor-protecting response. Conversely, modesty and humility are underplayed virtues, in the ancient Hellenic world. One may dissemble as a beggar, or play crafty; these stances are ok, even honorable. But to be a beggar is not honorable, does not deserve respect. The motto of certain religious faiths, that the 'wretched of the earth' deserve special attention, is not to be found in ancient Greece.

AJAX. Ajax is one of the leading Greek commanders at Troy, and as such expects benefits in the first rank, among the beneficiaries of the war. When Achilles dies his immortal armor is awarded to Odysseus, instead of to Ajax, a terrible blow to the honor of this noble hero, who is overwhelmed by distress at being passed over. Ajax' instinct is to murder Agamemnon and Menelaus, the two most prominent Greek leaders, who were in fact responsible for the awarding of Achilles' armor. The goddess Athena intervenes at this point, to avert a calamity for the Greeks, and sends a dream-enshrouded flock of sheep to Ajax, who slays these animals by mistake, thinking they are the two Greek commanders. Upon waking, Ajax realized his mistake, and in a humiliation greater than that caused by losing the shield, he kills himself. Without his accustomed honor he cannot live.

ANTIGONE. For Antigone the honor of the family requires respectful burial for its dead. When she realizes that her brother is lying unburied outside the walls of Troy, she knows she must intervene, and at least cover the body with soil, as a sign of respect. Her honor as a member of the family requires this, despite the proclamation of Creon, the ruler of Thebes, declaring that no burial will be permitted, for the enemies of the polis. Ajax was driven by personal honor while Antigone was driven by the honor of the family.

ELECTRA. Like Antigone, Electra finds herself faced with continuing dishonor to the name and life of her father, Agamemnon, whom her mother (Clytemnestra) and her lover (Aegisthus) have murdered. Electra has waited years for the return of her brother Orestes, to erase the stain of dishonor which has pervaded the family of Electra. When at last Orestes shows up, Electra is brought thrillingly into action, while she and her brother dispatch the pair of adulterers who have killed Agamemnon. In this case, honor-action is required on behalf of the slain father, for by the killing of him the dignity of the whole family is undermined. Like Hamlet, Electra is haunted by the need to restore honor to her family, but unlike Hamlet she has an ally, her brother, who can help her do the job.

PHILOCTETES Philoctetes was en route to the Trojan War, carrying with him his huge and powerful bow, a powerful weapon which the Greeks needed as heavy artillery against the Trojans. Bitten by a snake he developed gangrene in his leg, and stank so badly that the Greeks had to abandon him on the island of Lemnos, where he has passed the last ten years, when the play opens. Just then a two-man expedition arrives from the Greek forces—Odysseus and Neoptolemus—to try to regain control of the bow, which is needed at a crucial point in the Trojan fighting. Philoctetes is reluctant to abandon his home and his bow, for his honor seems deeply involved with remaining true to these two parts of himself. For a long time Philoctetes remains true to his food-gathering weapon, and honors the experience he has accumulated on the island. Finally, he is induced to compromise, leave the island, and return to Greece. But he remains true in spirit to the island where he has suffered and survived. We would say that Philoctetes conceives honor as we do, when we say that 'we honor the memory of such and such a place or person.'