

Searching for Feminists in Athens Golden Age with Sdhbh Walshe

An Exploration of selected works by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes

In recent years, many scholars have been re-evaluating the great works of Ancient Greek theatre through a feminist lens. The tragedies and comedies that were written by the four major playwrights of Athenian Golden Age – Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes – feature some powerful and extraordinary women who do not shy away from attempting to control their own destinies. Characters like Clytemnestra, Antigone, Medea, and Lysistrata, to name a few, are increasingly viewed as anachronistic feminist icons who stood up to their men folk, often at great personal cost. But while modern day audiences and readers may see much to admire in these undeniably complex women, some scholars believe that any feminist revisionism is misguided. They remind us that the writer's intention may not have been to celebrate these independent women but rather to demonstrate the danger they posed to men and to society.

So, which is it? Well, that's what we hope to find out in this course as we explore selected works from each of the aforementioned writers – *Lysistrata* and *The Women's Assembly* by Aristophanes, *Medea* and *Trojan Women* by Euripides, *Antigone* and *Elektra* by Sophocles, and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (a trilogy of plays comprising *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*.) In addition to closely examining these plays through a feminist lens, we will learn about the playwrights' lives, the major events that were taking place in 5th century Athens which informed their work.

Wednesdays on Zoom
5/4, 5/18, 6/1, 6/15
6:30–8:30 p.m. EDT

SYLLABUS

May 4, Session One – Aristophanes - *The Women's Assembly* and *Lysistrata*

The youngest of the four playwrights, Aristophanes was born in Athens circa 446 BC and died circa 385 around the age of 60. During his lifetime, he wrote 40 comic plays of which 11 survive. His early life would have been marred by the great plague that struck the city of Athens in 430 BC, killing up to 25% of the city's population. Furthermore, he lived through the entirety of the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta, which began in 431 BC during the plague and lasted until 404 BC when Athens was forced to surrender ushering in the definitive end to the city's golden age. These tumultuous events form the backdrop of several of Aristophanes' surviving plays, including the two we will focus on – *Lysistrata* and *The Women's Assembly*. Ostensibly, both these plays could be viewed as prototype feminist oeuvres. *Lysistrata* features an eponymous heroine who calls on the women of Athens and the women of enemy Sparta to go on a sex strike to force their men folk to bring about an end to the devastating Peloponnesian war. While the women are successful in their mission and *Lysistrata* herself is depicted as strong-willed and rational, Aristophanes' characterization of the women as drunken sex addicts with little self-control rather complicates the picture. Similarly, *The Women's Assembly* features a plot in which the women of Athens, led by Praxagora, take over the city's parliament or assembly from the incompetent men who are in charge in order to usher in a host of radical reforms. So far, so good in the feminist stakes, but with these reforms including measures such as giving the old and ugly first dibs on sexual partners, Aristophanes' intentions must be called into question.

But by closely examining the text of both plays and some of the more robust commentary, we will endeavor to get a better understanding of whether he was merely playing women for laughs or trying to make what would have been a very radical point that women were more than capable of participating in life outside the domestic sphere.

May 18, Session Two – Sophocles’ *Antigone* and *Elektra*

Born in 495 in a village a mile north of Athens, Sophocles – the second oldest of the playwrights – lived to the ripe old age of 90 and wrote at least 100 plays of which only 7 survive. Like the other writers, he was born into wealth and privilege, but his lifetime spanned both the Persian war in which the fledgling city state of Athens had to defend itself against the then mighty Persian empire, as well as the aforementioned Peloponnesian wars. In fact, Sophocles’ death in 404 occurred in the same year that Athens finally fell under Spartan control. Having lived through such a tumultuous period and witnessed Athens’ slow decline under foolhardy leadership, it’s little wonder that his surviving work frequently explores the corrupting influence of unchecked power.

The question we will ask as we examine two of his plays featuring female leads – *Antigone* and *Elektra* – is whether Sophocles’ exploration of corruption comes at the expense of these women or on their behalf. *Antigone* features the eponymous heroine who defies Creon, the autocratic leader of Thebes, by insisting on giving her dead brother a proper burial. Although *Antigone* is generally portrayed as noble and Creon as a bully, scholars still argue that Sophocles’ pervading purpose was to showcase the havoc that an unchecked and unmarried woman can wreak upon ‘civilized’ society. Similarly, while *Elektra* could also be viewed as a ‘strong woman’ in that she is not afraid to take the law into her own hands as she seeks vengeance on her mother Clytemnestra for murdering her father, she is often viewed as an “Avenging Angel of the Patriarchy” for her efforts in upholding the rule of men.

June 1, Session Three – Euripides’ *Medea* and *Trojan Woman*

Born in Salamis in 480 BC, the same year that the famous battle that brought the Persian war closer to its end took place there, Euripides was the second youngest of our writers and the nearest contemporary of Aristophanes. Euripides was skewered in more than one of Aristophanes’ plays for his allegedly wicked portrayals of women – (the central plot of Aristophanes’ play *The Women’s Festival* is that the women of Athens seek revenge against Euripides for his vile depictions of them in his work.) Nonetheless, from a modern perspective, Euripides is our best hope of locating a feminist among the writers of the Athenian Golden Age. While his most famous and enduring play, *Medea*, features a woman who (spoiler alert!) murders her own children to avenge her cheating husband, a close examination of some of *Medea*’s staggeringly brilliant monologues reveals a sensitivity to the suffering of women that is hard to find in other contemporary work. Similarly, his play *Trojan Women* not only drew tears from tyrants through its sensitive portrayal of the plight of the women of Troy, it also contains one of the greatest monologues in theatre delivered by Helen of Troy defending her role in the buildup to the war. So, we may find that while he was often the butt of Aristophanes’ jokes in his lifetime, Euripides may get the last laugh.

June 15, Session Four - Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* (a trilogy of plays comprised of *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*)

The oldest of all the playwrights, Aeschylus was born circa 525 BC and lived to the ripe old age of 90, a considerable achievement considering he is believed to have fought at both the famous Battle of Marathon, in which the Athenians first repelled the Persian invaders in 490 BC, and later in the Battle of Salamis. Over the course of his long life, Aeschylus is thought to have written 89 plays of which only 7 survive. We are fortunate that among those that survived is the *Oresteia*, the only known example of an ancient Greek tragic trilogy, and one that occupies a privileged position in the Western canon.

The trilogy tells the story of Clytemnestra's bloody revenge on her husband for killing their daughter Iphigenia and her subsequent undoing by her own son, Orestes. But despite its profound themes, and brilliant storytelling, we may have a hard time locating much sympathy for the plight of women in this classic work. In fact, many critics believe that more than any piece of literature, the *Oresteia* was responsible for cementing women's place in the domestic sphere until, as the classics scholar Edith Hall put it, "Ibsen's *Nora* flung open the doors of the Doll's House." But what better way to end our search for feminism than in a work that carries that much weight.

Required Reading

Lysistrata by Aristophanes

The Women's Assembly by Aristophanes

Antigone by Sophocles

Elektra by Sophocles

Medea by Euripides

Trojan Women by Euripides

The Oresteia Trilogy by Aeschylus

Recommended Reading

Troy by Stephen Fry

Pandora's Jar by Natalie Haynes

A Guide to Ancient Greek Drama by Ian C. Storey and Arlene Allan

The Silence of the Girls by Pat Barker

About the instructor

Sadhbh Walshe is a New York based Irish writer and journalist. She has written op eds and features for *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *NBC*, *CBS*, *The Irish Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Al Jazeera America* and she wrote a weekly opinion column for *The Guardian*. She was awarded a John Jay/ H.F Guggenheim justice fellowship and was named a Soros Justice fellowship finalist for her year-long *Guardian* series, *Inside Story: The US Prison System*. She was an associate producer for the TV pilot *The District on CBS* and was a staff writer for the syndicated tv series. She wrote and directed the award-winning short film *Miss Bertram's Awakening* and her new play, *The Write Off*, recently had its inaugural performance in New York. Previously, Sadhbh taught the Writing Irish Women course for the Rosenbach.