

Cunning, Guile, and the Origins of Ancient Greek Culture

L246-IH1 Fall 2009, Fridays Bunting 480, 1-3:45

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Range and Purposes of the Course

If Homer and Hesiod can be said to transmit to us the founding stories of ancient Greek culture, then a prominent place must be given to cunning and wily intelligence (the Greek word is *Metis*) in those founding stories. In Hesiod's *Theogony* the titan Kronos uses cunning to ambush and castrate his father, making himself lord of the universe. Prometheus, another Titan god, matches his cunning against that of Zeus when he steals the fire Zeus had concealed and gives it to mankind. Homer's *Odyssey* has as its hero Odysseus, the great tactician and man of many turns, who was for the Greeks the spitting image of guileful resourcefulness. In our extended reading of *The Odyssey* we will meet with other examples of canny trickery and wiliness: the war and wisdom goddess Athena often expresses it in action, and in a different way so does Hephaestus, the lame craftsman god, as for instance when he nets his wife Aphrodite in bed with her lover Ares. In our reading of Homer we will notice the appearance of crafty intelligence in surprising places, as for instance when king Menelaos disguises himself as a seal and then waits for and pounces upon the old sea god Proteus whom you have to hold on to tight if you want to subdue him since Proteus has the power to change rapidly into many forms. In our study we will learn all of the ways in which the cunning hero becomes a constantly shifting, devious trap in order to seize and master a constantly shifting and more powerful adversary or situation. Perhaps we will discover occasions when the fox gets caught in his own wiles—like Daedalus in his own labyrinth.

What place did cunning intelligence have in ancient Greek culture and society? How did it differ from other forms of intelligence? The classicist historians Marcel Detienne and Jean Pierre Vernant ask these and other fundamental questions in their magisterial study *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*. They lay out the many senses of the Greek word *Metis*, and give us a broad and deep understanding of this slippery and sly form of intelligence as it appears in many different aspects of Greek life: hunting and fishing, chariot racing, the art of warfare, natural science, myth and epic poetry, philosophy. You might say that Vernant and Detienne's intellectual history of ancient Greece is enriched by a broad-ranging anthropology of the classical world, and that is exactly right. Although we read primary texts in this course, from time to time the instructor will be referring to the work of Vernant and Detienne (as well as the third in this French trio, Vidal-Naquet) since if not for their work, this course would have been impossible.

Later in the course, we'll study the transformations of cunning intelligence in Sophoclean tragedy, in the fables of Aesop, in the ruses of the Sophists, and in the paradoxical "back-turning" thought of Heraclitus. We'll ask if Socrates himself was a practitioner of a kind of intellectual cunning. We'll get to know the famous Socratic irony and end with a selection from

a dialogue of Plato's, called *the Sophist*, in which Socrates attempts to disentangle the ways of the true philosopher from those of his false cunning double, the Sophist.

Requirements

Writing

You will write an in-class mid-term essay on a topic you will know ahead of time. And you will also write a 7-page paper at the end of the term. Together these two essays comprise 65% of your final grade. There will be occasional short in-class writings on interesting questions related to our reading. The close reading-oral presentation accounts for 15% of your final grade.

Oral Presentations-Close Reading

Also, each week two students will offer their own interpretations of the reading selection for that class day. These presentations, between ten and fifteen minutes long, are to be close readings of any one passage from the week's assignment. You should focus on any aspect of the text portion that you hold to be especially powerful, subtle, or artful in light of the larger context of the story or play. And it should of course have something to do with our study of cunning intelligence. Maybe you haven't been able to figure out just what it is that explains the significant effect you detect in this portion of the text. The close reading is your opportunity to wonder and question aloud, to open this part of the text up for class discussion and to point a way or ways that we might go in interpreting that section's significance. Please do not consult secondary sources for the close reading.

The final component of your grade will be based on my evaluation of your participation in class. The factors that comprise participation are: preparedness (have you done the reading and thought about it?), the quality of your contributions to discussion and interpretation, and your attendance record.

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. All excused absences must be verified. The instructor reserves the right to fail any student who has accrued more than two unexcused absences.

If you miss a class, you are responsible for the assigned reading due on that day as well as for the assignment due for the next week.

Plagiarism Statement and Policy

Plagiarism is using someone else's words or ideas without acknowledgment. It is a serious breach of academic integrity and is grounds for failure of an assignment or failure of the course. Repeat offenses will be referred to Academic Affairs with a recommendation for suspension or dismissal from MICA.

To be responsible when summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting, include a citation like:

Henri Michaux quipped "If Christ had not been crucified, he would not have had a hundred disciples in Europe." (Michaux, p. 33)

Be sure to cite the source in parentheses and then give the source in a Works Cited at the end of your paper. Follow standard guidelines such as those given in the *MLA* or the *Chicago Manual of*

Style. Familiarize yourself with these guidelines in Diana Hacker's *A Pocket Style Manual*, and always check with your instructor before turning in questionable work.

Required Texts available at the College Bookstore

Homer, *The Odyssey*, Robert Fitzgerald translation

Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days*, M.L. West translation

Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Judith Affleck translation

Aesop, *The Complete Fables*, Olivia and Robert Temple translation

Suggested Reading, available at Bookstore

Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought*

Recommended

Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*

This is an expensive book, but you can find it in many university libraries.

Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*

Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *The Black Hunter: Forms of Thought and Forms of Society in the Greek World*

Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*

Some reading assignment will be posted as either **course document** or **external link** on MICA's **blackboard** site.

Blackboard Access

To access blackboard: Go to <http://blackboard.mica.edu/> Click User Login, give your ID and password and you're in. Under My Courses click Cuning, guile and Origins of Ancient Greek Culture. Some reading assignments will be posted as either **course document** or as **external link**, or both.

Note: If the blackboard reading is not too long, please print the document and bring it to class so that you have it before you during class discussion.

Texts marked with an asterisk (*) are photocopied handouts that will be provided for you, either distributed in class or else on reserve at the Decker Library.

Reading Schedule

September

4 Introduction. Sign up for close readings.

11 Homeric Hymn to Hermes. Posted in Blackboard. Course Documents.

close reading1

close reading2

18 Hesiod, *Theogony* pp3-10; p16 - 27(from "Rhea surrendering to Kronos..." to "giving him his daughter Cymopolea in marriage."); p.29 (just one paragraph beginning "Zeus as king of the gods made Metis his first wife...")

Hesiod, *Works and Days*, p38-40 (from "for the gods keep men's food concealed...")

close reading1

close reading2

25 Homer, *The Odyssey*, Books 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6.

	close reading 1	close reading 2
October		
2	<i>The Odyssey</i> , bks 8, 9, 10, 12 and 13.	
	close reading 1	close reading 2
9	<i>The Odyssey</i> , bks. 14, 16 (to “if in truth you have a sign from Zeus the storm king), 18 and 19.	
	close reading 1	close reading 2
16	FALL BREAK NO CLASS	
23	<i>The Odyssey</i> , bks 21-24	
	close reading1	close reading2
30	Midterm In-class Essay on Homer and Hesiod and Hymn to Hermes	
November		
6	Sophocles, <i>Oedipus Tyrannus</i>	
	close reading1	close reading2
13	Aesop, <i>Fables</i> (selected fables, pages to be announced)	
	close Reading 1	close reading 2
20	Early Greek Philosopher-Sages: Heraclitus, the Fragments (aphorisms and pages to be announced)*	
	close reading1	close reading2
27	THANKSGIVING NO CLASS	
December		
6	Some views of Socrates in the Platonic Dialogues. Was Socrates’s irony a kind of philosophical cunning or was it totally sincere? Read: Excerpts from Plato’s <i>Meno</i> and other dialogues. Blackboard, external links.	
	close reading1	close reading2
13	from Plato, <i>The Sophist</i> . Posted in Blackboard, course documents and external links	
	close reading1	close reading2
20	Kafka’s <i>Odysseus</i> , <i>Prometheus</i> ; Brecht’s <i>Socrates</i> *	
	close reading1	close reading2

Conclusions. **Final Essay Due**