

## **THE GOLDEN MASQUE OF AGAMEMNON**

### **Material for Schools**

**NOTE: A paper version of this pack is also available, containing maps and cartoons etc. that may not be reproduced in this electronic version. If you would like a copy, please send an email to [claridge@uni-bremen.de](mailto:claridge@uni-bremen.de) with a postal address and your name.**

#### **Lesson 1: Religion, Fate**

- What do you think guides your way through life? Fate? Gods? Chance? You yourself?
- How important is religion for you?
- Try to think about the different religions you know (or have?). What do they have in common? What is different?

#### **INFO: Fate**

Fate or destiny today are considered obstacles in life that are to be overcome. The modern man is responsible for his own way through life, his decisions and their outcome. People who accept their fate and do nothing about it are considered weak and lazy. Yet many of us are fascinated by fortune-tellers, magic spells that are supposed to tell the future, tarot cards or even just horoscopes. We want to fight that uncertainty and fear about what is going to happen to us and be prepared for what awaits us. So did the ancient Greeks, but in their world, fate was more than just a word with an air of mystery. Fate was an authority even higher than the gods – an inescapable destiny not even the greatest of the gods, heroes and kings could change. The gods especially could tamper with humans and thus recreate or alter their fate. They did not, however, have control over their own destiny. Fate, and the desperate attempts to change or escape it, is the central topic in many ancient Greek tragedies and in most cases the protagonists merely succeed in making everything worse and dragging other people into their tangle of violence, blood and death.

Useful links:

<http://www.ancientgreece.com/s/GreekMyths/Oedipus/>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destiny>

#### **INFO: The Importance of Religion**

According to some philosophers, religion is not the cause of violence, but the solution to it. They believe that this is the reason why religion exists and why we need it. The thinkers of the so-called “anthropology of religion” are convinced that religion serves a psychological function. It is the answer to an emotional human need. Religion helps us to overcome conflicts which would otherwise end up in a cycle of violence and confusion. Rituals and myths enable the humans to discover their own nature.

An important argument of the philosophers is that religion is not primarily about God but about the sacred. The experience of 'the sacred' comes into existence whenever a conflict is resolved and human loneliness, fear and aggression disappear. The sacred is central to religion. This is easier to understand when you think of ancient Greek religion: Take away the Greek gods and their stories, and you will come to the core, to rituals which dissolve human anxiety.

Religion developed when humans first tried to live together in societies. In daily contact, people are confronted with aggression, rivalry and jealousy, which lead to violence. One ritual that helps people to resolve conflicts before they escalate is “scapegoating”: A victim is chosen (by fate?) and marked as outside the community. By uniting against this scapegoat – and maybe even killing it – people are relieved of their aggression and reconciled. The resulting awe and relief are a sacred experience. (In the same way, some religions call for the sacrifice of an animal – for example a goat – that symbolically takes the punishment for human ill-deeds upon it.)

Religions are built on the basis of rituals like this. The emotional need for the sacred experience can be found in ancient cults and in Hinduism as well as in Judaism, Islam or Christianity. Myths, as they are known from antiquity, are very important in this context. They are no reliable accounts of events in the past. Instead, myths set the humans into relation with concepts such as freedom or guilt and therefore teach us how to relate to the world around us. The several myths which lay the foundations for the various religions are very similar to each other. This indicates the likeness of humans' psyches. Religions are therefore very closely connected with a discovery of the human nature.

Friedrich Nietzsche argued that religion and tragedy are adjacent. The theatre is able to retell stories. It is thus possible to relive a ritual sacrifice and receive the sacred awe without any violence being exercised. Tragic plays such as *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles or the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus tell the story of cycles of revenge and purification via a ritual sacrifice. They offer “fictional substitutes for the original crime” to their spectators to fulfil their emotional need.

### **INFO: The Oracle of Apollo at Delphi**

The oracle in the temple complex of Delphi, in Greece, is the most famous of its kind. It was first recorded in the 8th century BC and the last recorded fortune-tellings took place in the 4th century AD. People came from all over Europe to ask questions and to hear what the Pythia (in our play called the “Pythoness”) answered. The Pythia was a priestess who was said to be in direct contact with the gods and could pass on their advice to mortals. Archaeologists have found fumes and vapours coming out of the earth on the site of the temple that probably intoxicated the priestess, causing her to utter broken fragments of speech or even speak gibberish. The priests would then interpret and translate the oracle to the questioner. Sacrifices were performed to appease the gods or to get answers. In most cases, it was animals that were killed, often burned, and the priests read from their entrails (especially the liver, as you will see in the play). Sometimes people would also offer money to the gods.

The responses the oracle gave were not plainly “yes” or “no”, however. More common were cryptic utterances which the questioner had to ponder and interpret for himself. That took considerable responsibility and accountability away from the oracle herself and also allowed the helpless mortal to read whatever he liked into that answer. If things turned out badly, however, he could always blame it on the oracle.

Useful link:

[http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/08/0814\\_delphioracle.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2001/08/0814_delphioracle.html)

### **Lesson 2: Greece + Troy, Part I / Agamemnon and Mycenae**

- What do you know about ancient Greece?

- What do you know about the ancient religion (Greek gods)?
- Have you ever heard of the Trojan war?

### **INFO: What Do We Know About Agamemnon?**

Not much is certain about the historical figure of King Agamemnon, nor whether he really lived or did all that is been said about him. A golden mask was discovered when the ruins of the ancient town and palace of Mycenae were excavated in 1874 by Heinrich Schliemann (who also discovered the ruins of Troy); it was claimed – without firm evidence for or against – that this was the funerary mask of Agamemnon. It can be admired today in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens (and online). Several ancient tombs in the vicinity of Mycenae have also been named after members of the house of Atreus, Agamemnon's father. Findings have shown that the town must have been quite rich, even had a plumbing system providing fresh water, and was inhabited for centuries BC. The palace complex is especially spectacular, and perhaps best known for the Lion Gate, with two lions still looking down imperiously at the visitor today. Thus, it is the ideal place for legends which can neither be proven nor disproven.

### **INFO: What Do We Know About Troy?**

Pictorial information and cartoons are in the paper version of this pack.

### **INFO: Map**

#### **Check out**

[http://www.sigmapbooks.gr/maps\\_en\\_enGreece.html](http://www.sigmapbooks.gr/maps_en_enGreece.html)

(a more helpful version of this map is in the paper version of the schools pack)

Possible presentation topics: The Greek Gods (Zeus, Athene, Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis)

### **Lesson 3: Greece + Troy, Part II / The Trojan War**

Possible presentation topics: The Trojan war, Odysseus, Achilles, Helen + Paris

→ Form two groups, the Trojans and the Greeks. In your groups, find arguments for or against the Trojan War. Then have a discussion with three impartial judges who will decide whether the Greeks should attack Troy!

### **Lesson 4: Greek drama + the Chorus**

Possible presentation topics:

Greek tragedy (+ famous examples: *Oedipus*, *Antigone*, *Medea*)

Theatre in ancient Greece (the *skene*, *deus ex machina*, how many actors, the use of masks, the chorus...)

- What is different to contemporary theatre?

### **INFO: The Chorus in ancient Greek drama**

The Chorus is an essential part in the drama of ancient Greece. It consisted of up to fifty performers who were to act in unison, sing and dance. Its main function in the plays from that era is to comment on events. Therefore, it creates a connection between the events and the audience since additional explanations or viewpoints are presented to the latter. In many cases, the chorus represents certain moral and cultural standards of society. As an "ideal spectator" it also utters its opinion, often giving a voice to common Greek people: acting as the *vox humana*, the human voice, in contrast to the anger of the gods and the megalomaniac protagonists. In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the chorus represents Corinthian women, while in *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus it comprises the elder men of Argos. "The Chorus rejoiced in the triumph of good; it wailed aloud its grief, and sympathised with the woe of the puppets of the gods. It entered deeply into the interest of their fortunes and misfortunes, yet it stood apart, outside of triumph and failure" (Lauchlan Mecleon Watt). Unfortunately, the chorus takes part in the action only very rarely. Its warnings or cheers scarcely reach the protagonists or change the prophesied action.

In addition to its commenting role, the chorus has some practical and structural functions. Firstly, it helps the author to emphasise some elements of the play and to play down others. It can alter the pace of a scene or create a certain atmosphere. Secondly, it is important to know that theatre in ancient Greece included never more than three principal actors, who played various roles each. The chorus was needed not only to help the audience to identify the various characters, but also to entertain the spectators in the breaks which the actors needed to change their costumes.

<http://krishaamer.com/2008/03/26/function-chorus-greek-drama/>

<http://www.theatrehistory.com/ancient/chorus001.html>

→ Form groups of 4 people. Try to perform the following extract from *The Golden Masque of Agamemnon* together as a chorus. What different ideas do your groups have: movement, distribution of lines, speed, volume, rhythm, working as a unit or individually, contact with or no contact with the audience etc.? What impact does your performance have on your spectators?

"A shout broke the silence of midnight  
Sleepers woke and lay in terror  
A dream was screaming through all the rooms  
Out of the throat of the sleeping Queen  
Out of the throat of Clytemnestra  
She dreamed that she was bearing a child  
But what came out instead was a snake  
She wrapped the snake as if a baby  
Cradled it in her arms and kissed it  
Fed the snake with milk from her breast  
It sank its fangs into her breast  
Blood came out and mixed with the milk  
The snake fed on milk, milk and blood  
Curdling together, forming lumps

This dream crept out of her husband's grave  
The Queen woke screaming, screaming in terror  
Screaming and clawing the wall of her chamber  
Torches were lit throughout the palace  
Till the whole place blazed with light  
And Clytemnestra, the Queen, sat sobbing  
Suddenly terrified of her dead King.  
Fate used her sleeping mouth  
To speak to everyone who could hear  
That the dead are furious for revenge  
Against the murderers... (*Pause.*)"

### **Lesson 5: The Oresteia + The Golden Masque Of Agamemnon**

#### **INFO: Plot summaries**

#### **Aeschylus' *The Oresteia***

*The Oresteia* is a trilogy of tragic dramas written by the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus. It tells the story of the House of Atreus and thereby deals with numerous essential themes, such as theology, justice, politics and blood relationships. The play itself is of great significance: not only does its first performance date back to 458 B.C. but it is also the only complete trilogy of Greek tragedies that has survived to the present day.

*Agamemnon*, the first play of the original trilogy, details the glorious homecoming of the King of Argos from the Trojan War. In the ten years of Agamemnon's absence, his wife Clytemnestra, has started an affair with his cousin, Aegisthus. Enraged by the news that Agamemnon had to sacrifice their daughter Iphigenia in the war and disappointed to see her husband return with another woman, she murders her husband and rules Argos with her lover.

The second play, *Choephoroi*, portrays the reunion of two of Agamemnon's remaining offspring, his daughter Electra and his son Orestes. In order to avenge his father's death, Orestes slays both his mother Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus. In the following, the guilt-wracked Orestes begins to be viciously chased by the female incarnations of his mother's curse, the Furies. Maddened by his own evil deeds and the inability of self-justification, he finally flees from the scene of murder.

Finally, in the third play entitled *The Eumenides*, Orestes follows the advice of the oracle of Delphi and travels to Athens to face a trial for his matricide. The trial is led by the goddess of Athena with the Furies as the accusers and Apollo as his advocate. Every party finally gets to tell their side of the story, but how is Athena going to decide who is right and who is wrong – and will Orestes ever escape the vengeful Furies?

## Differences between the original *Oresteia* and *The Golden Masque of Agamemnon*

- The most prominent difference between the original *Oresteia* and our play – *The Golden Masque*<sup>1</sup> of *Agamemnon* – is the textual division of the story into various different parts. While Aeschylus' *Oresteia* consists of three entire plays, *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroi* and *The Eumenides*, *The Golden Masque*... is one play divided into two acts.
- There is only one Chorus in our play, in contrast to various Choruses in the *Oresteia*.
- The Furies play only a minor role in the original *Oresteia* while they function as an essential part of our play.

### INFO: Thumbnail Sketches of Major Characters

**Agamemnon**, king of Mycenae and supreme commander of the united Greek army, with the title 'King of Men'. Agamemnon is a central figure in the war upon Troy, its beginnings, and its repercussions. If anything or anyone stands in the way of his goals, he takes them for an obstacle that needs to be dealt with, violently if necessary. As with all major tragic figures in Greek drama, Agamemnon is an all-too-willing victim of *hubris*, or excessive pride: his belief, one might say blind faith, is that he is but an extension of the hands and the will of the gods. That equips him with an efficiency that makes for loyal followers... and determined enemies. In *The Golden Masque of Agamemnon*, the larger-than-life king bows to an outrageous command of the gods, leading to his ten year war against the Trojans – and to his final downfall.

**Clytemnestra**, wife of Agamemnon and queen of Argos. King Agamemnon killed her first husband and their child in order to take her as his wife, treating her as little better than a possession. Unsurprisingly, they never led a happy married life, but when she gets to know that Agamemnon sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia to persuade the gods to provide a fair wind for the fleet to sail for Troy, all the bottled-up hatred she has felt for him over the years suddenly erupts. Together with her lover, Aegisthus, she develops the plan to murder her husband in order to avenge her beloved daughter's death. Consumed by her scorn for Agamemnon, Clytemnestra fails to realise that by killing him, she will stir up the wrath of her children and people, which eventually has disastrous consequences for her own life.

**Orestes**, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra; brother of Electra, Chrysothemis and Iphigenia. On the day of his father's planned return from Troy, Orestes' mother sends him away to Phocia for education purposes, where he meets his future best friend Pylades and finds out that his mother murdered his father. Seven years later, he returns to Mycenae with a difficult task given to him by the oracle of Delphi: to kill his own mother, Clytemnestra, and her lover Aegisthus. However, he knows that killing his mother is an unforgiveable crime that will certainly result in his being pursued by the vicious Furies for the rest of his life; his only chance not to get torn apart by them is to never feel any kind of doubt about his previous actions. Desperately looking for the right thing to do, he sets out to seek Apollo's advice. But how will Orestes decide in the end?

**Iphigenia**, daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon; sister of Orestes, Electra and Chrysothemis. Iphigenia and her siblings spent the majority of their childhood with their nurse, Cilissa, as their mother, Clytemnestra, was too preoccupied with thoughts of revenge to properly look after them, and their father was too preoccupied with boosting his standing among his fellow-Greek kings. On the day of her supposed marriage to the handsome and respectable

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<sup>1</sup> What IS a *masque*? How does it differ from a *mask*? Can you come up with any suggestions why the author chose *masque*, and not *mask*?

Achilles, she discovers that her father, Agamemnon, intends to sacrifice her to the gods instead of persuade them to grant him the right wind to blow his ships to Troy. When Calchas, the high priest, raises the knife to go through with Agamemnon's plan of killing her, everything turns black. The future of this innocent young girl is yet to be decided.

**Electra**, daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra; sister of Electra, Chrysothemis and Orestes. The young princess is banned from the royal palace after the death of Agamemnon, marrying a poor local. She desperately wants to avenge the death of her beloved father by achieving the death of her mother, Clytemnestra. All her hopes are pinned on her brother, Orestes, and the time when he finally returns from Phocia. Her naive, defiant and rather delusional way of thinking leads her to believe that her fate must be to kill her mother.

**Cassandra**, daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba of Troy. When the god Apollo wanted her as his lover, he bestowed upon her the great gift of prophecy. However, because Cassandra refused to be his lover, Apollo cursed her so that nobody ever actually believes her prophecies. Although she sees what havoc will happen next and tries to warn the people around her accordingly, she is perceived as mad by everyone and her prophecies are dismissed as being the product of a deranged mind. After Agamemnon wins the war in Troy, he takes Cassandra home as his mistress, which only fuels the growing hatred of his wife, Clytemnestra. Once Cassandra foresees her own death, she tries to fight it, but will her prophecy come true or is it just another 'deranged' misperception on her part?

**Calchas**, priest of Apollo, is no normal priest. He is slightly crippled and therefore rather unattractive, has symbols painted on his body, and takes strong hallucinogenic drugs to enable him to communicate with the god, which often leaves him in a drug-induced trance. However, he also possesses great power because of this ability to communicate with the gods, putting him in an elevated social position. He has prophesied to Agamemnon about the latter's future victory over Troy, but nevertheless, Agamemnon is slightly repulsed and afraid of him and the news he might deliver. In general, Calchas is a very self-involved creature as he only seeks to protect himself and to live in the most comfortable life possible – seen in the fact that he, a Trojan, deserted to the Greeks when Apollo originally warned him that Troy would fall to the Greeks. Thus, when the chance arises to kill the young Iphigenia to help her father to sail for Troy, he does not hesitate to take action.

**Thybius** (a.k.a. Talthybius) holds a highly ambiguous position in the play. On the one hand, he is Agamemnon's squire, his servant, carrying out any jobs the king wants performed: Agamemnon relies on him, tells him secrets, keeps him around and trusts him with much very dangerous knowledge, although he is probably aware of the fact that Thybius does not always approve of his actions. On the other hand, he also functions as the omniscient narrator of the whole play, providing interesting background information, commenting sometimes sympathetically but more usually sarcastically on the people and actions in the play and, at times, even mocking other characters. In cooperation with the Chorus, he usually knows exactly what is going to happen next and is able to jump in and out of scenes to talk to the characters and/or the audience. His position allows him to ridicule the numerous religious ceremonies as well as pious activities on stage without ever undermining his role as the official squire of the king. His ideas of morality change somewhat whenever he feels it is necessary. Since he already knows the outcome of everything, he can afford to take things less seriously than the rest of his fellow characters.

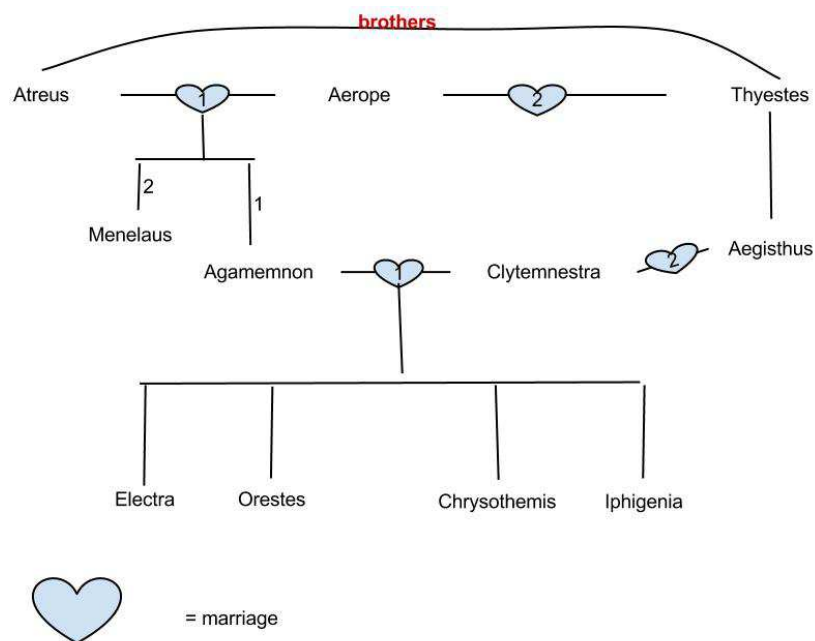
**The Chorus** is narrowed down to four characters – Althaea, Macaria, Alcmene and Polydora. These four women will be found in each and every scene. Moreover, they will, together with Thybius, guide the audience throughout the entire evening. However, they also function as his counterpart and are always trying to push the action. Even though the Chorus appears to be manipulative, it is very musical at the same time and creates various special moments. Simple but impressive instruments along with chants and dances will enrich the evening and show the

variety of these four characters, individually and as a tight-knit group, in support of the story telling. They are the Everyman (or Everywoman) of our tale: after all the important characters are long turned to dust, the Chorus and the Thybiuses of this world will live on... and on... from age to age.

**The Pythoness** is a priestess who functions as the voice of Apollo. She acts as the connection between the gods and the human characters, putting the god's wishes in motion, although she always offers choices instead of commands. She does not have any actual motivation of her own and is merely a pawn of the gods. The Pythoness always appears when necessary and sets things in motion with her prophecies. However, she usually disappears as quickly as she has appeared, often leaving the rest of the characters confused and conflicted.

**The Furies** are spirits of punishment who pitilessly avenge wrongs done to family members and especially murder within the family. They hate humans, especially since they themselves can no longer enjoy the life that they see humans leading. In many ways, therefore, they are the antithesis to the Chorus. It is not a good idea to do anything that causes the gods to set the Furies on you...

### INFO: The House of Atreus



### A Trail of Blood: Who Kills Whom?

- Thyestes takes Aerope from her rightful husband, his brother Atreus
- Atreus murders two of Thyestes' sons and serves them to his brother (i.e. their father) in a pie to take revenge
- Aegisthus (the remaining son of Thyestes) kills Atreus (his uncle) to avenge his brothers
- Agamemnon kills Clytemnestra's first husband and their child to marry her himself
- Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigenia for a wind to Troy



- f) Clytemnestra and Aegisthus kill Agamemnon to avenge Iphigenia (and Thyestes)
- g) Orestes kills Clytemnestra and Aegisthus to avenge Agamemnon
- h) Orestes kills Aegisthus' son, Aletes, to prevent him seeking to avenge his father's death by killing Orestes
  - Can a tragic play about murder and revenge be interesting to you? Is there any relevance for our lives today? Aren't we far too civilised for all this – totally superior morally?

### **INFO: Curse on the House of Atreus**

The curse on the house of Atreus goes back even further in time. It started with Atreus' grandfather (which would be Agamemnon's great-grandfather) Tantalus. To test the omniscience of the gods, he cooked his son Pelops (hear, hear, cooked children again) and served it to them. Unfortunately, the almighty gods discovered his plan and cursed him and his family. They banished him to the underworld where he had to stand in a pool of water under the branches of a fruit tree for all eternity. Sounds pleasant? Whenever he would reach for the fruits, the branches would rise out of reach and whenever he would try to hold water with his hands, the water would flow away. Pelops was revived by the gods to continue the curse on the whole family which said that every generation there would be someone killing another family member, thus increasing the guilt and adding to a long line of blood and death.

Pelops married Hippodamia after killing her father in a chariot race, which he won of course. He killed his helper Myrtilus (for varying reasons) who cursed him, dying, thus adding another curse to the house of Atreus. Well done.

The story of Pelops' sons Atreus and Thyestes will be explained in full during the play (the short version can be seen above) but be assured that it contained even more cursing.

Five generations after Tantalus, Orestes finally manage to put an end to the curse (by first doing a bit more killing, naturally...).

<http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/houseofatreus.htm>

## Preparing to attend a performance

### Discussion points

#### 1. Before the performance:

- What do you expect of a play set in ancient Greece? What could the costumes be like? Will it be funny, boring, sad, trying to teach you something?
- The gods and the Furies: how do you think they will appear, speak and move?
- From what you have discovered about the Trojan War, are there any figures about whom you already feel positive OR negative?

#### 2. During the performance:

- Make mental notes about the use of costumes & make-up, music & rhythm, sound effects & lighting, and masks...
- Think of questions you might want to ask the actors in the question-&-answer session after the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday performances

- If you can (it's not easy!), keep a mental track of how your feelings change towards the various characters as the story unfolds.

### **Lesson 6: After the performance**

- Who are the protagonists? Who is the hero, who is the anti-hero (indeed, can one reduce the story to such terms)?
- Now that you are familiar with the story and have been able to see the characters in action, have your feelings changed towards any of the major people? For example, to what extent do you feel the following were justified in what they did:
  - Agamemnon?
  - Clytemnestra?
  - Orestes?
- Think about reporters 'embedded' with military forces in today's wars. If you were a war correspondent at the time of our story and could have stopped the action of the play at any point for an exclusive interview, where would you have stopped it, whom would you have interviewed, and why?
- Was the performance as you expected it to be? Did anything surprise you? What/how?
- Masks: why, where, how, effects?
- Costumes and make-up: why, where, how, effects? Helpful? Distracting?
- Music: Why, how, where? Did it seem familiar or strange? Why/how? How did it help? Was there any point when you felt it inappropriate?
- The Chorus: "We're such *little* people", one of them says at one point. Now that you have experienced the Chorus in action, what do you feel would be lost if they were not in the play – if we had just Thybius as narrator to guide us through the action?
- Why is Greek tragedy so popular today (think of various plays, the film *Troy* with Brad Pitt, etc.)?
- Moving away from actual names, draw up a list of the kind of characters we have in the story of Agamemnon and Troy (e.g. different types of leader figure (what types?); advisors; powerful women etc.). Think of some of the recent major films and books that are NOT set in ancient Greece; then, taking your list, track whether they also have these same kinds of character – whether modern writing and film-making continues the tradition found in epic tales from ancient Greek myth and legend.  
(If you are familiar with another contemporary culture, do the same for that culture!)