Fall 2020 Honors Seminar

Sex and Gender in Greek Tragedy  Dr. Robert Davis  
THEA_UT 801.003 – 4 Credits Tuesdays 3:30-6:10

When Athens became a democracy in the 6th century BCE, it immediately excluded women from public life. Over the next century, the city created Greek tragedy, the earliest known Western dramatic form. At the heart of ancient theatre is a troubling contradiction: it was written by men, performed by men, for an audience of men, but it was obsessed with women. Did the Greeks portray evil women to demonize them? Or did they secretly want to be more like these women? This class will delve into ancient theories of sex and gender to look at how Greek theatre reinforced or challenged stereotypes and norms. We will look at women in plays as well as in Greek society, from priestesses to prostitutes and trace their influence on theatre today.

Students will read plays like Medea, The Oresteia, and others alongside ancient medical texts, poetry, and philosophy to understand the gender politics and dynamics of classic theatre. Particular interest will be given to how tragedy represents women who draw strength from their emotions, whether for violence, justice, or power. Be prepared for axe murders, power grabs, poisonings, bloody revenge, and the social consequences of female rage. Since authors in subsequent centuries have been using and rewriting these stories, we will also analyze productions of tragedy from the ancient world to today.