

Agamemnon for At-Risk Teens

*An Ancient Classic
Delivers Relevance
and Rigor*

By Rick Ayers

“Dear Gods, set me free from all the pain,” declares the watchman at the beginning of *Agamemnon*, setting the stage for a most dreadful story, one that confronts us brutally with the horrors of death and a life filled with wrong choices.

I began to wonder if this was the right way to start my 11th-grade World Literature class. Yes, *Agamemnon*, the first play in the trilogy *The Oresteia*, is a classic and would set a great benchmark for the year. And the local theater, the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, was planning to present the whole trilogy in the spring.

But this was going to be a hard ride. The junior class of Communication Arts and Sciences (CAS) was coming to me with a bad reputation. They were the “problem” class, the ones who drove their freshman teacher crazy, who inspired others to try to get out of teaching them. In our diverse high school, it was also the class with the highest number of working-class kids and “at-risk” kids and the lowest level of literacy and academic preparation. The majority of the kids were African American, which made this class more like the “urban” side of Berkeley as opposed to the “suburban” population.

Could we really jump off with a story about a warrior king returning from Troy and being slaughtered by his wife and her lover, with the subsequent revenge killings by the cursed couple’s son with the aid of his sister? I have always been an advocate of more texts by authors of color, always coming down against the “dead white men” curriculum in the canonical debate. Still, it turned out that many of the classics were not a “bitter medicine” that had to be swal-

lowed; for one thing, they’re filled with appealing topics like sex and violence. People who talk about the corrupting influence of rap lyrics and violent movies ought to take a gander at the Greeks. And the classics were not exercises in bowing to authority. The Greeks were above all doubtful, suspicious, and critical of authority. I did not believe this class needed to be confined to tales of ghetto heroism and tragedy. We could travel back 2,500 years and 4,500 miles to some of the foundational works of Western civilization and find relevant and powerful tales.

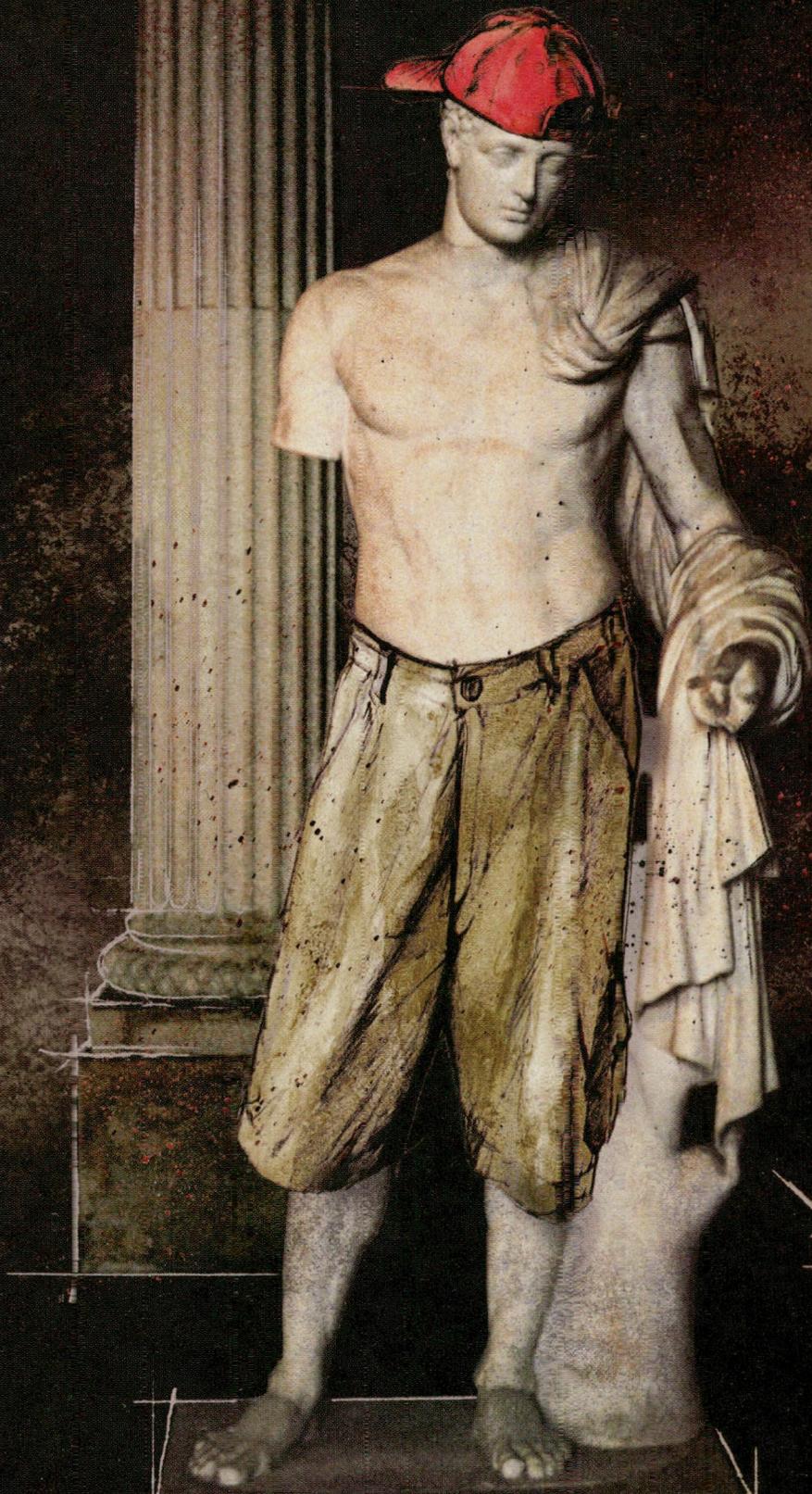
Robert Fagles, in the introduction to his 1975 translation, declares that “*The Oresteia* is our rite of passage from savagery to civilization.” Yes, in fact, it is the story of the first democratic court system. In this trilogy, a seemingly endless cycle of violence is plaguing the House of Atreus, with one revenge killing following after another. Finally, wise Athena, patron goddess of Athens, comes down and declares it is time for brute force to step aside. Both sides of the blood feud will argue their cases. But here’s the real twist. It is neither she nor Zeus who will decide. A jury from the audience will be impaneled (an early case of audience participation) and judge the case. Suddenly in *The Eumenides*, the third installment of the trilogy, the play changes from a gore fest to a courtroom drama. What a revelation. We don’t have to slaughter each other. There is a way out.

This was the secular urge of the Greeks in its full glory. They would rely neither on the gods nor on brute force to settle things. No, reason and persuasion would decide the case. And we would be freed of the need for more killing, more revenge, and more horror. This was a way in, and I saw the way we would work in relevance to the students’ lives. I read the play, making marks and noting themes. But I still did not grasp the play in all its resonance. That would wait until the class began reading it aloud together.

The Cycle of Revenge

By the second day of class, we had begun reading *Agamemnon*. I’m always anxious to start reading aloud together and encounter whatever difficulties and confusions come up.

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ΟΡΕΣΤΕΙΑ

So we plunged in, beginning to work our way along the Eagles translation—just noble enough but also accessible. The animal imagery jumped out at the students. The chorus describes the two commanders of the Greek forces, the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus, as twin eagles, fierce and merciless. In fact, the chorus describes the vision of a seer, who spied two eagles swooping down and tearing open a pregnant hare, scattering her unborn babes on the ground in a bloody mess. “Eew,” exclaimed Angela, throwing back her tie-dyed scarf, “how gross.” Gross, yes indeed, but all I could think of with a certain amount of glee was, *it’s going to get much worse*.

They had yet to encounter the flashback, the story of how Atreus, the twin kings’ father, brought a curse on his house by engaging in a quarrel with his brother Thyestes and one day serving him a dinner in which he had cooked up Thyestes’ own children in a stew. They were captivated by the tale—this was no longer obscure Greek literature but an over-the-top horror story.

Now that they were involved with the play, the problem statement—the overriding issue—made its appearance. It seemed that all the horror was tied to an endless cycle of revenge. And teenagers know this paradigm only too well. How many times have the adults broken up futile fights and confrontations only to have the participants complain, “Well, he did this to me first,” or “But she did that to my sister.” Somehow payback was reason enough to do something stupid. Maybe Aeschylus could help us think about this pattern and how to break it. After all, the doomed people in the House of Atreus had plenty to be angry about, far more than a playground slight.

The main action of *Agamemnon* is that queen Clytemnestra kills her husband on his arrival back, victorious, from the Trojan War. Agamemnon was a leader of the Greek coalition fighting against the Trojans and has fought for 10 long years, only to be cut down the day he arrives home. Why the murder? Well, Clytemnestra was upset, to say the least, that her husband had sacrificed their beautiful teenage daughter, Iphigenia, to secure a safe ocean passage on the eve of the war. Then again, she also has a motive for killing Agamemnon’s new concubine, Cassandra, and installing her own paramour as the king. In the next play, *The Libation Bearers*, Agamemnon’s daughter and son, Electra and Orestes, avenge their father’s murder by killing Clytemnestra. In *The Eumenides*, Clytemnestra’s ghost and the avenging earth goddesses (the Furies) come after Orestes to kill him in vengeance for the matricide. Here, wise Athena intervenes and sets up a tribunal to stop the cycle of violence and determine a final and just resolution.

As we were reading the first pages, I gave the students the assignment to write a personal reflection. They were to tell a story, a narrative, about an example of a cycle of revenge—how people behave in loyalty to their own group by getting back at, and revenge on, the “outsider” or “other” group.

One of my students, Francisco, was always quiet and seldom responded to writing assignments. He came to class regularly but stayed out of discussions—sitting in the back

with his Dickies work pants, clean pressed white T-shirt, and short hair slicked straight back. This time he handed in something right away, and he was clearly in touch with the danger in the theme. He wrote,

The cycle of revenge is an extremely dangerous thing to be part of, and it has a lot of consequences for you and even your family. The Norteños and Sureños live the cycle of violence and revenge every day. The cycle never ends. It keeps going back and forth. Both sides are living the life of [*The Oresteia*].

The Norteños and Sureños can be extremely powerful when it comes to violence and revenge. There is this saying by the Norteños, “You take out one of ours, we take out 10 of yours.”

“And I say rush in now, catch them red-handed, butchery running on their blades.” I chose this quote [from *Agamemnon*] because many Sureños and Norteños get caught red-handed in their rivals’ turf. Some get caught red-handed by going to, and tagging on, their rivals’ turf. They can also get caught (slippin’) just being on your rivals’ turf. This happened to a lot of my friends. I heard stories of them getting jumped, stabbed, and shot by rivals. They also went back for payback, but they never think of the consequences. While getting paid back, sometimes the rivals come back and sometimes they don’t. But they come back some day, the cycle just never ends.

The stuff we were dealing with was real. Francisco dug right into the sense of futility and frustration engendered by the cycle of violence in his life and found pieces of Aeschylus’s writing that spoke directly to him. I only hoped that he could stay with it through all three plays, with the resolution, the breaking of the cycle, and the achievement of peace and a just society. Was it possible that he would be able to apply the Greek solution in West Berkeley?

Aysha, the slam poet and African-American radical of the class, took Francisco’s point, written in the privacy of his paper, and brought it into the discussion in the classroom. How do we understand revenge, even with kids on the playground? Is this something called human nature, or are we taught to do it? And isn’t revenge sometimes justified—either to teach the wrongdoer or to gain some satisfaction? But who is the wronged one? There always seem to be eight sides to every story.

Big thoughts, and, yes, Francisco and Aysha were right into them. The class was engaged, and I was holding my breath, hoping we could continue to surf this wave of interest.

Something about reading together, aloud, made all these new and fascinating connections jump out. Whereas academics read with a cool eye, high school students are fiercely present, always looking for the powerful connection to their lives. Aeschylus, the playwright, made them question their choices and their pride, made them wonder about impulsive actions and moderation, and made them consider the wisdom of their elders less dismissively.

We talked about theater, then and now. The earliest Greek theater festivals took place at the feast of Dionysus, the annual celebration of the harvest and wine, licentiousness, debauchery, wildness, and the unbridled id. The students were fascinated to hear about the tragedy competitions. Who says poetry is sullied by competition for money in slams? Such competition was good enough to create Aeschylus and Sophocles—not bad company. And of course each set of three tragedies was coupled with a comedy and a Satyr play.



The latter, a wild physical comedy filled with sexual parading (how about those six-foot-long phalluses for a theater?), are always fascinating to high school students. We never, of course, stage such plays as part of our appreciation of Greek culture.

We were drawn into a long discussion about gender, especially as we read *Agamemnon*, the story of the murderous wife. The chorus tells a flashback tale in which the goddess Artemis requires the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's beautiful 13 year-old daughter, for the storms to abate, and for the Greek ships to have smooth sailing to Troy. Aeschylus does not spare us the disgusting details. It's all there, the girl screaming, a gag stuffed in her mouth, her clothes torn off, her arms and legs bound, then the carving and the blood. And with his commitment to the requirement of war—a task of state, “men’s work”—Agamemnon has violated the laws of home, hearth, the center of life, and “women’s rights.”

The chorus, recounting the house gossip, laments, “A father’s hands are stained, blood of a young girl streaks the altar. Pain both ways and what is worse? Desert the fleets, fail the alliance? No, but stop the winds with a virgin’s blood? Feed their lust, their fury? Feed their fury! Law is law! Let all go well!” (I. 210).

So as we were reading, a new theme emerged—the men versus the women, the question of patriarchy. According to

one reading, *The Oresteia* explains that women’s power (represented by Clytemnestra, as well as her earth goddesses, the Furies) must be overthrown—even if it is painful—for civilization to be established. In this play we see the struggle between the old, the communal, and the tribal society and the new imperial civilization of the polis. Just as the old earth goddesses, Gaia and the Furies, were overthrown by the Olympians Zeus and Apollo, so the mother-right must be overthrown for the men to carry out their imperial tasks.

But that neat story doesn’t quite do justice to the unruly forces at work here. Clytemnestra’s adultery, her maternal attachment to Iphigenia, and her murderous fury point to different directions, at least to modern ears.

There is something frightening in the women of *The Oresteia*. It is as if the men are afraid of the very passion, the very sexuality, of the women, and these must be controlled and repressed. Angela and Aysha pick up on this. Aeschylus even leveled the accusation that a strong woman, one who resists the sacrifice of her daughter, is not feminine enough. After Clytemnestra’s first speech, the chorus leader remarks, “spoken like a man, my lady.” Maybe she’s not so bad, the students argued; maybe she has a grievance that no one will listen to. How would the play look if a woman had written it?

And most strikingly to me, we grappled with death.

When Agamemnon returns victorious, Clytemnestra urges him to enter the palace by walking on the red tapestry, a long, embroidered royal rug she has prepared for him. In words rife with double meaning (foreshadowing the blood of Agamemnon that is about to flow), she says, as she rolls out the tapestry, “Let the red stream flow and bear him home to the home he never hoped to see—Justice lead him in” (I. 904). Agamemnon is anxious, not sure he should step on such a beautiful tapestry, afraid such an act would be too proud, too risky. He says, “What am I, some barbarian peacocking out of Asia? Never cross my paths with robes and draw the lightning [never deck me out like a god and attract the wrath, and lightning, of Zeus]. Never, only the gods deserve the pomps of honor” (I. 915). The comment on the “barbarian peacocking” refers to Mongol and Persian warriors who dressed in all their finery, with full makeup, when going to war.

Here, Clytemnestra has her way. With a combination of bullying and flattery, she persuades Agamemnon to go against his better judgment and act like a god. Ah, then his downfall is sealed. He steps out of his chariot onto the red tapestry, walks into his house, and is slaughtered in the bathtub by his wife.

At this point, the dramatic irony, as well as personal recognition became real for the class. Anthony remarked, “Yes, you can always try to avoid this error or that error. But we are human. We never know the future or what effect will be created by this or that action. So we are doomed to making the tragic error. Only the powerful ones, the arrogant ones, make the error in a big, loud, public way.”

The class seemed to resist the play. “Why is there so much death, so much slaughter in these things?” intoned Aysha. “Why is Western literature always about killing, suicide, and despair?”

"I'm not sure," I backpedaled. "Maybe it's because it would be boring to have a simply happy story, two people falling in love, walking off into the sunset, and living happily ever after. Where's the fun in that?" But there was more.

Jesse challenged me: "These guys are obsessed with death. Why?"

I wondered too. Maybe they knew death more intimately. Maybe we should too. Perhaps our sanitized lives, I suggested, where the infirm are sent away to die in isolation, allow us to live in denial. People gather in the theater and weep over the most extreme situations as a way of facing the terror of inevitable death together.

From a modern sensibility, the terror at our mortality, at our being lost to the world, is an existential crisis. It is the story of death, of how we face it or turn away from it. The Greek tragedies make us take a good long look at our mortality. Maybe on other days, engrossed in workaday trivialities, we don't think about death. But when we are most in touch with it, most aware, we look into the yawning abyss, and we quake. The class agreed to read on, this time with a bit less bravado.

Clytemnestra crows about her power and her husband's household, declaring her pride and hubris without hesitation. "Our lives are based on wealth, my king, the gods have seen to that ... and you are Zeus when Zeus tramples the bitter virgin grapes" (II. 96off). But the chorus is still frightened, still worried. "Stark terror whirls the brain and the end is coming, Justice comes to birth" (I. 998). The old men fear the specific horror about to happen but also bemoan the fate of all mortals, what Unamuno called the tragic sense of life, the fact that we must die: "But a man's life-blood is dark and mortal. Once it wets the earth, what song can sing it back?" (I. 1018).

Then Clytemnestra tries to entice Cassandra (Agamemnon's mistress and war captive, the daughter of Troy's Priam) to follow Agamemnon into the house. Cassandra is silent, and Clytemnestra quickly tires of trying to engage her and leaves. The chorus leader then speaks to Cassandra, trying to show pity and concern. Cassandra, however, was given the power of prophecy by Apollo and dreads going inside. Her first words are a half-mad scream, "Aieeeee! Earth—Mother—Curse of the Earth—Apollo, Apollo!" (I. 1071). She speaks with the leader, always emitting sharp cries and visions of the future as well as the past of the House of Atreus. This dramatic scene has Cassandra pitching herself around onstage, seeing the horrors of the future. "She is the snare," she cries, referring to Clytemnestra, "the bedmate, death mate, murder's strong right arm!" (I. 1117).

The chorus is confused by all of this and doubts the veracity of her words. Cassandra raises another concern of the Greeks that is familiar in our postmodern consciousness: What is true, what can we really know? The gods name things, and their words are true, but what words are we mortals to believe? "What good are the oracles to men? Words, more words, and the hurt comes on us, endless words and a seer's techniques have brought us terror and the truth" (I. 1135). Cassandra's vision becomes even more opaque, more surreal. She screams, "Flare up once more, my oracle!" and then she conjures a vision from hell, of dancing

Furies, legions of men killed in battle, blood for blood. She then describes, in horrendous detail, the feast at which Atreus (Agamemnon's father) served his unsuspecting brother Aegisthus his own children in a stew.

Cassandra predicts her own death but also knows that Orestes will return and kill Clytemnestra and her lover. "There will come another to avenge us, born to kill his mother, born his father's champion" (I. 1302). The leader asks the same question the students asked: "If you see it coming clearly, how can you go to your own death, like a beast to the altar driven on by god, and hold your head so high?" (I. 1320). Cassandra explains that her time has come, and it is best to go out with honor. She enters the house, where she smells death. She ends her time on-stage with an evocation of the existential dilemma: "Oh men, your destiny. When all is well the shadow can overturn it. When trouble comes, a stroke of the wet sponge, and the picture's blotted out. And that, I think, that breaks the heart" (I. 1350).

I asked students to do a freewrite on what they felt they had learned about Greek culture and values. Angela wrote:

Greek culture. Intense. If I lived there then, well, I guess I wouldn't live for very long unless I set up a mafia or something....

Greeks, if they saw so much death, why didn't they just stop? Clytemnestra killed because her daughter was murdered, but then to save her own neck she would have killed another one of her children (Orestes). Make any sense? No. Neither do the Greeks.

A culture based on love and hate, revenge, ruled by Zeus, whose servants are women. The men rule over everything, like dogs gone wild, killing whatever gets in their way. People have others as property, and the more property you have the better the people fight over property and power. And love and hate and lust. Life is a death sentence if you are in the family of Agamemnon.

It's a tradition, a traditional curse that falls upon houses struggling with one another for the power to be in control.

Death reaches people so extremely that that is all they can see. Death for death, life for life.

Well, gosh, I thought, maybe I have been having a different experience with these plays than the students. The Greek tragedies are painful, ghastly really. And many students commented that the Greeks seem to be reveling in death and destruction. Have I been teaching this stuff wrong? What about the soaring insights of the Greek concept of love? What about the noble ideas of humanism and science? Does it look to the class like a deadly world of mafia terror?

But when I looked further at Angela's wonderful reflection, written in a few minutes, I wondered. The tragedian has succeeded in weaving a picture of desperation, of despair, of the terrible downfall that mortals suffer. It is a world in which "men rule over everything, like dogs," and they fight over property and power. Well, this wasn't so unfamiliar. The dog reference fit, too, because some of these plays demonstrate the dangers of an unchecked id, the violence and selfishness of desire.

I am older and, at least by degree, closer to death. So I contemplate these things, the existential black hole we peer into, wondering if it does end in dust. Teenagers are famous

for living in an eternal present, seemingly immortal. But in reality they think about death all the time; they are just reaching the age where they can wonder deeply about it. Sometimes, perhaps, they want to look death in the eye and challenge it. Even though we adults shake our fingers at them and remind them of the dangers of fast cars, AIDS, violence, and cigarettes, sometimes they take these risks precisely to face down death, to dance with it, to challenge it, and sometimes to embrace it.

So Aeschylus has ground Angela's face in some pretty terrible thoughts. Great literature takes these thoughts out of the secret recesses of the mind and makes us take a good, hard look at them.

But on second thought, I could see that the Greeks had taken Angela somewhere else. They had made her cry out (as Athena does), "When does it all stop, the killing, the tragedy, the cycle of revenge? Who is the one with the strength to stop it?" Yes, that's the question. And she couldn't have done a better job of setting up *The Eumenides*, the denouement of the trilogy, the resolution of the cycle of revenge. For Athena calls a tribunal composed of a jury of mortal citizens to review the various crimes (complete with a prosecutor and a defense attorney, like an Olympian version of the TV show *The Practice*). And we put an end to the violence. We establish order and civilization and human rights.

No, we do not escape the horrors of death. Part of the story is the encounter with mortality and a search for order and peace and love.

By the end of October, we had finished with the plays and had moved on to other works, other texts, other discussions. But the story of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and the whole cursed House of Atreus remained as a reference point for the rest of the year. When we were studying Latin America, we dove into the magical realism of Pablo Neruda's poetry as well as the small Mexican novel *Esperanza's Box of Saints*, by María Amparo Escandón. This was far from the Greeks, to be sure, but again we encountered cycles of revenge, the women's critique of patriarchal power, and the grand mystery of death.

Seeing *The Oresteia* Onstage

The Berkeley Repertory Theatre presented Aeschylus's masterpiece a few months later. When *Agamemnon* finally opened, we were thrilled to be in the first student audience to attend the play. This play was performed at the new stage that the Rep had built, which they were inaugurating with the oldest surviving play. They performed the first tragedy on its own, and a week later they presented the other two, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*.

When the day of the performance finally came, the whole class was excited. For students at a big school like Berkeley High, just getting off the campus is a treat. Yes, it was going to be a big old Greek tragedy, but they were ready, they knew what to expect. Except that they didn't, since the actors and directors impart so much to the performance.

We had gone over some of the main discussions, reread a few final papers, and discussed what to expect before heading to the theater.

The students filed into the new theater, a large venue with soaring seats that made everyone feel close to the front. The whole front of the stage was covered by a massive stone wall, representing the city of Argos. The students bent together and whispered, "Look, there's the watchman. Remember the beginning?"

As the play progressed, I became delighted with the production. I also kept looking back at the students to see what they were taking in. It was all there: "We must suffer, suffer unto truth"; "Our lives are pain, what part not come from god?"; "Words, endless words I've said to serve the moment—now it makes me proud to tell the truth"; "Call no man blest until he ends his life in peace, fulfilled."

The only thing the students could not abide was the depiction of Cassandra. She was the seer, a visionary who was cursed with the fact that no one would believe her. She was also a bit mad, a wild and crazy spectacle. And I had been told she would be completely naked onstage. When she emerged, the students were shocked and angry, but not by the nudity, which became secondary. No, what bothered them was how horrid, filthy, disheveled, and "torn up" Cassandra looked. They were expecting to see a brilliant seer, a beautiful concubine of Agamemnon, the sister of Helen. Instead, Cassandra looked like a refugee from the schizophrenic ward in the movie *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. The students looked scandalized.

Of course, the nudity was the director's choice. Cassandra staggered, bellowed, and screamed. The students, in turn, squirmed and mumbled ("Oh, no, that ain't right," one of them said). Well, they were learning; that is part of the theatergoing experience. You interact with what's onstage. You like one thing but don't like something else. Personally, I loved it and fought back tears through the whole ending—tears at the horror and beauty of it and at being there with a group of 16- and 17-year-olds taking in the whole spectacle.

When the final curtain came down, we heard thundering applause. Students clapped, stood up, laughed. Many had never been at a performance like this and were delighted to see the actors come back onstage, in their own identities now, smiling at the audience, applauding back, and taking bows in pairs, individually, and as an ensemble. *A good curtain call always makes a good play greater*, I thought.

But the real experience of those CAS juniors and *The Oresteia* was not that we could bring the classics to a group of diverse students. It was that a diversity of students could come to *The Oresteia* and bring everything—their concerns, their anger, their brilliance—and make it real and important, the way theater is supposed to be. The classics are not ossified, but our notion of how to teach them often is.

My experience with this group of students and *The Oresteia* convinced me that great literature is timeless not because it is inaccessible, but precisely because each audience, each generation, makes compelling meaning of the piece. And I'm certain that any students, from any background, can derive rich and important experiences from such works if he or she can get with the right group—a classroom, a family, or friends—to voyage out and discover the power of literature. □