**Odyssey – Coming Home**

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus returns to Ithaca after ten years fighting at Troy and another ten years struggling to get home. He comes disguised as a beggar and has to suffer his house filled with glutinous suitors vying for the hand of his wife, Penelope. In Book 23, Odysseus finally removes his disguise after defeating the suitors and struggles to reunite with his wife after so long away. This scene is one of the most moving and poignant in ancient literature and can inspire questions about how Americans deal with the issues affecting the returning warrior today.

What happens when a person is trained to fight and kill in the name of his or her country, is exposed to often horrific scenes of destruction, has to deal with inhumane sights and sounds on a daily basis and then returns home to the civilian population? Do we expect veterans to lay their service aside as they enter civilian life, or will they be always changed by their experiences of war? How do we as a society “restore” our warriors, acknowledging and accepting their experiences while welcoming them home? What can civilians learn from the returning veteran about war, and does dialogue with veterans change the way we think about warfare? How can veterans from earlier wars help and advise the recent flood of new veterans returning home and how has battle changed over the years? Is it still fundamentally the same as when the mythological Odysseus sailed on Troy in the Greek Bronze Age?

- **Hercules: The Idea of the Hero**

In Euripides’ play *Heracles* (or Hercules), the most famous of all Greek warriors completes his final mission and returns home. The goddess Hera drives him momentarily insane and in a fit of madness he destroys his own family. In Greek myth, Heracles is constantly denied the solace of a home and family despite his famous martial exploits. Euripides wrote *Heracles* in the midst of the Peloponnesian War, when the Athenians had already suffered years of conflict, plague and deprivation. The play asks its audience to consider the psychological cost that warfare places on its people, both home and away and creates a vivid and extreme demonstration of combat trauma or post-traumatic stress, both upon warriors and the societies within which they live.

This unit will focus on the famous messenger speech of the play - a chilling and moving account of how this great hero went from protecting his family to completely destroying them. The play concludes with the arrival of Theseus, Heracles’ brother in arms, whose comradeship offers a form of restoration from Heracles’ personal destructive hell.

We have come a long way in acknowledging the effects of post-traumatic stress and traumatic brain injury, but do we really understand what was called Shell Shock in WW1 and what was seen as some kind of madness sent by a divinity in Greek literature? We can see the physical injuries suffered by our soldiers but what about the psychological ones? How can civilians better understand veterans who have to deal with some form of PTS? Can these ancient texts tell us anything about the psychological effects of enduring combat?

- **Ajax: The Dilemma of War**

Ajax is the greatest Greek warrior at Troy after Achilles and has served for ten long years. When Achilles is killed in combat, Ajax is not awarded his armor by the other Greeks. Ajax regards this
as an enormous insult by the commanders and feeling dejected and abused he sets out to attack them all. But his plan fails when the goddess Athena deludes him and he sets upon cattle instead of men. When Ajax recovers from his god-sent delusion, sees the carnage he has wrought on the animals and that his attack has failed, he is plunged into a fit of despair, eventually resulting in his suicide, which leaves his family bereft and his soldiers in fear for their lives.

How do we treat those who have served with fairness and justice? This argument extends into the civilian realm as well, where we see the perception that CEOs are receiving multi-million dollar bonuses while ordinary workers are laid off. Scholar and combat veteran, Paul Woodruff calls this the “Ajax Dilemma.” The arguments articulated in Sophocles’ play highlight many of the imbalances that exist both within the military and between the military and civilian populations.

How much responsibility do we have as citizens when our elected governments choose to send our soldiers to war? Should we all share the burden and institute the draft? Ajax commits suicide because he cannot face to live in a world he thinks is unjust. What are the parallels between the grievances of Ajax and those faced by people today? In Sophocles’ Ajax, the man who was awarded the arms, Odysseus, brokers the peace because he witnessed the destruction of Ajax by the gods and learned from that experience that it can happen to anyone. His appeal for calm and empathy saves the Greeks. What role can justice, compassion and moderation play in mediating these disparities today?

**Philoctetes: The Ethics of War**

In Sophocles’ play, Philoctetes, a warrior is abandoned after suffering a debilitating wound while on a mission for the Greeks. Ten years later, those same Greeks find that they need this warrior to end the Trojan War. Philoctetes places the ethics of war at the center of its story. How can one retain a sense of personal ethics while fighting a war? Is one's personal integrity, beliefs and moral compass more important that the strategic aims of an army, or does one have a duty to sometimes set these aside for the common good?

Men and Women at war are asked to test the limits of human mental, physical and sometimes ethical endurance to perform their duties. Sophocles’ play lets these issues unfold in a gripping mythological narrative about a plan to trick the wounded Philoctetes.

War places people beyond the expectations of their cultures. Aquila Theatre has produced a version of Sophocles' play that casts a woman warrior in the role of the long-suffering Philoctetes to highlight some of the issues surrounding women in the military. Today women make up about 20% of the US military and many of them are deployed to combat zones. Over 100 women were killed on active duty in Iraq and Afghanistan and more than 600 were wounded. Currently, there are nearly 70 female generals and admirals serving in our armed services. How did the Greeks deal with women at war and how is the role of women in the military changing today? What about the effects of war upon those left behind at home, husbands and wives, children and parents? How does Greek literature deal with these questions and can we find similar reflections in American culture today?