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21L.001 Foundations of Western Culture: Homer to Dante
Fall 2008

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Close Reading Exercise, due by email 2 days after SES #3

Most readers of Homer's *Iliad* have found Agamemnon an unsympathetic character, in a host of different ways and for a wide range of specific causes. Your assignment is to use the techniques of close reading we've discussed in class as a way of delving more deeply into just who this figure is: the war-leader of the Achaean host, yet in the dramatic architecture of the poem subordinate to Achilles, Hector, and a host of gods and goddesses. Why, precisely, and in what ways can he be read as unsympathetic? Do you agree with such assessments or not, and why? Does his character evolve over the course of the reading to this point? You have the entire first half of the *Iliad* to use as data, though with such a large range of material to explore, you will need to be strategic about which passages you focus on in depth.

Your analytic method will need to consider how all of the elements of close reading we have discussed intersect with what actually happens in the *Iliad*: what Agamemnon does and does not do; says and does not say; and how all of this compares and contrasts with the actions and words of other characters, mortal and divine. Bear in mind that I am an intelligent reader and do not need to be informed of the obvious: that it was foolish of Agamemnon to take Achilles' concubine, for example. Rather I am interested in how the texture of the text – its diction, tone, syntax, and so on – reinforce or complicate Homer's depiction of Agamemnon.

The first draft of this exercise that is due on Friday does not need to be a sustained, coherent literary argument about Agamemnon's character (though the revised version due two weeks later does, so any progress you can make toward such a document is all to the good). At this stage I am most interested in – read: will grade you on – how insightfully, creatively, and convincingly you make arguments about how the subtleties of Homer's language create nuance and complexity in the depiction of a principal though often overlooked character.

The document you present to me can be a finished essay or a series of close reading-based interpretations of scenes and speeches, with or without a larger provisional argument. Do not worry about form at this point: if you have read closely, analyzed creatively, and argued convincingly, you will be fine.