

Political Science 302
Spring 2006
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THE AMBITION TO RULE

Texts to be Purchased:

Aristophanes, Frogs, Assemblywomen, Wealth. Translated by Jeffrey Henderson (Harvard University Press: Loeb Classical Library).
Machiavelli, Mandragola. Translated by Mera J. Flaumenhaft (Waveland Press).
Xenophon, The Education of Cyrus. Translated by Wayne Ambler (Cornell University Press).
Holy Bible: King James Version
Shakespeare, Four Great Tragedies: Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth (Signet Classics).
Shakespeare, The Tempest (Signet Classics).

Goals of the Course:

The ambition to rule has always been the passion at the heart of political life. But what is the nature of this passion? Is political ambition a noble passion, animated by the desire to bring about justice and peace? Or is it driven by the ruthless passion for boundless power and glory?

In this course we will explore the nature of ambition by studying a variety of masterpieces of literature, political philosophy, and religion. We will begin by considering the relation between ambition and comedy by studying first Aristophanes' account of Praxagora's attempt to found a perfectly just society, ruled by women, in the Assembly of Women and then the great comedy, the Mandragola, by the political philosopher whose name is virtually synonymous with political ambition, Machiavelli. We will then turn to the political philosopher Xenophon, the classical thinker most sympathetic to political ambition (and most admired by Machiavelli) and explore his account of the relation between ambition and empire in his work on the founder of the Persian Empire, The Education of Cyrus. We will move on to investigate the relation between ambition and piety by examining the career of the greatest political hero in the Bible, King David, in I and II Samuel. Finally, we will turn to Shakespeare and consider his understanding of the relation between tragedy and ambition in Macbeth, King Lear, and the Tempest.

As we study these works, we will consider such questions as the following: Is justice the proper object of ambition, or is ambition essential amoral? What is the surest path to lasting, or everlasting, glory? Is the goal of political power, prestige, and glory a reasonable one? What price must one pay to achieve that goal? What are the theoretical premises of political ambition? Does political ambition presuppose that the world is fundamentally moral or amoral, orderly or chaotic, ruled by God or godless?

Requirements:

There will be two short (5-8 page) papers (worth 25% each) and one longer (12-14 page) paper (worth 40-45%). You must do all of the written work in order to pass the course. You will be docked a half of a grade (for example, from A to A-) on a paper which you hand in late unless you either have asked for (and received) my permission beforehand or have a very good excuse. Roughly 5-10% of your grade will be determined by class participation. You will be expected to read the assigned texts carefully before we discuss them in class. Regular and punctual attendance is expected.

Assignments:

January 10 Introduction

I. The Comedy of Ambition

January 12 Aristophanes, Assemblywomen

January 17 Aristophanes, Assemblywomen

January 19 Machiavelli, Mandragola

January 24 Machiavelli, Mandragola

January 26 Machiavelli, Mandragola

II. Ambition and Empire

January 31 Xenophon, The Education of Cyrus, Book I
1ST PAPER DUE

February 2 Xenophon, The Education of Cyrus, Book I

February 7 Xenophon, The Education of Cyrus, Book II

February 9 Xenophon, The Education of Cyrus, Book III

February 14 Xenophon, The Education of Cyrus, Book IV

February 16 Xenophon, The Education of Cyrus, Book V

February 21 Xenophon, The Education of Cyrus, Book VI

February 23 Xenophon, The Education of Cyrus, Book VII

March 7 Xenophon, The Education of Cyrus, Book VIII

March 9 Xenophon, The Education of Cyrus, Conclusion.

III. Ambition and Piety

March 14 I Samuel 1-18.
2ND PAPER DUE

March 16 I Samuel 19-31.

March 21 II Samuel 1-12

March 23 II Samuel 13-I Kings 3.

IV. The Tragedy of Ambition

March 28 Shakespeare, Macbeth.

March 30 NO CLASS

April 4 Shakespeare, Macbeth.

April 6 Shakespeare, Macbeth.

April 11 Shakespeare, King Lear.

April 13 Shakespeare, King Lear.

April 20 Shakespeare, King Lear.

April 25 Shakespeare, The Tempest.

April 27 Shakespeare, The Tempest.

May 2 Overview.

May 8 FINAL PAPER DUE FOR SENIORS.

May 10 FINAL PAPER DUE FOR NON-SENIORS.