

TRAGEDY AND POLITICS

Deep Springs College

Term 6 2020

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Course Description

Reading Greek tragedy is unpleasant: you will not smile; you will shudder. Why should we inhabit tragedy's unpleasantness? Why should we read these plays about death, war, revenge, madness, impossible choices, calamitous errors, the destruction of whole peoples—in short, about the many faces of human suffering?

The conceit of this course is that we need tragedy—that, with suitable translation, tragedy's distinctive ethical universe, its political preoccupations, and its unique dramatic and theoretical form can illuminate our own unquiet time. Reading Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, the canonical Greek tragedians, we will discuss enduring and discomfiting ethical questions. How should we confront death—and how do we confront it? Do human beings encounter impossible situations, in which wrongdoing is inevitable? What is the role of luck in determining how our lives turn out? In addition, we will see that Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were piercing observers of political life. In their hands, tragedy was a distinctively democratic discourse that critically engaged with the central questions of democratic Athens—from free speech to imperial warfare, from self-government to the oppression of women and slaves. Tragedy will push us, as it pushed the ancient Athenians, to reflect on the promises and perils of democratic politics.

We will also approach Greek tragedy through its reception. Heavyweight philosophers including Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Heidegger offer epic theories of tragedy as an artform, an ethical orientation, and a political-cultural phenomenon. And influential scholars, including Danielle Allen, Arlene Saxonhouse, and J. Peter Euben give us precise interpretations of particular plays that also raise philosophical and political questions. Finally, contemporary tragedians, filmmakers, and actors—for example, Wole Soyinka, Astra Taylor, and the Theater of War Project—allow us to experience tragedy and to revivify it for our own political situation.

Required Texts

In the present circumstances, every text for this course will be made available in an electronic format (either PDF or EPUB). But I also encourage you to purchase hard copies. Consider ordering from an independent bookstore like Powell's, Skylight Books, or Politics and Prose. We will use the following volumes (or excerpts from them):

- 1) Aeschylus. *The Complete Aeschylus, Volume 1: The Oresteia*. Edited by Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- 2) Aristotle. *Poetics*. Translated by Joseph Sachs. Indianapolis: Focus Philosophical Library, 2006.
- 3) Euripides. *The Complete Euripides, Volume 1: Trojan Women and Other Plays*. Edited by Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

- 4) Euripides. *The Complete Euripides, Volume 4: Bacchae and Other Plays*. Edited by Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- 5) Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*. Edited by Raymond Geuss. Translated by Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- 6) Sophocles. *Sophocles I*. Edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- 7) Sophocles. *Sophocles II*. Edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- 8) Soyinka, Wole. *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite*. New York: Norton, 1974.

Course Expectations and Practices

By far the most important expectation and requirement for this course is that you read the assigned texts carefully and prior to class. You should expect to read for at least two hours, and perhaps for much longer, in preparation for each session. Read and read again! Take notes! In this course, the only way out is through—that is, through the text with pen in hand. In addition, you will be expected to read the reflections circulated by your classmates prior to each session and to arrive prepared to discuss them. You should also strive to attend every session. There are no excused absences except in the event of a documented illness or emergency; absences will severely decrease your participation grade. Most importantly, during class, please try to discuss the texts and to engage with your classmates in a spirit of questioning, openness, and friendship. This seminar hinges on your conversation! Students who meet these expectations will have every chance of success. For my part, I promise to be flexible, open, and attentive, especially in light of the pandemic. Please don't hesitate to talk to me about anything related to the course: texts, logistics, or personal concerns. I'm around.

Marking Scheme

1) Reading Reflections (1 per week)	20 %
2) Paper 1 (1,500 words, due Sun., May 31)	30 %
3) Paper 2 (1,500 words, due Sun., June 28)	30 %
4) Attendance and Participation	20 %

Course Policies

- 1) Reading reflections should be circulated to the class by 9 PM EDT the night prior to our discussion of the relevant text. You are required to do one reading reflection per week; whether you write for the Tuesday or Friday meeting is up to you. Although I think that we should be flexible about the form and the length of these reflections, a good reflection will exceed two hundred words—but not five hundred—and it will aim to generate discussion.

- 2) Attendance is critical: any unexcused absence will lower your participation mark by 10%.
- 3) Late assignments will be penalized five percent for every day late. No student will receive credit for this course unless he or she completes both essays.
- 4) Academic integrity is expected, of course. Please refer to the Deep Springs Handbook.

Schedule of Readings and Events
WEEK 1 CLASS 1: Euripides, <i>Trojan Women</i> ; Peter Burian, "Introduction," in <i>Trojan Women</i>
WEEK 1 CLASS 2: Euripides, <i>Trojan Women</i> ; selections from J. Peter Euben, "Introduction," in <i>Greek Tragedy and Political Theory</i> ; Paul Cartledge, "Deep Plays"; Adrian Poole, "Total Disaster"
WEEK 2 CLASS 1: Sophocles, <i>Antigone</i>
WEEK 2 FILM: Theater of War Project: <i>Antigone in Ferguson</i>
WEEK 2 CLASS 2: Sophocles, <i>Antigone</i> ; selections from Martin Heidegger, <i>Introduction to Metaphysics</i> ; Arlene Saxonhouse, <i>Fear of Diversity</i>
WEEK 3 CLASS 1: Sophocles, <i>Philoctetes</i>
WEEK 3 RADIO SEGMENT: <i>This American Life</i> : "Life After Death"
WEEK 3 CLASS 2 (Joel visits): Sophocles, <i>Philoctetes</i> ; Joel Schlosser, "Adrienne Rich on Lemnos"; selection from Rich, <i>Twenty-One Love Poems</i>
WEEK 4 CLASS 1: Theory Interlude: Aristotle, <i>Poetics</i>
WEEK 4 CLASS 2: Theory Interlude: Nietzsche, <i>The Birth of Tragedy</i> (selections); Bernard Williams, "Fictions, Pessimism, Ethics"
WEEK 5 CLASS 1: Euripides, <i>Bacchae</i>
WEEK 5 CLASS 2: Wole Soyinka, <i>The Bacchae of Euripides</i>
WEEK 6 CLASS 1: Theory Interlude: Josiah Ober and Barry Strauss, "Drama, Political Rhetoric, and the Discourse of Athenian Democracy"; M.I. Finley, "Athenian Demagogues"

WEEK 6 FILM: Astra Taylor, *What Is Democracy?*

WEEK 6 CLASS 2 (Daniela Visits): Daniela Cammack, “Deliberation and Discussion in Classical Athens” and “The *Dêmos* in *Dêmokratia*”

WEEK 7 CLASS 1: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* and *Libation Bearers*

WEEK 7 CLASS 2: Aeschylus, *Eumenides*