

ENG 339
Tragedy

T/Th 11:30am-12:50pm
Merrill 403

Instructor: Professor Daniel Sack
Office: Johnson Chapel, Room 30C
Hours: Tuesday 1-3pm (and by appointment)
Contact: dsack@amherst.edu

Course Description

A survey of some of the many lives and deaths of tragedy as a theatrical form, this course considers representative plays in the genre from its origins in Ancient Greece through to the crisis of the form in the 20th and 21st century. This is not a seminar in Classics; it is an investigation of a genre as a mode of thought and artistic production. However, all tragedy to follow revolves around the initial statements in the Classical period, so we will ground our discussions here. Signal moments in other times and traditions inform subsequent readings, but our primary focus will be upon the way in which modern and contemporary artists in the English language have revised, rehearsed, and rejected the oldest genre of Western theatrical production.

One could certainly speak of a broader tragic vision or sensibility extending into other forms of artistic production (novels and films, for example) or even into everyday life as in the newscaster's daily lament about whatever catastrophe or downfall. In this course we are concerned with how tragedy is performed in the theatre and what its location there promises for its audiences. In addition to the plays we read, theory and philosophy on the nature of the tragic will help guide our conversation. Performance thinks differently than literature, differently than philosophy. Play scripts presuppose a staged performance and represent but one facet of a larger artistic whole, so too our readings of plays and theory will always refer to what is possible or expected upon the stage. We will watch selected documentation of contemporary productions of the pieces we discuss, together attend live performances of the pieces we read, and even explore how to perform the tragic ourselves.

Additional questions for the seminar include: In what ways does tragedy offer an audience refuge from the catastrophic or the unknowable? What are the relationships between ritual, sacrifice, and tragedy? What are the politics of the form? Who gets to be a tragic figure and who is excluded from such an honor? Is tragedy the story of the one or the many? Do older works in the genre speak to contemporary audiences? Is tragedy still possible in the contemporary world after what Nietzsche called "the death of god" and the fragmentation of community?

No experience in the theatre or performance is necessary.

REQUIREMENTS

Participation

This is a seminar, not a lecture-based course, which means that the classroom is a collective enterprise. Your participation is vital and thus counts for a significant portion of your final evaluation. You are expected to have read the assignments for each class before each meeting, to come to class with discussion questions, and to contribute regularly to the discussion. Unexcused absences, lack of participation, or lack of preparation will have a detrimental effect on your grade for the term. You are allowed one unexcused absence for the term, every subsequent absence will lower your participation grade by 5 points. More than 5 unexcused absences will result in an automatic failure for the term.

Each student will lead the discussion for one class during the term. You will be asked to prepare a short 10-15 minute presentation on the reading for that meeting and to orient our conversation more pointedly. You will be required to meet with me beforehand during my office hours to prepare.

Performance

On Saturday (2/11) we will see a performance of Sophocles' tragedies in New York City. The production, *These Seven Sicknesses*, adapts all seven of Sophocles' extant tragedies (two of which we will have read) into a single 5-hour performance. Do not let the duration daunt you: there are breaks in the performance and dinner/dessert is provided. A conversation with the director of the piece, Ed Sylvanus Iskandar, will also be scheduled for that weekend. One of your writing assignments takes up this performance (see below), so attendance is mandatory.

Performance Project

We could say that Tragedy interrogates how a community responds to a catastrophe, an accident, or disaster. As part of our investigation into how to stage the tragic, we will all create short performances that seek to represent an accident or catastrophe (factual or fictional, personal or monumental) and respond to it using a tragic mode borrowed from a play or theoretical model we discuss during the term. These performances may take any form (a short play or monologue, a slideshow, a video work, a diorama, a series of tableaux, etc.) and ideally they will tread some of the same territory as your final paper, approaching similar questions or material from a different perspective. They should last no more than 10 minutes and you will be asked to explain the theoretical basis for the work you've undertaken. On the final day of class we will present these performative experiments for each other.

Written Assignments

All papers should be submitted via email (dsack@amherst.edu) as a word attachment, double-spaced and formatted according to either MLA or Chicago Manual of Style standards. Unless an extension has been arranged 24 hours before the due date, papers will receive a ½ grade deduction for every day they are late. There are three short writing assignments for this course and one longer essay. You will have an opportunity to revise any of the shorter assignments, with the understanding that a revision does not ensure a higher grade.

1) One 3-4 page **close reading** of a speech or short exchange from a play (no more than 10 lines), exploring the imagery, language, character, and performance possibilities depicted therein. Focus on the smallest segment of text and illuminate its possibilities in relation to the larger whole of a play. This is also an exercise in marshaling textual evidence, so you are asked to rely on the chosen text as the basis for your argument. **Due on Thursday, February 9th.**

2) One 3-4 page **performance analysis** in response to the production of *These Seven Sicknesses* that we will see together. This paper will focus on reading performance as a material text apart from the linguistic text of a dramatic script, addressing one or two aspects of the live event (for example, the use of a prop or set piece, the casting of a role, the arrangement of the audience). I will provide several possible frames to consider and we will discuss the performance as a group beforehand. **Due on Tuesday, February 28th.**

3) One 5-6 page **argumentative essay**, exploring the relationship between a theoretical argument and a textual object. Taking up one of the theoretical/philosophical perspectives on Classical Tragedy we have discussed thus far, you will explore how Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* realizes or disappoints more abstract claims about the genre. Please be sure to explicate the theoretical apparatus and use specific examples from the playtext to build your argument. **Due on Tuesday, March 13th.**

4) One 8-10 page **research paper** as your final written assignment, taking up one or more of the plays read over the term. At least two additional outside sources should inform your essay. **A short one-page proposal** for the paper and for your performance project will be due on **Thursday, April 19th**, and you will meet with me in the following week to discuss the paper topic. The final papers will be **due on Tuesday, May 8th.**

Course Evaluation

Participation in Seminar Discussion: 25%

Presentation: 10%

Performance Project: 15%

Shorter Writing Assignments: 25%

Final Paper: 25%

Required Texts

Many of the texts we will read this term are available in various translations or adaptations. There are, for example, over 600 English translations of Euripides' plays alone. Where possible, I have selected editions that are available as E-Books through the Amherst Library. I have also posted PDFs of several texts on the course website. However, there are several texts that you will need to purchase for reference. While there are no perfect translations, for the sake of consistency I ask that you purchase the following books in the version suggested. Prices refer to the most recent listings on Amazon Marketplace.

Aristotle, *the Poetics*, translated by Gerald Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1967) [new 12.43/used 3.79]

Caryl Churchill, *Far Away* (New York: TCG Publications, 2001) [new 10.36/used 7.35]

also available in—

Caryl Churchill, *Plays: Four* (New York: Nick Hern Books, 2009) [new 22.70/used 18.68]

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967) [new 9.60/used 3.16]

also available in—

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche*, translated by Walter Kaufman (New York: Modern Library Edition, 2000) [new 12.24/used 7.02]

Jean Racine, *Phèdre: a play*, translated by Ted Hughes (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000) [new 10.40/used 3.25]

SCHEDULE OF CLASSES

Tuesday Jan 24

Introductions

Thursday Jan 26

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

--Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* in *An Oresteia*, translated by Anne Carson (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011), pp ix-74. [available on course website]

Tuesday Jan 31

Sophocles' *Oedipus*

--Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* in *the Theban Plays of Sophocles*, translated by David Slavitt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). [available as E-Book]

Thursday Feb 2

Aristotle's *Poetics*

--Aristotle, *the Poetics*, translated by Gerald Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1967) [required text]

Tuesday Feb 7—**NO CLASS**

Thursday Feb 9

Sophocles' *Antigone*

--Sophocles, *Antigone* in *the Theban Plays of Sophocles*, translated by David Slavitt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). [available as E-Book]

Saturday Feb 11

Class trip to New York to see *THESE SEVEN SICKNESSES*

@ the Flea Theatre, NYC (6:30 pm – 11pm, dinner included)

Tuesday Feb 14

Theories of the Tragic Individual

--A.C. Bradley, "Hegel's Theory of Tragedy", from *Oxford Lectures on Poetry*, (London: Macmillan and Co, 1909), pp. 71-95. [available on course website]

--CLOSE READING DUE--

Thursday Feb 16

Theories of the Tragic Individual

--George Steiner, selections from *the Death of Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. ix-10. [available on course website]

Tuesday Feb 21

The Dionyssian Multitude

--Euripides, *Bakkhai*, translated by Reginald Gibbons (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). [available as E-Book]

Thursday Feb 23

The Dionyssian Multitude

--Friedrich Nietzsche, Sections 1-15 of "The Birth of Tragedy" in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), pp 33-98 [required text]

Tuesday Feb 28

Shakespearean Tragedy (the briefest glimpse)

--Shakespeare, *King Lear* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). [available as E-Book]

--PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS DUE--

Thursday Mar 1

Shakespearean Tragedy (the briefest glimpse)

--Stanley Cavell, selections from "The Avoidance of Love: a Reading of King Lear" from *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp 267-353. [available on course website, required sections TBD]

Tuesday Mar 6

Neo-classical Tragedy

--Jean Racine, *Phèdre*, translated by Ted Hughes (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux: 2000). [required text]

Thursday Mar 8

Neo-classical Tragedy

--Roland Barthes, selections from *On Racine*, translated by Richard Howard (New York: PAJ Publications, 1983), pp. 3-60 [available on course website]
--Jean de la Taille's "the Art of Tragedy" (1572) and Jean Chapelain's "Summary of a Poetic of the Drama" (1674) [available on course website]

Tuesday Mar 13

Tragedy and the Common Man/Woman

--Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*. [available on course website]

Thursday Mar 15

Tragedy and the Common Man/Woman

--Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man." [available on course website]

-----**SPRING BREAK: MARCH 17-25**-----

Tuesday Mar 27

Restaging the Classical

--Charles Mee, *True Love*, please read all the sidebar texts on Mee's website. [see *the (re)making project* (www.charlesmee.org)]

Thursday Mar 29

Restaging the Classical

--Sarah Kane, *Phaedra's Love* in *Blasted & Phaedra's Love* (London: Methuen, 1996), pp. 63-103. [available on course website]

Tuesday April 3

Endless Catastrophe: Samuel Beckett

--Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*. [available online through www.samuel-beckett.net]

--ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY DUE--

Thursday April 15

Endless Catastrophe: Samuel Beckett

--Samuel Beckett, *Catastrophe*. [available online through www.samuel-beckett.net]

Tuesday April 10

The Theatre of Catastrophe

--Howard Barker, *The Castle in Plays: Two* (London: Oberon Books, 2006), pp. 7-77. [available on course website]

Thursday April 12

The Theatre of Catastrophe

--Howard Barker, "the Consolations of Catastrophe", "Beauty and Terror in the Theatre of Catastrophe", and "The Idea of Promiscuity in the Theatre of Catastrophe" from *Arguments for a Theatre* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 51-60, 119-123. [available on course website]

Tuesday April 17

Ritual Sacrifice and Tragedy: Dance Theatre

--Rene Girard, selections from *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), pp. 1-27, 39-49. [available on course website]

In-class Video: Pina Bausch's *Café Müller*, *The Rite of Spring*, and *Bluebeard*; Sasha Waltz's *Körper* and *(no)Body*.

Thursday April 19

Ritual Sacrifice and Tragedy: Dance Theatre

--Giorgio Agamben, "Introduction", "The Ambivalence of the Sacred", and "Sacred Life", from *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 1-12, 75-86.[available on course website]

--PAPER/PERFORMANCE PROPOSAL DUE--

Tuesday April 24

Tragedy of / for the Masses

--Will Eno, *Tragedy: a Tragedy in the Flu Season and Other Plays* (New York: TCG Publications, 2006) pp., 71-109. [available on course website]

Thursday April 26

Tragedy of / for the Masses

--Caryl Churchill, *Far Away* (New York: TCG Publications, 2001). [required text]

Tuesday May 1

Tragedy as Virus: Societas Raffaello Sanzio

--Romeo Castellucci, selections from *the Theatre of Societas Raffaello Sanzio* (New York: Routledge, 2007), [available on course website]

In-class Video: Societas Raffaello Sanzio's *Tragedia Endogonia*

Thursday May 3

LAST CLASS: Final Words and Performance Projects

Tuesday, May 8

Final Papers Due via email by midnight