

# Interdisciplinary Graduate Seminar

## Winter, 2023



### Tragedy and Philosophy

German 590

[Prof. Ellwood Wiggins](#)

According to Peter Szondi (1961), although there have been poetics of tragedy since Aristotle, there was no philosophy of the Tragic prior to German Idealism. In this course, we'll probe and test this claim, reading the tragedies that have been most influential for philosophical innovations alongside the philosophers they inspired. The banishment of poets from Plato's *Republic* and their rehabilitation in Aristotle's *Poetics* sets up a contrasting template for the role tragedies play in society. Recent feminist interpretations and adaptations of *Antigone* take the classic definition of the Tragic proposed by Hegel to task and repurpose it for emancipatory projects in the contexts of both gender and race. Post-colonial claims for tragedy both uphold and subvert the primacy of Greek models for working through massive trauma.

The questions we'll pursue have both political and epistemological stakes: Can the spectacle of suffering have therapeutic effects, or does the representation of trauma necessarily re-inscribe its violent power? Why does tragedy seem to lend itself to philosophical speculation? Is knowledge itself a tragic enterprise?

- **Poets include:** Sophocles, Euripides, J.W. Goethe, Anne Carson, Wole Soyinka.
- **Philosophers include:** Plato, Aristotle, Friedrich Schiller, Friedrich Hölderlin, G.W. Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Judith Butler, Martha Nussbaum, Ato Quayson.
- **Discussion in English.** Reading of texts in original languages (Greek, German, English, French) is encouraged, but not required. **All texts available in English translation.**

## Readings\*

Jan 3: Intro: Plato

Jan 10: Aristotle / Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*

Jan 17: Goethe / Euripides, *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*

Jan 24: Schiller / W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*

Jan 31: Hölderlin / Sophocles, *Oedipus & Antigone*

Feb 7: Hegel / Sophocles, *Antigone*

Feb 14: Nietzsche / Euripides, *Bacchae*

Feb 21: Nussbaum / Sophocles, *Philoctetes*

Feb 28: Butler / Carson, *Antigonick*

Mar 7: Quayson / Soyinka, *Bacchae*

\*We can take advantage of the UW School of Drama's production of [The Oresteia](#) (Feb 23-March 5) as a way to engage concretely with the relation of *performance* to philosophy and philology. I propose attending the play together followed by a catered dinner in Denny 359. Precise date and time tbd.

## Texts

- Most philosophical texts (as well as any required secondary literature) will be provided in digital format over Canvas.
- You should procure the following volumes. They are all available in digitized format online, but I recommend recently edited, annotated editions. Specific translation recommendations posted on Canvas.
  - Aristotle: *Poetics*
  - Sophocles: *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Antigone*, *Philoctetes*
  - Euripides: *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, *Bacchae*
  - W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
- **Secondary literature:** On the canvas course website, there is a [bibliography of scholarship on tragedy and philosophy](#). For each of the individual works we read, I will suggest some scholarship on the assignment page in canvas. In addition to completing the required readings and actively participating in class discussion, students are expected (as in any graduate-level class) to read extensively on their own. Please make use of the bibliographies in the suggested articles as well as research tools such as the MLA Bibliography.

### Seminar Meetings

Normally, we will open seminar by choosing one person to pose an opening question (see “Participation” below). This question will lead to an open conversation in which everyone should participate. After a break, I will offer a reading as a provocation for further discussion.

### Course Requirements

Everyone

- **Participation** (15% of final grade): Includes opening question when name is drawn. Full points awarded by default.
  - **Opening Question:** Pose some problem based on the text, something you found confusing, vexing, or surprising concerning a central issue. Focus on at most 3 sentences, and speak for about 5 minutes. After your presentation, the class will freely discuss the question.
- Choose one of the options below and inform me in an email of your choice by Jan. 6:

#### Option 1: Seminar Paper

- **Mini-paper** (10% of final grade): ~500 words. Two well-constructed paragraphs: first introduce a problem posed by the text(s) and then suggest a promising way to explore it. *Due Feb 14.*
- **Final paper** (75% of final grade): An **interpretive essay** (c.15 pages) that articulates a problem posed by the text(s) and explores this question through an engaged reading. A good paper will *develop* an idea over the course of a well-organized essay. You should introduce the stakes and motivation for your question, build an argument through cogent yet creative analysis, and clearly show what progress has been made in a conclusion. Students should meet with me to discuss their paper prior to Feb. 28. *Due March 18.*

#### Option 2: Conference Presentation

- **Abstract** (10% of final grade): c. 300 words. A brief precis of your paper idea: set up the question and its stakes, then suggest how you will address it. *Due Jan 31.*
- **Presentation at [CAPN conference](#) (March 10-11):** Students will be expected to present a paper in a special panel of the conference and actively participate in discussions. Students also expected to attend other panels during conference. Students will submit the written version of their paper (c. 8pp) with a brief reflection on how they would work further on it based on feedback from the conference discussion. Precise details (length of presentation, etc.) tbd depending on number of participants and time allotted.