

Instructions for the final paper

In the lectures for this class, we cover six plays:

- The *Oresteia* trilogy (Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, and Eumenides)
- *Prometheus Bound*
- *Oedipus Tyrannos*
- *Antigone*

For your final paper, you should choose at least **one** play we cover in class and at least **one** play from the remaining ten in our sourcebook. These remaining plays include a play by **Aeschylus** (*The Persians*), plays by **Sophocles** (*Electra* and *Oedipus and Colonus*) and plays by **Euripides** (*Alcestis*, *Medea*, *Hippolytus*, *Elektra*, *Trojan Women*, *Helen*, and the *Bacchae*). You should use these plays and at least two works of secondary literature to complete the paper assignment below.

Your final paper will be a 7-10 page research paper on **one** of the topics listed at the end of this document (**note that you should confirm with me as soon as possible if you would like to do an alternative topic!**).

Timeline for completing the final project

Writing is a process, and you will be graded as much on your demonstrated engagement with this process as you will on the final product. In the drafting and completion of this paper, 4 mini-assignments will contribute to the completion of the whole paper.

1. By **Wednesday**, January 7, you should submit a paragraph (5 sentences maximum) in which you articulate **which** prompt you will be exploring, **which primary sources** (tragedies) you will be utilizing for your paper, and **why** this particular subject matter and source material is appealing to you. Notice that to write this paragraph you already will have to do some research into the various plays. I suggest you read the introductory material and skim the text of any plays that catch your eye. (10% of paper grade)
2. By **Sunday**, January 11, you should submit an **outline** of the final paper. This outline is provisional, but should reflect your best thinking so far on your subject matter. For information, examples, and a rubric for how to create a solid outline, see the [Outlining a Research Paper advice document](#) under "Important Documents" on our Blackboard site. (30% of paper grade)
3. By **Friday**, January 16, you must submit your final draft of the research paper (60% of paper grade), in which you build on your outline and feedback received to create a complete, 7-10 page paper on the topic of your choice. See Rubric for the final draft [here](#).

Lateness Policy

Due to the fast-moving nature of the wintermester, **LATE SUBMISSIONS WILL NOT, EXCEPT UNDER EXTRAORDINARY CIRCUMSTANCES, BE ACCEPTED AND LATE SUBMISSIONS WILL AUTOMATICALLY BE GRADED “FAIL.”** Extraordinary circumstances include severe illness/death in the immediate family. No exemption will be granted with regard to due dates unless discussed IN ADVANCE. Communication on these matters is the responsibility of the student.

Topics for final paper (suggestions):

Topic 1: Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy: Greek tragedy was performed as part of civic festivals in democratic Athens—public celebrations meant to unite the community. Yet these plays repeatedly explore fundamental contradictions and tensions within political life itself. Using 2-4 plays, develop an argument about the tragic difficulties involved in the creation of political life. What do these plays say about the relationship between the *polis* and *physis*, the artificial political world created by humans vs. the natural/psychological/familial forces that humans must contend with? Your play should develop an original thesis on the nature of political authority in these plays, exploring questions like: “How does the conflict between *oikos* (household/family) and *polis* (city/state) structure tragic action?” “How do the plays explore the process of political legitimation?” or “What role does gender symbolism play in representing the tension between political rationality and familial necessity?” **Possible plays to explore:** All may be relevant depending on your specific take, but the *Oresteia* trilogy, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyranos*, *the Bacchae*, *Electra*, *Trojan Women* are some particularly relevant cases.

Topic 2: What is “Knowledge?” Throughout this course, we examine how Greek tragedy explores the fundamental tensions and contradictions inherent in human existence—particularly the conflicts between different forms of knowledge, authority, and human flourishing. Develop a sophisticated argument about **the tragic character of knowledge itself**. What do these plays reveal about the various forms of understanding—e.g., political wisdom, divine insight, self-knowledge, or technical mastery (*technē*)? Your essay should develop an original thesis about how the *pursuit of knowledge* (in its various forms) becomes a source of tragic action in these plays. Consider questions such as: “What are the different forms of knowledge represented in your chosen plays, and how do they conflict with one another?” “How does the attempt to achieve complete or perfect knowledge lead to unexpected outcomes?” “In what ways does the structure of dramatic tragedy itself enable insights that are unavailable to the characters within the plays?” “What is the relationship between knowledge and power?” **Possible plays to explore:** All are relevant, but some standouts include: the *Libation Bearers*, *Oedipus Tyranos*, *Prometheus Bound*, *the Bacchae*, *Hippolytus*, *Agamemnon*

Topic 3: Moral Responsibility in Greek Tragedy. The tragedies repeatedly stage conflicts where human agents act under divine influence, compulsion, or curse, yet still face consequences for their actions. This raises fundamental questions about moral responsibility: Can characters be held accountable for actions influenced or ordained by gods? Do the plays present a coherent theory of justice that reconciles divine causation with human agency? **Construct an argument about how two-four plays negotiate the problem of responsibility in a world where divine and human causation intersect.** Does tragedy endorse the justice of the outcomes it depicts, or does it critique the moral framework of the cosmos it portrays? Be specific about how different plays handle the relationship between divine will and human choice. **Possible plays to explore:** *Oresteia* trilogy, *Oedipus Tyranos*, *Hippolytus*, *Medea*, *Bacchae*, *Prometheus Bound*

Topic 4: The Cosmic Worldview of Greek Tragedy. Greek tragedy relentlessly stages extreme suffering, often inflicted on characters who seem (to varying degrees) undeserving of their fate. This raises profound questions about whether the universe is ordered according to justice, and whether human suffering possesses meaning or purpose. **Construct an argument about what vision of cosmic order (or disorder) emerges from your chosen tragedies.** Do the plays suggest that suffering is educative, punitive, random, or something else? Is there a "lesson" to be learned, or does tragedy resist such consolations? Consider how different plays use the chorus, divine pronouncements, and dramatic structure to shape interpretation of suffering. **Possible plays to explore:** *Prometheus Bound*, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Bacchae*, *Trojan Women*, *Alcestis*

Topic 5: The "Foreign" as concept in Greek Tragedy. Greek tragedy frequently stages encounters with foreigners, enemies, and cultural "others." Yet the genre's treatment of non-Greeks varies remarkably—from the sympathetic portrayal of defeated Persians to the demonization of "barbaric" Medea, from the suffering Trojan women to the Egyptian exoticism of Helen's adventures. **Develop an argument about how tragedy constructs and interrogates the boundary between Greek and barbarian, self and other.** Do these plays reinforce Greek cultural superiority, or do they critique it by extending tragic sympathy across cultural boundaries? How does the genre negotiate between celebrating Greek victory and recognizing the humanity of the defeated? What role does gender play in how "foreign" characters are represented?

Suggested plays: The Persians, Medea, Helen, Trojan Women, Bacchae

Topic 6: Appearance and Reality. Some tragedies turn on the gap between appearance and reality—between what seems to be true and what is true, between reputation and actuality. This raises epistemological questions about how we can know the truth, and ethical questions about the power of false narratives to shape lives and destroy reputations. **Construct an argument about how your chosen plays explore the relationship between truth and appearance, and the power of narrative to construct reality.** When characters or audiences are deceived, what is at stake? Do the plays suggest that truth inevitably comes to light, or can false narratives become functionally "real" in their effects? How do the plays themselves, as narrative constructions, reflect on their own truth-status? *Suggested plays: Helen, Oedipus Tyrannos, Bacchae, Elektra (Sophocles or Euripides), Hippolytus*

Topic 7: Mourning and Ritual. Greek tragedy is pervaded by lamentation—ritualized expressions of grief that are gendered, communal, and politically charged. Yet plays differ in how they represent mourning: sometimes it is cathartic and restorative, sometimes it is prohibited or punished, sometimes it threatens to become endless and destructive. **Develop an argument about the function and significance of lamentation in two to four tragedies.** What work does mourning do (or fail to do) in these plays? Who has the authority to grieve, and under what conditions? How does gender shape the representation of grief? Consider how different plays use lamentation to explore questions about memory, community, and moving forward after catastrophic loss.

Suggested plays: The Persians, Libation Bearers, Trojan Women, Medea, Alcestis, Antigone, Elektra (Sophocles or Euripides)

Topic 8: Hubris as vice in Greek Tragedy. The concept of hubris—arrogant transgression of proper limits—is central to many discussions of Greek tragedy. Yet the plays themselves present complex and sometimes contradictory pictures of what constitutes hubristic behavior and how it relates to divine punishment. **Construct an argument about how tragedy defines and evaluates hubris across two to four plays.** Is hubris primarily about excessive ambition, impiety toward the gods, or violation of social norms? Are hubristic characters always punished proportionately, or does tragedy suggest that divine justice is itself excessive or arbitrary? Consider how different plays use the language and imagery of excess, measure, and transgression.

Suggested plays: The Persians, Prometheus Bound, Agamemnon, Bacchae, Hippolytus, Medea

Topic 9: Femininity as symbol and construct in Greek Tragedy. Greek tragedy features remarkably powerful female characters who act decisively in worlds that theoretically restrict women's agency. Yet their actions are often viewed through the lens of their sexual reputation, fidelity, and conformity to gender norms. **Construct an argument about how tragedy represents female agency and the relationship between women's actions and their reputations.** Do the plays suggest that women can act meaningfully in the public sphere, or are they always constrained by gendered expectations? How does reputation—especially concerning chastity and fidelity—function as a form of power or constraint? Consider how different plays handle the gap between what female characters actually do and what they are said to have done.

Suggested plays: Helen, Medea, Alcestis, Hippolytus, Elektra (Sophocles or Euripides), Agamemnon

Topic 11: The Theology of Greek Tragedy. Greek tragedies are populated by gods who intervene in mortal affairs, yet these interventions often seem arbitrary, vindictive, or disproportionate. The plays thus raise theodical questions: If the gods exist and govern the universe, why is there so much apparently unjust suffering? **Develop an argument about what vision of divine justice (or injustice) emerges from your chosen tragedies.** Do the plays defend the gods' actions, or do they indict the gods as cruel or capricious? How do different plays use divine characters, prophecies, and choral reflections to shape our understanding of cosmic order? Is there a distinction between how gods see events and how humans experience them?

Suggested plays: The Persians, Prometheus Bound, Hippolytus, Bacchae, Helen, Trojan Women

Topic 12: The Recognition Scene. Aristotle identified *anagnorisis* (recognition) as a crucial element of tragic plot, but Greek tragedies vary widely in how they structure moments of revelation and discovery. Some plays build toward a single catastrophic recognition; others

feature multiple recognitions or false recognitions; still others interrogate the very possibility of true recognition. **Develop an argument about how two to four plays use recognition scenes to create meaning and emotional impact.** How do playwrights time, stage, and dramatize moments of discovery? What is the relationship between what characters recognize and what audiences already know? Consider how recognition scenes interact with other structural elements (reversals, messengers, divine appearances) and how they shape the plays' exploration of knowledge, identity, and self-understanding.

Suggested plays: Oedipus Tyranos, Helen, Libation Bearers, Elektra (Sophocles or Euripides), Bacchae, Alceste

Topic 13: The purpose of the Chorus. The tragic chorus is one of the genre's most distinctive features, yet different playwrights deploy the chorus in strikingly different ways. The chorus can serve as ideal spectators, moral authorities, vulnerable victims, unreliable interpreters, or active participants in the action—sometimes shifting between these roles within a single play.

Construct an argument about the dramatic and thematic functions of the chorus across two to four tragedies. How does each playwright use choral odes to shape temporal experience, provide context, offer interpretation, or create emotional effects? What is gained or lost when the chorus is closely aligned with versus distanced from the protagonists? Pay attention to the chorus's identity (elders, women, foreigners, etc.), their lyric language, and their relationship to the dramatic action.

Suggested plays: The Persians, Agamemnon, Antigone, Bacchae, Helen, Trojan Women

Topic 14: Imagery and Metaphor in Greek Tragedy. Greek tragedy operates through highly compressed poetic language where recurring images, metaphors, and verbal patterns create networks of meaning that extend beyond individual speeches. Playwrights use animal imagery, storm and sea metaphors, light and darkness, disease and pollution, hunting and sacrifice, and other image clusters to develop thematic concerns. **Develop an argument about how patterns of imagery and metaphor create meaning in two to four plays.** Choose a significant image cluster and trace how it functions across your selected texts. How do these patterns shape characterization, create irony, foreshadow events, or embody thematic concerns? How do different playwrights use similar imagery to different effects? Your analysis should demonstrate close attention to the poetic texture of the Greek (in translation).

Suggested plays: Agamemnon, Oedipus Tyranos, Bacchae, Hippolytus, Medea, Trojan Women

Topic 15: The role of the Messenger. Tragedy regularly relies on *messenger speeches* to narrate offstage violence and events. Yet these narrative reports are not neutral transmissions of information—they are rhetorically shaped, emotionally charged, and sometimes unreliable accounts that raise questions about narrative authority and the relationship between seeing and knowing. **Develop an argument about the function and significance of reported action across two to four tragedies.** Why do certain events occur offstage and require narration while others are dramatized directly? How do messenger speeches use vivid description, emotional appeals, and narrative shaping to affect their onstage audiences (and us)? How reliable are

these reports? Consider both conventional messenger speeches and other forms of narrative report (letters, prophecies, eyewitness accounts).

Suggested plays: The Persians, Agamemnon, Bacchae, Oedipus Tyranos, Hippolytus, Medea

Topic 16: Rhetoric and Debate in Greek Tragedy Many tragedies feature formal debate scenes (*agones*) where characters argue opposing positions in extended speeches. These rhetorical showpieces reflect the influence of sophistic teaching and Athenian legal/political culture, but they also serve dramatic functions—advancing plot, revealing character, and exploring ethical dilemmas through dialectical argument. **Develop an argument about how two to four plays use rhetoric, debate, and persuasion as dramatic and thematic tools.** How do characters deploy rhetorical strategies (appeals to emotion, logic, authority)? What is the relationship between rhetorical skill and moral truth? How do playwrights use formal debate structures, and what happens in their aftermath? Consider what it means that tragedy stages conflicts as arguments, and how this shapes our engagement with the plays' ethical questions.

Suggested plays: Eumenides, Antigone, Medea, Helen, Hippolytus, Trojan Women

Topic 17: for this option, choose your own topic. Develop a prompt suggesting some literary or philosophical question you could explore through the Greek tragedies, and send your prompt to me by **January 7**.

General advice for the final paper:

Ground your argument in careful reading of specific scenes, speeches, and dramatic structures. Quote and analyze key moments that illuminate your thesis. Analyze how plot developments embody philosophical problems. Engage with the deep political-philosophical paradoxes these plays explore. Avoid simply identifying "conflicts" between characters or values—show how these conflicts reveal contradictions within concepts or modes of thought embodied in these plays. Move beyond lecture summaries to develop your own interpretive position about what these tragedies can say and how seriously we should take them as philosophical or literary texts.