

Helen Cushman “Tragic Flaws: Crippling Western Drama

Tragic Flaws: Crippling Western Drama

Instructor: Helen Cushman

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Office Hours: TBA

Tutorial Description: In light of recent critiques of the practice of “crip drag,” able-bodied actors portraying disabled characters on stage, theater would seem to exclude non-normative bodies from the stage in practice, if not in theory. Why then, has western drama so often taken physical and mental disability as its subject? Moreover, why does one of the founding and most influential texts of western dramatic theory, Aristotle’s *Poetics*, use the language of medical purgation and healing—*catharsis*—to describe at least one dramatic genre’s function? Does participating in theatrical production—as recent practices such as “drama therapy,” suggest—have a medicinal effect for disabled people? Or does the tradition of making non-normative bodies spectacles on a stage suggest instead that these “tragic flaws” are the very stuff of theater?

In this course we will read landmarks of western drama and dramatic theory alongside crip theory and proto-crip theory. We begin with *Oedipus Rex* and conclude with *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*.

Tutorial Goals:

General Goals

- Read and become familiar with a body of texts
- Design a research question about those texts
- Develop a critical bibliography around that question, including diverse methods and viewpoints
- Become familiar and engage seriously with secondary criticism in a field
- Write clearly, precisely, and professionally
- Produce a 20-25 page research paper in preparation for an honors thesis.

Course-Specific Goals

- Describe the relationship between disability studies, theater, and historical discourses about drama
- Discuss the historical representation of mental and physical illness in dramatic texts and performances
- Critique representations of disabled people in western dramatic texts and performances

Assessment:

Attendance and lively participation	10%
First paper (5-7 pp. close reading)	15%
Prospectus and annotated bibliography	15%
Junior essay draft	25%
Final Essay*	35%

***Failure to submit the junior essay in time will result in a failing grade**

Required Texts:

Oedipus Rex, Sophocles (trans. Mulroy)

Hercules Furens, Seneca (trans. Beck)

Richard III, William Shakespeare

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Ghosts, Henrik Ibsen (trans. Sharp)
Mother Courage and Her Children, Bertolt Brecht (trans. Bentley)
Endgame, Samuel Beckett
The Glass Menagerie, Tennessee Williams
The Skriker, Caryl Churchill
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, Simon Stephens

Disability Theater and Modern Drama: Recasting Modernism, ed. Kirsty Johnston
The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry

Suggested Reading and Useful Resources

Primary

Oedipus at Colonus, Sophocles
Philoctetes, Sophocles
The Bacchae, Euripides
Croxtton Play of the Sacrament
Digby Play of Mary Magdalene
King Lear, William Shakespeare
The Imaginary Invalid, Molière
Wozzeck, Alban Berg
Nabucco, Giuseppe Verdi
Something Cloudy, Something Clear, Tennessee Williams
The Elephant Man, Bernard Pomerance
The Normal Heart, Larry Kramer
The Miracle Worker, William Gibson
Angels in America, Tony Kushner

Secondary

Paradoxe, Denis Diderot
The Encyclopedia of Disability, ed. Gary Albrecht
Bending Over Backwards, Lennard Davis
Cultural Locations of Disability, David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder
Enforcing Normalcy, Lennard Davis
Disability Theory, Tobin Siebers
The Wound and the Bow, Edmund Wilson

Reading Schedule:

Note: this schedule is subject to change after the first meeting.

Week 0	Introduction Theater practice reading: From <i>Disability Theater and Modern Drama</i> , “What is Disability Theater?” and “Inherited Plays and New Approaches,” Kirsty Johnston
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- Week 1 *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles
Dramatic theory reading: From *Poetics*, Aristotle
Philosophical reading: From *Frontiers of Justice*, Martha Nussbaum
- Week 2 *Hercules Furens*, Seneca
From *Confessions*, Augustine
Dramatic theory reading: From *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche
- Week 3 *The Conversion of St. Paul*
From *2 Corinthians* and *Acts*
Historical reading: "Paul's Disability: The Thorn in His Flesh," Adela Yarbro Collins
From *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, "Disability," by Jonathan Hsy
- TBA Meet with Odile in Widener Library *Required**
- Week 4 *Richard III*, William Shakespeare
"Some Character-Types Met within Psycho-Analytic Work," Sigmund Freud
Psychoanalytic reading: "Descanting on Deformity," Marjorie Garber
- Short Paper (5-6 pages) due by email at 5pm**
- Week 5 *The Changeling*, Thomas Middleton
Theater history reading: From *The Player's Passion*, Joseph R. Roach
"Disability Aesthetics," Tobin Siebers
- Week 6 *Ghosts*, Henrik Ibsen
Some contemporary reviews of performances of *Ghosts*
From *Enforcing Normalcy*, Lennard Davis
- Week 7 *Mother Courage and Her Children*, Bertolt Brecht
Dramatic theory reading: From *The Theater and Its Double*, Antonin Artaud
Philosophical reading: From *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry
- 10/16 Prospectus (2-3 pages) due by email at 5pm**
- Week 8 *Endgame*, Samuel Beckett
"Samuel Beckett: Disability as Hermeneutic Impasse," Ato Quayson
"‘Every Man his Specialty’: Beckett, Disability, and Dependence," Michael Davidson
- Week 9 *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams
Shattering the Glass Menagerie, Terry Galloway, M. Shane Grant, Ben Gunter, and Carrie Sandahl
"Reclaiming the Ordinary Extraordinary Body: Or, the Importance of *The Glass Menagerie* for Literary Disability Studies," Anne M. Fox

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Week 10 *The Skriker*, Caryl Churchill
Feminist reading: From *The Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva

Week 11 *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, Simon Stephens
From *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer

Conferences

Week 12 Student’s Choice

Thanksgiving

Date TBA: Junior essay full draft due to me (email) by 5pm

Date TBA: Presentations

Date TBA: Junior essay due by 5pm, one copy to me, one to the department.

The Fine Print

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is the use of another person’s ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the paper to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with Harvard FAS’s Honor Code: “*Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.*”

Collaboration: You are absolutely encouraged to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each others’ work. In individual assignments (which may include midterm or term papers, short writing assignments, homework or reading questions and responses, or take-home exams), academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

Attendance: Your attendance in tutorial is vital to your own success as well as to the success of the class as a whole; so is your attendance in Junior Tutorial General Meetings and at other required events. I will allow each student a “free” tutorial absence to be used in case of sickness, travel, etc: no explanation necessary. Missing more than one class will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Also, being late really disrupts the work we’re doing together: 2 lates = 1 absence. If you have attenuating circumstances, you must communicate with me in a timely manner so that we can discuss how to deal with it.

Due Dates & Late Grades: Unless otherwise specified, assignments are due by 11:59pm on the date listed in the schedule. Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day late, except for the final paper, which must be

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turned in before the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. If, well in advance of an assignment, you expect you will need an extension, please talk with me.

Email: I’ll use our course listserv to distribute important info throughout the semester—from emailing you handouts to adjusting assignments and deadlines. You are responsible for checking your email on a daily basis. If you have a question that you need to ask me by email, be sure to give me at least 24 hours, or you may not get a response until it's too late. Also, please let me know if you’d like to use a non-Harvard email address.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: *“Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present their Faculty Letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the professor by the end of the second week of the term, (Sept. 16). Failure to do so may result in the Course Head's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential, although Faculty are invited to contact AEO to discuss appropriate implementation.”*