

Tragic Pleasure | Tragic Woman

Fall 2018, Department of English, University of North Florida

LIT 4093, CRN 82379

Tues. and Thurs. 3:05-4:20 PM

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“The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad... Hence they are in error who censure Euripides just because he follows this principle in his plays, many of which end unhappily. It is, we have to say, the right ending.”

—Aristotle's *Poetics*

“If something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory.”

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*

In tragic theater, one might wonder just what is the attraction created by watching the terrors and tribulations of others? Are we—like voyeurs slowing down at the scene of a car crash—merely titillated on some instinctual level to examine the horror, stare at the sadness of those suffering? Or is it somehow instructional to see the pain performed before us, thus allowing larger lessons to be learned? Do we discern and discover something about ourselves through the witnessing of such a distanced ordeal? And, mysteriously, how is it that, as Aristotle describes, tragedy offers its audience a “true tragic pleasure”? In light of the often-bloody horrors witnessed, what kind of “pleasure” could this truly be?

We will address these questions of tragic pleasure and tragic instruction by looking first at a pair of ancient tragedies, one Greek, one Roman, the horror stories of the two powerful women—Medea and Phaedra. These plays, these women, will set the stage for our semester-long discussion of tragedy and the women caught in its violent grip. We will then, abruptly, leap centuries ahead to the emergence of modernism in the 19th century, examining tragedy's enduring attraction and impact, and our own modern and contemporary responses to it.

This historical leap of millennia—from ancient Greece and Rome, to 19th century Europe and then contemporary America—is not arbitrary, but one that, through the earlier characters created, will expose our enduring emotional and intellectual links to that earlier world. Also uncovered between the two historical periods will be the individual's relationship to power, both earthly and divine—the power of society, of men (vs. women), of the gods (vs. humans), of God. As the tragedies unfold, where are the gods and what are they doing as the suffering unfolds?

To help us navigate and understand the power and significance of our tragic material, we will also be reading throughout the semester supplemental, theoretical essays by writers ranging from Aristotle to Friedrich von Schiller, Arthur Schopenhauer to Friedrich Nietzsche, Vladimir Nabokov to Maurice Maeterlinck—all of them brilliant, all of them illuminating.



Fiona Shaw as Medea (photo by Richard Avedon)