

# THEORY OF DRAMA: THINKING ANTIGONE

New York University  
Department of English  
DRLIT-UE 130

Mondays & Wednesdays, 3:30-4:45 PM, GSASL, Room 369

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 4:15 to 5:45 and by appointment

## COURSE DESCRIPTION:

“*Antigone*, one of the most sublime and in every respect most excellent works of art of all time.”

— G. W. F. Hegel

Sophocles’ *Antigone* is one of the most important – and widely interpreted – dramatic texts in Western literature. Indeed, in his *Antigones*, George Steiner demonstrates how philosophers and artists alike have taken this drama (and not *Oedipus*) to be “not only the finest of Greek tragedies, but a work of art nearer to perfection than any other produced by the human spirit.” *Antigone* has been central for philosophical conceptions of tragedy and the tragic. She was a recurring protagonist for the historical avant-garde. More recently, *Antigone* has become a centerpiece for thinking about feminism and politics. Why *Antigone*? Why *Antigone*? This course will explore some of the reasons this particular play has captured so many imaginations – and continues to do so. As we read and reread *Antigone* in different translations, adaptations, and philosophical interpretations, we will explore the play’s investigations of citizenship, law, gender, kinship, resistance to authority, religion, family, and the state, as well as ask a number of broader questions about the relationships between theater and theory, performance and philosophy: What do theory and theater have in common, and what can they learn from each other? How does theater constitute a laboratory for aesthetic, conceptual, and political experimentation? How does theoretical philosophy depend on models of knowledge and action that derive from theater? And in what sense is theorizing not simply an act of abstraction, but a *performative* act as well?

## READINGS:

Many of the texts we will read this term are available in various translations or adaptations. While there are no perfect translations, for the sake of consistency, I ask that you purchase the following books in the version suggested:

- Sophocles, *Sophocles I*, eds. David Grene, Richmond Lattimore & Mark Griffith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
- Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Gerald F. Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967).

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).
- Bertolt Brecht, *Collected Plays: Eight*, eds. Tom Kuhn & David Constantine (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

These titles are available for a reasonable price at the NYU bookstore. All other course readings are available as PDFs for download from the course page on the NYU Classes website. *Please* come to class with the day's readings on hand.

## **REQUIREMENTS:**

### **Class Participation**

An essential part of a vibrant society is an informed, thoughtful citizenry, empowered to ask questions about their social world. I encourage you to practice that mode of critical engagement in the classroom. To do so, you *must* come prepared, having read and considered the assigned readings, ready to grapple with, discuss, and debate the texts, performances, and critical frameworks at hand. I urge you to do so with respect and empathy for all of your interlocutors (both on the page and in the seminar room). Each student is permitted one unexcused absence; all other absences must be cleared with the instructor. Please refrain from using your cell phone in class, and restrict laptop usage to course-related purposes.

### **Group Presentation (due in class on October 19)**

Working in groups of 3 or 4, you will collaboratively lead the class in a 10 to 15-minute pedagogical presentation exploring the conjunctions of *Antigone* and the thinking of either Aristotle, Hegel, or Nietzsche. The hope is that your work on this presentation will be a springboard from which you think about your *argumentative essay* (see below) by exploring how *Antigone* realizes or disappoints more abstract claims about theater, drama, tragedy, etc. The format of the presentation is up to your group: it can be quite frontal in format or much more interactive – no matter the form, however, you should be sure explicate your thinker's theoretical apparatus using specific examples from the play. You should also be prepared to answer questions from your colleagues.

### **Performance (due in class on December 12/14)**

To a large extent, the positions taken by theorists and practitioners of tragedy (and drama more generally) affirm the *logos* of the text – sometimes, even, at the expense of the theater itself. One of the goals of this course is to examine (even promote) a theatrical and performative dimension to our discussions of *Antigone*, drama, and theory. As part of this investigation, we will all create short performances that use the temporal, spatial, gestural, aural, verbal, and collective medium of the seminar space to experiment with alternate ways of “thinking” *Antigone*. This performance experiment will of necessity be a fragment, but it should be memorized, rehearsed and give careful attention to how form and idea mutually constitute and challenge each other. Ideally, the performance will tread some of the same territory as your final paper, approaching similar questions or material from a different perspective. The performance should last no more than 10 minutes and you will be asked to explain the theoretical basis for the work you've undertaken. We will present these performative experiments for each other during the final week of classes.

## Written Assignments

- 1) One 5-page **argumentative essay** exploring the relationship between a theoretical argument and a textual object (namely, *Antigone*). Taking up one of the theoretical/philosophical perspectives on classical tragedy we have discussed thus far (Aristotle, Hegel, or Nietzsche), you will explore how *Antigone* realizes or disappoints more abstract claims about the genre. Please be sure to explicate the theoretical apparatus and use specific examples from the play-text to build your argument. **Due on October 26<sup>th</sup>.**
- 2) In the wake of the presidential election, you will write a 2-3 page **manifesto** proposing and outlining ideas for your very own production/adaptation of *Antigone*. You may make use of – though you are not bound by – Brecht and Artaud’s ideas for a “revolutionary” theater. In addition to a detailed description of the aesthetic choices you would make, you must be sure to present an argument for the ways your production will comment on the realities of our political moment. This short writing assignment will be posted in the “Forum” section of our NYU Classes page by **10PM on Monday, November 7<sup>th</sup>**, and will form the basis of our discussion in class on Wednesday the 9<sup>th</sup>. You will be expected to read your colleagues’ work and bring thoughts and questions into class.
- 3) One 10-page **research paper** as your final written assignment, taking up an issue of your choice pertaining to one of the topics raised in our course. Your analyses may be based on readings, “watchings,” primary and secondary sources, and additional research. At least two additional outside sources should inform your essay. I suggest that you come and talk to me in office hours by the beginning of November to discuss your ideas. The final papers will be **due on December 22.**

### EVALUATION:

You will be evaluated on your thoughtful participation and the level of your contribution to the discourse of the class, your group work, solo performance work, as well as the timely completion and responsible composition of your written work throughout the semester. There will be no extensions on any of your assignments. Course evaluation will be based on the requirements as follows:

Participation **20%**

Group Presentation **10%**

2 Shorter Pieces of Writing **20%**

Performance Project **15%**

Final Essay **25%**

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## COURSE SCHEDULE (*subject to change and revision*)

Wed., September 7

Introductions

Mon., September 12

Read: Sophocles, *Antigone* in *Sophocles I*, vii-69.

Wed., September 14

Read: *Antigone*, translated by Anne Carson (2015) [available on course website]

Mon., September 19

Watch: *Antigone* – directed by Ivo van Hove (2015) [check with me for Dropbox link]

Wed., September 2

Read: Plato, *Republic* (selections from books 2, 3 & 10) [available on course website]

Mon., September 26

Read: Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. G. Else (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1967) 1-75.

Wed., September 28

Continue with Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Mon., October 3

G. W. F. Hegel, selections from *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* [available on course website]

Wed., October 5

G. W. F. Hegel, selections from *Phenomenology of the Spirit* [available on course website]

Mon., October 10 – **NO CLASS**

Wed., October 12

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

Mon., October 17

Continue with Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*

Wed., October 19

In-class: Group *Antigone*/ Aristotle/Hegel/Nietzsche Presentations

Mon., October 24

Bertolt Brecht, "Short Organon for the Theater" [will soon be available on course website]

Wed., October 26

Bertolt Brecht, *The Antigone of Sophocles* in *Collected Plays: 8*, 1-51

Mon., October 31

Bertolt Brecht, "Antigone: Texts by Brecht" in *Collected Plays: 8*, 197-218

Bertolt Brecht, "From the *Antigone Model 1948*" [available on course website]

Wed., November 2

Antonin Artaud, selections from *The Theatre and its Double* [available on course website]

Mon., November 7

Watch: *Antigone* – by The Living Theater [check with me for Dropbox link]

Cindy Rosenthal, “Antigone’s Example: A View of the Living Theatre’s Production, Process, and Praxis” [available on course website]

Wed., November 9 – **Day After Election Day**

In-class: Discuss *Antigone* Manifestos

Mon., November 14

Judith Butler, “Antigone’s Claim” [available on course website]

Wed., November 16

Judith Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics” [available on course website]

Mon., November 21

Athol Fugard, *The Island* [will soon be available on course website]

Wed., November 23 – **NO CLASS – Thanksgiving Break**

Mon., November 28

Tina Chanter, *Whose Antigone: The Tragic Marginalization of Slavery*, Chapters 1 & 3 [available on course website]

Wed., November 30

Hans-Thies Lehmann, selections from *Postdramatic Theater* [available on course website]

Mon., December 5

Read: Mac Wellman, *Antigone* [available on course website]

Watch: *Antigone* – by Big Dance Theater [link:

[https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic\\_entity%7Cvideo\\_work%7C2832903/antigone](https://search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cvideo_work%7C2832903/antigone)]

Wed., December 7

W. B. Worthen, “Antigone’s Bones” [available on course website]

Mon. December 12

In-class: Performance Projects

Wed., December 14

In-class: Performance Projects

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**EMAIL FAQ:**

I look forward to getting to know you over the course of the semester and am excited to hear from you if you would like to set up a time to speak in office hours. However, do keep in mind that I check my email only once each weekday afternoon. In most cases, please expect to wait 24 hours to hear back from me. Please be sure if you are emailing about a time sensitive issue that you leave an appropriate amount of time for a response from me.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:**

All students are responsible for understanding and complying with the NYU College of Arts and Science Statement on Academic Integrity. Please familiarize yourself with that statement, which is available at: <http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity>. Under **NO** circumstances will academic dishonesty or plagiarism be tolerated in this course.

**SPECIAL ACCOMMODATIONS:**

This class welcomes students with visible and invisible disabilities and will meet all and any academic accommodations to which a student is entitled. Accommodations may be made for students registered through the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities. For assistance in obtaining an accommodation, contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities [719 Broadway, 2nd Floor, (212-998-4980)].

**GRADING CRITERIA:****A = Excellent**

This work demonstrates comprehensive and solid understanding of course material and presents thoughtful interpretations, well-focused and original insights and well-reasoned analysis. "A" work includes skillful use of source materials and illuminating examples and illustrations. "A" work is fluent, thorough and shows some creative flair.

**B = Good**

This work demonstrates a complete and accurate understanding of course material, presenting a reasonable degree of insight and broad level of analysis. Work reflects competence, but stays at a general or predictable level of understanding. Source material, along with examples and illustrations, are used appropriately. "B" work is reasonable, clear, appropriate and complete.

**C = Adequate/Fair**

This work demonstrates a basic understanding of course material but remains incomplete, superficial or expresses some important errors or weaknesses. Source material may be used inadequately or somewhat inappropriately. The work may lack concrete, specific examples and illustrations and may be hard to follow or vague.

**D = Unsatisfactory**

This work demonstrates a serious lack of understanding and fails to demonstrate the most rudimentary elements of the course assignment. Sources may be used inappropriately or not at all. The work may be inarticulate or extremely difficult to read.

**F = Failed**

Work was not submitted or completed according to parameters (page length, topical focus, types of sources), or completely failed to express the most basic and elementary aspects of the course.

**Plus (+) or minus (-) grades indicate your range within the aforementioned grades.**