

# Drama and Philosophy

Philosophy 230-001  
Skidmore College  
Spring Semester, Tue 25 Jan – Tue 03 May 2011  
TTh 12.40-2.00p, Tisch 303

## Instructor: Christopher Moore

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Office Hours: Tu/W 2.15-3.15p, Th 11-12p, and by appt.

## Required Texts

Sophocles, *Four Tragedies* (Hackett)  
Euripides, *Hippolytus* (Focus)  
Aristophanes, *Clouds* (Focus)  
Aristophanes, *Frogs* (Focus)  
Plato, *Symposium* (Penguin)  
Aristotle, *Poetics* (Hackett)  
Seneca, *Six Tragedies* (Oxford)  
Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* (Oxford)  
Shakespeare, *Life of Timon of Athens* (Oxford)  
Racine, *Britannicus, Phaedra, Athaliah* (Oxford)  
Molière, *Misanthrope and Tartuffe* (Mariner)

## Course

Our nine plays depict the struggle to maintain human virtue—during erotic attraction, through philosophy, or despite loneliness—and each (from Athens, Rome, France, and England) takes place in ancient Greece. They dramatize conversation, confession, and decision about the hopes of love, the fears and desires for self-knowledge, and the traps of cynicism, and thereby provide exemplary occasions and models for reflective exchange and the attainment of political and domestic self-understanding. We will also study Plato and Aristotle to help us think about the role of drama in living the good and examined life.

This course is not “the history of the philosophy of drama”: we do not read through all the most significant theoretical reflections on the nature of drama; nor is it “the criticism of drama”: we will not focus on secondary literature about individual plays. It is not even really a class about theater: the syllabus must mostly ignore questions about

directorial decision-making, production and staging, actors and the methods of acting, and the sociology of patronage and audience.

The course's name "drama and philosophy" signifies that we will spend most of our time assessing the relationship between drama and philosophy. We will investigate to what extent dramatic texts and their performances, when treated as depicting people talking about the hardest and most recurrent human perplexities, yield the kind of clarity, insight, articulation of complexity, and comprehensiveness of vision that we expect from good philosophical work. We will ask whether dramatically personifying the most enticing and pungent ideals, ethical assumptions, and rules of thumb improves our ability to understand those life-principles' conceptual structures and to evaluate their relative goodness. We will try to find out how studying plays, in particular *these* plays (Western classics written before the early-modern era) could help one today become a better person, more knowledgeable about fundamental matters, or a more competent reasoner, each of which is a traditional goal of philosophy. We will also look into the ways in which resolving the plays' dramatic or literary interpretative puzzles depends on concerted thought about existential, epistemological, moral, or political matters: that is, about that which philosophy takes as its ambit. Our plays present situations that appear to demand we distinguish between, for example, modesty and temperance, love and lust, humans and animals, moral strictness and moral lassitude, dialectical competition and helpful teaching, pleasure and benefit, and happiness and good fortune. Do the plays teach us how to make the best use of them, or for our full edification must we do our own philosophical reflection first, or at least in parallel?

This class follows no particular narrative. We want mainly to improve our ability to speak with authority on the above issues, and to recognize the significance of our plays' main themes (love, self-knowledge, human isolation). Aristotle's *Poetics*, the philosophical tradition's most important statement on drama—and our final reading—will provide both a check on our understanding and a prompt for further reflection. We can make little sense of its insights until we work out for ourselves drama's opportunities and expectations.

A subsidiary and formal goal of the course is to practice what we might call "public criticism": the giving of acceptable reasons in favor of your judgment of something. Philosophy trains you to generate and elaborate on reasons for your intuitions, and produce valid inferences from them, even if you have the intuitions before you have the reasons for them. We will work on public criticism in class, writing assignments, and a public forum.

## **Class time**

We will spend much of our time in conversation about our assigned texts, often through close reading of important or characteristic passages, but also through argument reconstruction and assessment, character analysis, summary at various levels of abstraction, conceptual analysis, and critical response. During other blocks of time, we will talk more generally about the puzzles and themes of this course, hypothesizing, for

example, what parameters there might be on a dramatically-depictable “worldview,” or what could warrant laughing at people less well-off than ourselves (the “paradox of comedy”). Occasionally I will lecture briefly to provide historical, intellectual, and literary background. I wish to say something about fifth-century Athens, the time and place during which both drama and philosophy became fully autonomous disciplines and the time during when each discipline was most curious about the other. I will also regularly model what I take to be productive ways of responding to our assigned works. I hope our class-time will help show how to talk about the quality both of arguments and of artworks. In particular you should learn how to appeal to your personal experience as evidence for broader claims about individual works or texts themselves or about the experience others should have toward those works or texts.

You must take notes every day, about what your classmates or I say and what’s written on the board. I will expect your written work to reflect familiarity with what we’ve talked about. In-class use of your computer must be limited to note-taking. Please do not read or send txts or other electronic communications during our meeting time.

## **Work**

### Five Homework Assignments [45%]

Every several weeks you will respond to a prompt about the reading I will distribute at least a week in advance. If there is a length-requirement, the prompt will state it; otherwise you may write as much as you wish. These essays are the most important graded components of the course; your organization, clarity, and professionalism count.

Assignments will always be due in class at the beginning of class. I will accept assignments only by hardcopy, never by email, unless you are explicitly told on the syllabus or prompt to email them; please do not ask for an exception. Use 1.5 spacing, 12 pt font, 1” margins, paginate, and staple. You must include full heading information (full name, course number, name of the assignment, and the date it is due); failures to do so will lower the grade. I will accept at most one late assignment, at my discretion and if you have a good faith reason; it will lose one letter grade every 24 hours it is late.

I may on occasion require you to revise a paper, in which case I will return your paper marked “NO CREDIT.” Come to my office within three school days to discuss a revision-plan. During that meeting I may ask you to revise only part of the paper in only some respect; in any event, you will be required to rewrite and meet with me until you have perfected whatever part and respect we have discussed. We will determine together hard deadlines for these revisions and meetings. You will receive credit (not necessarily an A) upon submission of a paper I judge sufficiently responsive to my comments and our meetings.

### Local Theater Drama & Philosophy Blog [30%]

You are to see at least six plays or quasi-dramatic performances (e.g., film, live music, dance, opera, etc.) on your own or with classmates or friends, at Skidmore, in Saratoga

Springs, or in greater New York. For each play you see, you will post a thorough analysis on our class blog, *dramaandphilosophy.wordpress.com*. It is your responsibility to seek out schedules, but I will endeavor to post whatever production calendars I can find. Your classmates and I will ask follow-up questions about your analyses to which you must give detailed and prompt reply. You should also make sure to ask questions and make rejoinders to your classmates' or my analyses, especially if they or I have seen the same play you've seen. You may also introduce other topics related to local theater, readings and discussions from our class, or drama and philosophy in general. This should include talking about articles or essays you've read online to which you link.

You are also to write at least something (play-analysis, long comment, or general topic) every week, with many of your contributions at least several paragraphs long. For original contributions, focus on specificity, thoughtfulness, innovation, resourcefulness, and provocation of further discussion. For follow-up comments, focus on reading sympathetically, asking productive questions, sharing contrasting or corroborating experiences or assessments, and helping draw connections, inferences, or contradictions the original poster didn't mention. For responses to follow-up comments, focus on giving complete replies and on being open to revising and extending your earlier ideas.

I will share with you your in-progress grade before Spring Break. Your grade will depend on the (i) consistency and (ii) quality with which you contribute.

(i) Consistency will be measured by your having written at least one play-analysis every two weeks, measured cumulatively. This means that by the fourth week you will need to have written a total of two; by the sixth week a total of three; etc. This also means, however, that if you write, say, two analyses in January, you do not need to write any more play-analyses until after 19 Feb. Consider the two-week intervals to end on the following Sundays: 02/06, 02/20, 03/06, 03/20, 04/03, 04/17. These dates are not the dates on which you should post your blogs; they are simply markers of the two-week periods I will use in evaluating your consistency. Your general blog participation otherwise is to be weekly; this I will measure this at the end of the term simply by seeing whether you have posts or comments in every week of the course.

(ii) Quality will be measured by your following the criteria listed above and by your responsiveness to whatever questions I ask or comments I make as blog moderator.

### Final Paper and outline [20% + 5%]

You are to write a ten-page paper due the day and time for which the Registrar has scheduled our final exam; you may write on your choice of topic as long as it addresses explicitly and principally *Timon of Athens* and *Misanthrope* and develops some of the philosophical arguments of our class. You are to email a two-page outline to me by class time on Tuesday 28 April; I will return comments to you quickly.

### **Logistics**

## Attendance and Participation

Much of the activity and value of the class comes through our twice-weekly discussions; indeed, a principal goal of this class is for you to learn to engage verbally with your peers and myself in a text-attentive and critically reflective way. Accordingly, your final grade will take into account your attendance and participation, which I will spot-check. Repeated tardy arrivals may count as absences. Participation involves active visual engagement, note-taking, answering questions asked of you, asking your own questions, making contributions to the discussion, and chatting about relevant topics with your classmates or your professor. Unless you have documented medical excuses, your grade may be affected after several unexcused absences or weeks of insufficient participation, up to a two grade-level decrease.

## Grades

Your course grade will represent the precision, accuracy, comprehensiveness, care, thoughtfulness, and effort demonstrated by your participation in the course activities. You will receive the grade nearest to your average numerical score; for example, a 3.9 will be an A; a 3.47 will be a B+

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|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------------|
| A 4.0 – Extraordinary | B- 2.66            | D+ 1.33              |
| A- 3.66               | C+ 2.33            | D 1.0 – Minimal pass |
| B+ 3.33               | C 2.0 – Acceptable | D- 0.66              |
| B 3.0 – Good          | C- 1.66            | F 0.0 – Fail         |

## Technology

Please check class-related emails every day, and respond promptly. I will do the same. I will email you additional readings and assignments if I do not distribute paper copies. Please check with fellow students to ensure you have not missed any handouts, which include paper-prompts and notes.

## Accessibility

If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need academic accommodation, you must formally request accommodation from Meg Hegener, Coordinator for Students with Disabilities. You will also need to provide documentation that verifies the existence of a disability and supports your request. For further information, please call 580-8150, or stop by the office of Student Academic Services in Starbuck Center.

## Cheating

Academic dishonesty in any portion of the academic work for this course shall be grounds for failing the entire course and communication of dishonesty to the College. This includes, but is not restricted to, any plagiarism on any paper, or cheating on any

portion of the homework. Plagiarism includes, among other things, not citing text, paraphrases, or ideas taken from any assigned or unassigned reading, or other students' comments or papers. Read [cms.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.cfm](http://cms.skidmore.edu/advising/integrity/index.cfm) and please ask about any case you're concerned about.

## **Reading and Assignment Schedule**

### January

- T 25 Circulate syllabus.  
Th 27 Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* I. Student introductions.

### February

- T 01 *Troilus and Cressida* II-IV.  
Th 03 *Troilus and Cressida* V.  
  
T 08 Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 1-826.  
Th 10 *Philoctetes* 827-1471. **HW I**  
  
T 15 Euripides, *Hippolytus* 1-731.  
Th 16 *Hippolytus* 732-1466.  
  
T 22 Seneca, *Phaedra* I-III.  
Th 24 *Phaedra* IV-V.

### March

- T 01 Racine, *Phèdre* ("Phaedra") preface, I-III.  
Th 03 *Phèdre* IV-V. **HW II**  
  
T 08 Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1-829.  
Th 10 *Frogs* 830-1533. Receive in-progress Blog grade.  
  
T 15 [SPRING BREAK]  
Th 17 [SPRING BREAK]  
  
T 22 Aristophanes, *Clouds* 1-888.  
Th 24 *Clouds* 889-1516. **HW III**  
  
T 29 Plato, *Symposium* 172a-199c.  
Th 31 *Symposium* 199c-212c.

### April

- T 05 *Symposium* 212c-223d. **HW IV**  
Th 07 Shakespeare, *Timon of Athens* sc. 1-3.  
  
T 12 *Timon of Athens* sc. 4-14.  
Th 14 *Timon of Athens* sc. 15-17.

T 19 Molière, *Misanthrope* I-III.

Th 21 *Misanthrope* IV-V.

T 28 Aristotle, *Poetics* pp. 1-25. **Outline of Final Paper due.**

Th 30 *Poetics* pp. 26-42. Course evaluations.

May

T 03 *Poetics* pp. 43-55 and related commentary. **HW V**

TBA **FINAL PAPER DUE**