ENGL 3000
J. Comas
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GENERIC INQUIRY 5 - INTRODUCTION TO TRAGIC DRAMA

This (much-too-long) handout consists of five sections:
  I.   Reading Schedule for Next Week
  II. An Introduction to the Genre of Tragic Drama
  III. Notes on *Oedipus Tyrannus*
  IV. A Special Note on the Ancient Greek Word *Hubris* (ὕβρις)
  V.   List of the Conventions of Athenian Tragic Drama

I. Reading Schedule

<u>Tue, 10 Apr: Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*</u>
Required reading:
    Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* (*Norton*)
    "Tragedy," "Tragic Flaw," & "Hubris" (Holman & Harmon *Handbook*)
<u>Thu, 12 Apr: Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy</u>
Required reading:
    Aristotle, excerpts from *The Poetics* (photocopy)

II. Introduction to Tragic Drama: *Oedipus*, Emotions, & Aristotle's Theory of Tragic Drama

A third type of convention - We have spent the last few weeks examining genres in the areas of poetry (i.e., the sonnet), fiction (i.e., the grotesque), and non-fiction (i.e., the aphorism and the essay). Now we turn to a genre in the area of drama, one of the oldest genres in Western literature: *tragic drama*. We will begin by reading perhaps the most influential tragedy in Western literature, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. (You will find me using the Greek title, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, since the Greek word *tyrannos* (τύραννος) clearly conveys a more specific idea than the more general English word *king*). As with our study of other genres, we will read Sophocles' play with an eye toward identifying the genre's *thematic* and *formal* conventions. In addition, we will find a third kind of generic convention, one that defines a genre in terms of the kinds of *emotions* it triggers; and we will call this kind of convention "*affective* conventions."

What is the appeal of "Oedipus Tyrannus" - Most of you already have some knowledge of the Oedipus story, either from having read the play prior to this class or from hearing about Freud's concept of "the oedipus complex." So, when you begin to read the play for this class, you already know the basic story—as did the Greeks, who were familiar with the myth that preexisted the play— including the answers that Oedipus seeks. The fact that audiences already know the basic story of Oedipus raises an interesting question: Why have generations of audiences found Sophocles' play moving when they already know, before the first words of the play are spoken, the outcome?

Aristotle's Theory of Tragic Drama - This question is the primary focus of Aristotle's discussion of tragic drama, which has remained the basic theory for understanding tragic drama, even after 2500 years of scholarly elaboration and challenges. As you will see when we read Aristotle, he uses Sophocles' *Oedipus* as the model for the perfect tragedy; and he focuses not on the thematic aspects of the play but on the plot structure and, most important, the way in which the plot structure produces *emotional effects* on the reader/audience. Aristotle's approach to literature, thus, introduces us to a third category of generic conventions: in addition to thematic and formal conventions, Aristotle's approach focuses our attention on what I will call "affective conventions" in the sense that these conventions name specific emotions (or affects) that the

literary work stirs up. When we read Chapters VI-XVIII of Aristotle's *Poetics* (for Thursday), we will note the following points regarding the affective conventions of tragic drama:

- of the six key elements of tragic drama, *plot* (Gr. *mythos*) is the most important because the *structure* of the plot that produces the emotional effect peculiar to tragic drama: the arousing of pity (Gr. *eleos*) and fear (Gr. *phobos*) and, most importantly, the purging (**catharsis**, Gr. *katharsis*) of those emotions;
- there are three key features of the tragic plot: (1) **peripety** (Gr. *peripeteia*), or reversal of the situation; (2) **recognition** scene (Gr. *anagnôrisis*); and the scene of suffering (Gr. *pathos*);
- in the best tragic dramas, like *Oedipus the King*, peripety and recognition take place at the same time.

Additional information on important terms (marked in **bold)** may be found in the Holman-Harmon *Handbook*; come to class with any questions you might have about these terms/concepts.

III. Some Notes on the Text of *Oedipus the King*

Finally, here are a few notes on the text, supplementing the editorial notes in our anthology. Some of my notes concern the Greek text in order to show you how our understanding of foreign works can be limited by the translation.

1. You may have noticed that I refer to the play by its Greek title rather than by the Latinized *Oedipus Rex* or the English *Oedipus the King*. I do this because ancient Greek has two words for "king": *basileus*, which was used to refer to a hereditary king, and *tyrannos*, which was used to refer to a ruler who acquired his position through power. How might this distinction help us in understanding the play?

2. The Sphinx (line 41), a monster that plagued Thebes, killed herself when Oedipus answered her riddle: What is it that in the morning walks on four legs, at noon on two, and in the evenings on three? Oedipus answered, Man—who crawls as a baby, walks erect as a man, and uses a staff as an old man.

3. "pollution": In line 109, Creon says he will report on how "to drive out a pollution from our land." The Greek word translated as pollution is *miasma*, which literally means "a blood stain signifying defilement."

3. Erebos: In line 196, the Chorus refers to "the Western God"; this is Erebos, who is the god of darkness.

4. Ares: In line 205, you will find a reference to "the War God"; this is a translation of "Ares," who was not only the god of war but the god of bloodlust. Cf. the note above on *hubris* as physical violence.

5. Loxias: In line 453, Loxias is another name for Apollo. The word literally means "oblique" and is used to refer to the indirect and often ambiguous nature of the prophesies that come from Apollo through the oracle at Delphi.

6. Hubris and tyranny: In line 941, the Chorus state "Insolence breeds the tyrant"; *insolence,* here, is a translation of *hubris*, which, as I mentioned above, should be understood as "wanton violence."

IV. A Special Note on the Ancient Greek Word *Hubris* (ὕβρις)

I imagine that many of you are familiar—from an earlier study of tragic drama—with the concept of "tragic flaw" and, perhaps, the related concept of *hamartia* (see the entries for both terms in the *Handbook*). You may also be familiar with the related idea of *hubris* as a particular kind of tragic flaw. *Hubris* is typically defined as "overweening pride or insolence" (*Handbook*). However, in ancient Greek the word literally means "wanton violence" arising from pride of strength or from passion. By extension, the word came to be used to refer to "an outrage on the person, esp. violation, rape"; and ancient Athenian law used this word to designate crimes involving all the more serious physical injuries done to a person. Keep this ancient meaning of the word in mind as you read the play, especially those portions where Oedipus commits or threatens physical violence against others.

V. Conventions of Tragic Drama

Our initial discussions of genres (i.e., the sonnet and the grotesque) have been based on the idea that there are two basic categories of conventions: *thematic* and *formal*. However, there is a third, important category that deals with the effects on readers, typically emotional, that literary works can produce. This category

often is referred to as "affective conventions." The following list identifies most of the major conventions used in tragic drama:

(A) <u>Thematic Conventions</u> – The thematic conventions of tragic drama may be grouped into four basic sub-categories (I've defined these categories as questions to ask about a tragedy):

- *Metaphysical* – Are there otherworldly powers that affect human lives (i.e., the political, ethical, and moral dimensions of our lives)?
- *Political* – How do political forces affect human lives?
- *Ethical* – How do interpersonal relationships (i.e., kinship, friendship, romantic relationship) affect human lives?
- *Moral* – How is one's life affected by the sense of oneself as a person?

An important aspect of tragic drama is that its set of thematic conventions encompasses nearly every dimension of our lives; in fact, the overlap may be the most interesting aspects of the tragedy (notice below that hubris falls within several sub-categories).

(B) <u>Formal Conventions</u> – Aristotle, we will see, is primarily interested in the *structure of the plot* (*mythos*) and describes this structure by identifying three key moments of the plot:

- <u>reversal</u> (*peripety*),
- <u>recognition scene</u> (*anagnorisis*), and
- the <u>scene of suffering</u> (*pathos*).

In addition, Aristotle claims that, in the finest tragedy (e.g., *Oedipus Tyrannus*), "reversal" and "recognition scene" occur together.

(C) <u>Affective Conventions</u> – According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the essence of a genre is found not in its themes or structure but in the particular kind of emotional effect it produces in the audience. More specifically, the essence of tragic drama is found in this emotional effect: the arousal of fear and pity, following by the "purging" of those emotions (*catharsis*).

The following page contains a chart of these conventions (with references to *Oedipus Tyrannus*):

	Conventions of Tragic Drama (*Oedipous Tyrannos*)
Thematic	Metaphysical Motifs & Themes • Manifestations of the supernatural (oracles & seers) • Metaphysical forces exert control over human lives (i.e., fate) Political Motifs & Themes • Murder of the king • State threatened by a mysterious blight • Health of state depends on justice • "Insolence (*hubris*) breeds the tyrant" (941; 1409) • Purging (*katharsis*) returns the state to normal, under the rule of Creon Moral Motifs & Themes • Question of identity: does one understand one's self in terms of social role (*basileus*, *tyrannos*), in terms of family role (son, husband)? • *Hubris* (wanton violence) vs. rationality
Formal	Aristotle's Theory • Plot – Reversal (*peripety*) • Plot - Scene of recognition (*anagnorisis*) • Plot - Scene of pity (*pathos*) • Plot – Peripety & recognition take place together • Character - Protagonist belongs to higher class, is not "preeminent in virtue and justice" and falls not because of evil but because of "a certain fallibility" [*hamartia*] (see Ch. 13) Other Features • Choral Interludes
Affective	Aristotle The arousal of fear and pity, followed by catharsis