**Etymology of “Tragedy”**

In Engish, late 14c., "play or other serious literary work with an unhappy ending," from Old French tragedie (14c.), from Latin tragedia "a tragedy," from Greek tragodia "a dramatic poem or play in formal language and having an unhappy resolution," apparently literally "goat song," from tragos "goat" + oide "song".

The connection may be via satyric drama, from which tragedy later developed, in which actors or singers were dressed in goatskins to represent satyrs. But many other theories have been made (including "singer who competes for a goat as a prize"), and even the "goat" connection is at times questioned. Meaning "any unhappy event, disaster" is from c. 1500.

***The Eumendies*, by Aeschylus**

[This play is the third in a trilogy by Aeschylus, the earliest of the tragedians whose plays are still **extant**. In first play, *Agamemnon*, the **eponymous** king returns to Argos from the Trojan wars. He brings with him a **concubine**, Cassandra. Agamemnon’s wife, Clytemnestra, has plotted to kill Agamemnon, as retribution for Agamemnon sacrificing their daughter, Iphigenia. She does this with the help of her lover, Aegisthus. In *The Libation Bearers*, Clytemnestra and Agamemnon’s son, Orestes, returns home, and vows to his sister Electra to kill his mother, thus avenging murder of Agamemnon. When this is done, Orestes his haunted by his mother’s Furies, and he flees from Argos.]

Pursued and tormented by the **Furies** – evil, female, **chthonic** **deities** – for killing his mother, Orestes is granted refuge at the new temple of the sun god **Apollo** in Delphi. As the play begins, the Pythia, Apollo's priestess, enters the temple and is shocked by a scene of horror and wonder when she finds the exhausted [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html) in the **suppliant's** chair, surrounded by the sleeping [Furies](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html). Although Apollo cannot protect him from the Furies, he has managed to at least delay them with a sleeping spell, so that [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html) can continue on to Athens under the protection of **Hermes**.

However, the ghost of [Clytemnestra](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html) (Orestes’ mother) wakens the sleeping [Furies](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html), and urges them to continue hunting [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html). The Furies track down [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html) by following the scent of his slain mother’s blood through the forest and then through the streets of Athens. When they see him, they can even see rivulets of blood soaking the earth beneath his footsteps.

Finally surrounded again by the threatening [Furies](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html), [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html) begs the **Athena** (the goddess of justice) for help. She intervenes and brings in a jury of twelve Athenians to judge [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html). Athena herself presides over the trial, instructing her citizens to watch and learn how a trial should be conducted. Apollo speaks on behalf of [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html), while the Fries act as **advocates** for the dead [Clytemnestra](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html). When the trial votes are counted, the voting is equal, but Athena persuades the Furies to accept her own decision in favour of [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html) as the casting vote.

**Vindicated**, [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_aeschylus_eumenides.html) thanks Athena and the people of Athens, and leaves to go home to Argos as a free man and the rightful king. Athena then **placates** the Furies, renaming them “The Eumenides” (or “The Kindly Ones”), and ruling that they will now be honoured by the citizens of Athens. Athena also declares that, henceforth, hung juries should always result in the defendant being acquitted, as mercy should always take precedence over harshness.

As the play ends, the women attending Athena sing praises to Zeus and Destiny, who have brought this marvellous arrangement to pass.

***Antigone*, by Sophocles**

**Oedipus was banished from Thebes, when the prophecy of patricide and incest was proven true.\*** Oedipus left Thebes a blind and broken man. Creon took over the throne because Oedipus’ two sons, Eteocles and Polyneices, were too young to become rulers. As time passed, and the two sons aged, Eteocles claimed the throne for himself, exiling his older brother Polyneices. Polyneices then gathered a giant army and attacked Eteocles for the throne. Neither of the two sons won because they both ended up killing each other in battle.

Creon then resumed power and declared that Eteocles would have a proper burial; however, Polyneices’ body was to be left for the dogs and vultures to eat, as a punishment for his disgrace. This is point at which the play begins.

Antigone, Polyneices’ sister, then learns of such news and decides that she must give her brother a proper burial. Her sister, Ismene, warns her against the dangers and consequences, and states that she will not have any part in helping her sister with her scheme. Antigone then goes to her brothers’ guarded body and pours dirt and sand over him, performing the proper burial rights.

As guards brush the dirt off the body, she reveals herself willingly. Creon is enraged and imprisons both Antigone and Ismene, who he believes to be an accomplice. Creon’s son, Haemon, pleads with his father to release Antigone, his bride-to-be. Creon ridicules Haemon for his ridiculous thoughts of freeing Antigone. Haemon then runs off, crushed that his father would treat him so badly. Creon then states that Ismene’s innocence is clear and that only Antigone should be punished, so he takes Antigone to a cave outside the city and buries her alive.

Teiresias, the blind prophet then warns Creon that the gods are unhappy for the lack of proper burial and that his son’s death shall be the punishment. Creon mocks Teiresias, but the chorus reminds Creon that the prophet has never been wrong. Now worried for his son’s life, Creon performs the proper burial rituals for Polyneices’ body. Creon then rushes to free Antigone, but it is too late: she has hung herself in the cave. Haemon has killed himself for her. A broken man, Creon returns to the kingdom only to learn that his wife, Eurydice, has killed herself after learning about her son’s death. Creon is then lead away by the chorus, lamenting in his own self misery.

\* It was prophesied that Oedipus would kill his father (patricide) and commit incest (sexual relations with a member of one’s family) by having sex with and children by his mother. Although measures were taken to prevent this, the prophecy came true. Freud drew on the myth of Oedipus when developing his theory of the Oedipus Complex.

***Orestes*, by Euripides**

This **roughly** retells the story of *The Eumenides*: that is, the back-story is more or less the same. However, in this play, we never see the Furies; Orestes, driven to the brink of madness, speak of being tormented by the chthonic deities, but they are not characters. To further complicate matters, a leading political faction of Argos wants to put [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) to death for the murder, and now [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html)’ only hope lies with his uncle, [Menelaus](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html), who has just returned with his wife [Helen](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) ([Clytemnestra](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html)’s sister) after spending ten years in Troy, and then several more years amassing wealth in Egypt.

The play takes place in palace of Atreus (Agamemnon’s palace). Orestes’ sister, Electra, opens the play, giving us the backstory. [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) awakes, still maddened by the [Furies](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html), just as his paternal uncle [Menelaus](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) arrives at the palace. The two men and Tyndareus ([Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html)’ grandfather and [Menelaus](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html)’ father-in-law) discuss [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html)’ murder and the resulting madness. The unsympathetic Tyndareus roundly chastises [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html), who then begs [Menelaus](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) to speak before the Argive assembly on his behalf. However, [Menelaus](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) too ultimately shuns his nephew, unwilling to compromise his tenuous power among the Greeks, who still blame him and his wife for the Trojan War.

[Pylades](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html), [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html)’ best friend and his accomplice in [Clytemnestra](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html)’s murder, arrives after [Menelaus](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) has exited, and he and [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) discuss their options. They go to plead their case before the town assembly in an effort to avoid execution, but they are unsuccessful.

Their execution now seemingly certain, [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html), [Electra](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) and [Pylades](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) formulate a desperate plan of revenge against [Menelaus](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) for turning his back on them. To inflict the greatest suffering, they plan to kill [Helen](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) and [Hermione](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) ([Helen](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) and [Menelaus](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html)’ young daughter). However, when they go to kill [Helen](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html), she miraculously vanishes. A Phrygian slave of [Helen](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html)’s is caught escaping the palace and, when [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) asks the slave why he should spare his life, he is won over by the Phrygian’s argument that slaves, like free men, prefer the light of day to death, and he is allowed to escape. They do successfully capture [Hermione](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html), though, and when [Menelaus](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) re-enters there is a standoff between him and [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html), [Electra](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) and [Pylades](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html).

Just as more bloodshed is about to occur, Apollo arrives on stage to set everything back in order (in the role of the "deus ex machina"). He explains that the disappeared [Helen](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) has been placed among the stars, that [Menelaus](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) must go back to his home in Sparta and that [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) must go on to Athens to stand judgment at the Areopagus court there, where he will be acquitted. Also, [Orestes](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) is to marry [Hermione](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html), while [Pylades](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html) will marry [Electra](http://www.ancient-literature.com/greece_euripides_orestes.html).

**Vocabulary**

**Advocate (n.):** a person who speaks or writes in support or defense of a person, cause, etc. (usually followed by *of*):

Apollo: the ancient Greek and Roman god of light, healing, music, poetry, prophecy, and manly beauty; the son of Leto and brother of Artemis.

**Athena:** Also, **Athene** [*uh*-**thee**-nee] /əˈθi ni/ (Show IPA). Also called [Pallas](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Pallas), **Pallas Athena**. the virgin deity of the ancient Greeks worshiped as the goddess of wisdom, fertility, the useful arts, and prudent warfare. At her birth she sprang forth fully armed from the head of her father, Zeus.

**Concubine:** a woman who cohabits with a man to whom she is not legally married, especially one regarded as socially or sexually subservient; mistress.

**Chthonic:** of or relating to the deities, spirits, and other beings dwelling under the earth.

**Deity:** a god or goddess.

***Deus ex machina*: (1)** (in ancient Greek and Roman drama) a god introduced into a play to resolve the entanglements of the plot; (2) any artificial or improbable device resolving the difficulties of a plot.

**Eponymous:** giving one's name to a tribe, place, etc.

**Extant:** in existence; still existing; not destroyed or lost.

**Furies:** *Classical* *Mythology.* minor female divinities: the daughters of Gaea who punished crimes at the instigation of the victims: known to the Greeks as the Erinyes or Eumenides and to the Romans as the Furiae or Dirae. Originally there were an indefinite number, but were later restricted to Alecto, Megaera, and Tisiphone.

**Heracles (Hercules):** Also called [Alcides](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Alcides). *Classical* *Mythology.* a celebrated hero, the son of Zeus and Alcmene, possessing exceptional strength: among his many adventures were the twelve labors for his cousin Eurystheus, performed in order to gain immortality.

**Hermes:** the ancient Greek herald and messenger of the gods and the god of roads, commerce, invention, cunning, and theft.

**Placate:** to appease or pacify, especially by concessions or conciliatory gestures.

**Suppliant:** someone who supplicates.

**Supplicate:** to pray humbly; make humble and earnest entreaty or petition.

**Vindicate:** to clear, as from an accusation, imputation, suspicion, or the like.