To say that someone has committed a crime of passion is to suggest that he or she has acted impulsively, without reflection. Juridical language often places the passions or emotions in opposition to reason or deliberation. Emotions overcome and overwhelm, testing the limits of a person’s control over him or herself. In seventeenth-century France, the possibility of being carried away by one’s passions was frequently raised on the tragic stage. Many tragedies feature at least one character who simply cannot get a grip. Kings are overcome with rage. Sisters cannot stop mourning their brothers. Love leads both men and women to violate codes of propriety.

In this class we will study how seventeenth-century tragedy presents the passions as volatile forces that must be managed with care. Exploring how dramas address the problem of excess emotion through appeals to reason or through tidy resolutions of plot, we will also consider how emotional excess often escapes tragedy’s grasp. Appeals to reason, for example, often include rhyme schemes and other poetic structures that undermine distinctions between cool-headed rationality and over-heated emotionality.

In addition to examining the interplay of passion and reason in tragedies by Corneille, Molière, Racine, and Rotrou, we will also read theories of tragedy as a genre by D’Aubignac, Descartes, and Nicole. Throughout the semester, we will take up questions of gender and social rank. Does tragedy portray uncontrollable emotion as a particularly feminine problem? Does it suggest that individuals of noble birth are less susceptible to the passions’ sway? Finally, we will consider how the problem of the passions in seventeenth-century tragedy helps us to tackle contemporary questions of individual autonomy and responsibility. Approaching tragedy as both text and performance, we will explore how dramas were performed during the seventeenth century and imagine how they might be performed today. The class will be taught in French.