

Christia Mercer, Gustave M. Berne Professor of Philosophy, Columbia University
Morgain Gooding-Silverwood, Actor and Playwright, Columbia College, 2015
Keenan Teddy Smith, Poet and Student, Columbia College, 2018

Course Description

In this course, we'll analyze stories, plays and poetry from roughly 2500-3000 years ago. We'll frame our reading and discussion of these ancient works with a poem written by one of the great American poets, Gwendolyn Brooks. All of this literature explores love, desire, fear, family, revenge, courage, justice, power, and gender. The questions we will ask about the works include: How do these ancient works of literature create imagined worlds that still resonate with us, despite their historical distance, and what do they tell us about the *challenges* of human existence? Besides examining the themes and ideas in these dramas, we'll pay attention to the theatrical elements they employ. We'll do close readings of passages and scenes, and sometimes explore their complications by performing them.

Our Main Questions/Themes

Our classroom discussions will focus on the following questions: As human beings, what should we seek or love? How do our goals and loves relate to those of our family, friends, and community? Why is fulfilling our loves so hard? What gets in the way? What do we fear and how can we overcome those fears? In the end, what do the answers offered to these questions by this ancient literature tell us about ourselves as human beings?

Pedagogical Goals

Improve writing skills.

Learn about theatrical arts, epic literature, and poetic means of expression.

Use theatrical techniques to develop means for individual expression and community building.

Explore philosophical questions about love, desire, fear, family, revenge, courage, justice, power, and gender.

Improve skills of close-reading, literary analysis, and philosophical analysis.

Assignments

- Your primary goal each week is to read and think about the assigned materials. You are asked to submit 2-3 pages (about 400 words or more) of commentary on the assigned reading **every week**. Your weekly commentary will be based on questions distributed the previous class. This is casual and NOT formal writing. NOTE: if you do this work thoroughly every week, you will be prepared for the paper assignments, the final, and will learn a LOT more.
- Two 500-600 word papers.
- One personalize "response" to the assigned reading. This can be a poem, song, dance, reimagining a scene or passage from our reading, or any kind of improvisational response to a scene or passage. You may work with a fellow student or two.
- A very short final exam that will tie together some of the themes of the course.

Email Policy

If you have a question about an assignment, you will be allowed to send us one free email a week. Please keep the email to one or two short questions about the weekly assignment. Send your email by Monday or Tuesday (at the latest), and we will try to respond within 36 hours. The email address is: columbia.pep.program@gmail.com

Grades

- Each of two papers, 15% for total of 30%
- (Artistic-Literary) Response, 10%
- Weekly commentary and class participation = 50%
- Final Exam = 10%

Assigned Readings

Books:

- *The Epic of Gilgamesh, Part I*, (Penguin, trs. Andrew George)
- Aeschylus, *Oresteia* (Aeschylus II, Chicago, tr. Lattimore)
- Euripides, *Bacchae* (Euripides V, Chicago tr. Arrowsmith)

Packet of Printed Materials

- Sappho, Poems 1, 3, 4, 6.
- Plato's *Phaedo* (from the *Last Days of Socrates*)
- Gwendolyn Brooks, "De Witt Williams on His Way to Lincoln Cemetery"
- Background and Sum of *Gilgamesh*
- Context for Greek Theater/Drama
- Background and Sum of *Oresteia*
- Background and Sum of *Bacchae*

Course Schedule

A SUMMARY OF OUR SEMESTER BY WEEK

September

Week 1 9/8: **Introduction to Course, Themes and Goals.**

Theatrical Introductions

Required Reading: Sappho v. Plato readings (in packet)

Week 2 9/15: **Genre, Poetry, Meter, (formal) Beauty**

Genre: Epic v. Drama v. Poetry

Required Reading: Background Material in Packet and Gwendolyn Brooks, "De Witt Williams on His Way to Lincoln Cemetery"

Bring to class both *Epic of Gilgamesh* and *Oresteia*

Turn in Commentary 1.

[Mercer Absent]

Week 3 9/22: **Tyrants, Wild Men, and Friendship**

Required Reading: Background Material in Packet and *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Intro, xxxi-li (see map, timeline too); Tablet I-III (pp. 1-29). [Feel free to read more!]

First Paper Topic Distributed

Turn in Commentary 2.

Week 4 9/29: **Loss, Grief, and Journey**

Required Reading: *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablets IV-XI (pp. 30-99).

Turn in Commentary 3.

First Paper Abstract Due

Office hours before class

October

Week 5 10/6: **From Loss to Wisdom**

First Paper Due at the First of Class

Conclude Gilgamesh

Introduce *Oresteia* [bring book]

Week 6 10/13: **Ancient Drama, War, Love, and Revenge**

Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, "Agamemnon"

Required Reading: Background Material in Packet. In our book, *Aeschylus II*, read all the Introductory materials (pp. 1-18); *Agamemnon* (pp. 21-79, Lines 1-1675), which is the first of the three plays in *The Oresteia*.

Turn in Commentary 4.

Return Papers- Discuss

Second Paper Topic Distributed

Week 7 10/20: **Mothers and Sons; Milk and Vipers**

Required Reading: *Oresteia*, "The Libation Bearers," (pp. 81-122), the second play in *The Oresteia*

Turn in Commentary 5.

Second Paper Abstract Due

Office Hours before class

[Mercer absent]

Week 8 10/27: **Rethinking Love, Revenge, and Justice**

Required Reading: *Oresteia*. "The Eumenides," (pp. 123-162), the third play in *The Oresteia*.

Second Paper Due

November

Week 9 11/3: **Passion, Reason, Mothers and Sons**

Required Reading: Background Material in Packet and Euripides' *The Bacchae*, Introductory Materials in our edition. Read all of play.

Turn in Commentary 6.

Week 10 11/10: **Wild Women and Wisdom**

Required Reading: *The Bacchae*, finish.

Turn in Commentary 7.

Week 11 11/17: **Rethinking Brooks and What We've Learned**

Required Reading (AGAIN): Gwendolyn Brooks, "De Witt Williams on His Way to Lincoln Cemetery."

Prep for Finals

Office Hours before class

Week 12 11/24 **NO CLASS.** (Thanksgiving)

December

Week 13 12/1: **Conclusion**

Very Short Exam

Summary -- Conclusions