Conversations of the “West”: Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Reluctant heroes and cultures in conflict
Tuesday & Thursday, 11-12:15
Casa Italiana, auditorium

Prof. Jane Tylus (Italian Studies):
402 Casa Italiana, 998-8738. Office hours: 9:30-11, Thursdays

Preceptors: Paul Bucklin, ptb208@nyu.edu. Office hours: Tuesday 12:30-2, Casa Italiana 2nd floor
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In much great literature, the quest for meaning in a world that threatens to be senseless takes on the form of an actual physical quest to the realm of the dead, to the land of one’s forefathers, to the “east” – or the west. Many of these quests have in turn been called epics, and in our own quest this semester we will explore the rich genre of epic poetry in the ancient and medieval worlds and how it was inflected by what could be called rival claims: by women writers and characters, by a Platonism deeply hostile to storytelling, by Christianity and Islam. As we read, we will talk about the creation of communities within and without the poems, and thus about the fashioning of literature and its relationship to religious, social, and other cultural practices. Finally, we will discuss how cultures and communities revise their own and others’ pasts in order to create narratives that respond to immediate needs. How does the Hebrew Bible revise Canaanite myths? How do the Romans rewrite works of the Greeks? How do Christians confront the writings of pagans? Our principal three texts will be the Iliad, Virgil’s Aeneid, and Dante’s Inferno, but we will read widely in a variety of traditions in order to deepen our understanding of terms as complicated and ambiguous as “the west,” “ancient,” “medieval”, and “epic.”

September 6 and 8: Introductions & Inanna/Ishtar (handout; anthology)

September 13: The Legend of Gilgamesh; introduction to “The Ancient Near East” (anthology)

September 15: Genesis (anthology or Bible)

September 19: Complete Genesis; the Book of Ruth; introduction to “Strangers in a Strange Land” (Bible and anthology); chapter 1 in Auerbach, Mimesis

September 21: Introduction to Classical Greece (anthology); Iliad, Books 1-2. * FIRST ASSIGNMENT: your own Sumerian or Hebrew story

September 26 and 28: Iliad, Books 3-10; 14

October 4 and 6: Iliad, Books 16-24

October 11: Sappho (anthology) and Plato (anthology; handout). *SECOND ASSIGNMENT: your own Greek epic
October 13 and 18: Virgil, Aeneid, Books 1-2; Introduction to “Rome and the Roman Empire” (anthology)

October 20: IN CLASS MIDTERM. Discussion sections cancelled for October 21 and October 24.

October 25 and 27: Virgil, Books 4 and 6; 12 (anthology and handout); Ovid, the story of Orpheus (anthology)


November 8: The Martyrdom of Saint Perpetua (handout). * THIRD ASSIGNMENT: your own Roman epic

November 10: Augustine, Confessions (Anthology); chapter 3, Auerbach’s *Mimesis*

November 15: Islamic mysticism (handout)

November 17 and 22: The Franciscan revolution (handout); Dante, Inferno; Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, chapter 7 (section on Francis)

November 24: Thanksgiving Break: No class

November 30, December 1: Dante, Inferno; Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, chapter 8 on Dante

December 6: finishing Dante. * FOURTH ASSIGNMENT: your own medieval epic

December 8: Catherine of Siena, letters (handout)

December 13: REVIEW

December 20, 10-11:50 a.m.: FINAL EXAM

Required Texts: *The Longman Anthology of World Literature, Volume A: The Ancient World*
Homer, *Iliad*, tr. Robert Fagles (Penguin)
Dante, *Inferno*, tr. A. Mandelbaum (Bantam)
A copy of the Bible (not King James)
Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, with introduction by Edward Said
Various handouts, possible purchase of reader

Your responsibilities:
Attendance at all lectures and discussion sections; although this is a “lecture”, the room in the Casa is a relatively small one, and we’ll be checking attendance each week – and discussion will be encouraged. More than two unexcused absences will be duly noted; more than three will result in a lower grade.

Active participation in discussion sections.

Timely completion of all the readings. Jessica and Paul will feel free to give pop-quizzes in class, as well as to assign impression papers to gauge your involvement in the texts.

Timely completion of the four major written assignments, “writing your own epics”: your versions of Hebrew, Greek, Roman, and Dantesque poems. More instructions to follow, but you’ll be expected to engage with the poetic structures and themes of these works as you craft your own creative responses to ancient and medieval texts. Assignments must be handed in as a hard copy at the beginning of class.

Two in-class essay exams: a midterm on October 20, and a final exam in December.

Don’t even think about plagiarism: any demonstrated evidence of a plagiarized paper or exam will result in an F for the course following consultation with you and with the MAP director.

We’re not mathematicians, and we feel strongly that progress counts: i.e., a low grade on an initial assignment can be offset by a high grade on a later assignment. But a rough breakdown of the grading system will look, more or less, as follows:

- Attendance and participation: 20%
- In-class assignments: 10%
- Four epic projects: 30%
- Midterm: 20%
- Cumulative final: 20%

Our responsibilities:

To adhere as closely as we can to the syllabus.

To make your time in class as interesting and engaging as possible; this will occasionally involve using slides, outlines, and occasional film clips, but it will primarily involve cultivating the old-fashioned skills of lecturing, listening, and dialogue;

To be fair in grading;

To be attentive to your questions before and after class and during office hours;

To return assignments within a reasonable time frame;

To cultivate your love of literature … to introduce you to, or to rekindle your acquaintance with, provocative texts … to unsettle you … to make you question … and now and then (we hope!) to get you to laugh, or at least smile, as we explore how, millennia ago, men and women wrote stories that attempted to bring meaning to their lives.