

HUMANITIES SEMINARS PROGRAM
Spring 2020
“HOMERIC ECHOES through the AGES”
SYLLABUS

Taught by Dr. BELLA VIVANTE
Professor Emerita of Classics
bvivante@email.arizona.edu



<http://classics.arizona.edu/node/109>

Course Description:

Homer's sublime epics, *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, fire the imagination. We'll explore their reverberations from an ancient "prequel" to modern echoes. Homer's poetic tradition harkens back to the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*: the part-divine conflicted hero who wrestles with his destiny. Homer's creative poems then sparked new masterpieces: Vergil's *Aeneid* reweaves Homer's tales into the story of Rome's founding. Innovative modern re-visionings abound. We'll consider 3: H.D.'s exquisite epic poem *Helen in Egypt* (1961) expands Helen's ancient myths to explore women's identity and poetic creation. Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005) and Zachary Mason's *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* (2007) spin imaginative tales inspired by the silent spaces in Homer's poems, voiced in intriguing female and male counterpoint.

This course aims at multiple levels of appreciation. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* establishes many of the themes central to heroic, epic poetry that influenced the development of Greek and Roman epics. Vergil's *Aeneid* illustrates how deeply these themes became embedded in the Greek and Roman cultural traditions and which serve as the foundation for the Western literary heritage. The treatment of these themes in the *Aeneid* also shows how ideas and values can be transmitted across cultures and time, can even undergo culturally specific adaptations, and can still resonate with deep meaning. Segue to the modern works all of which reveal their debt to the ancient poems while they spin new visions out of the ancient threads meaningful in our time.

The continued exploration of these ancient tales by modern writers reveals the ongoing value of the ancient themes for our contemporary sensibilities. How rewarding to read these works that are still spinning out the ancient tales in a timeless poetic tradition.

Required texts (any translation okay): *Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. by N.K. Sandars (Penguin 1960), ISBN 978-1-55643-728-1; <http://www.jasoncolavito.com/epic-of-gilgamesh.html>

Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. by David Ferry (Chicago, 2017), ISBN 9780226450216;

https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Aeneid.html?id=PrUvDwAAQBAJ

H.D. *Helen in Egypt* (New Directions, 1961)

Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2005)

Zachary Mason, *The Lost Books of the Odyssey* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007)

Syllabus, by week:

- 1 1/28 Introduction to the course: Online: Timeline, Background, Homeric summaries
 - ◆ **Background** to Mesopotamian and Greek Oral Traditions and Epic Poetry
 - ◆ **Influences Paid Forward:** Summary of relevant characters, actions and themes of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to show Mesopotamian influences and basis for sequels
- 2 2/4 ***Epic of Gilgamesh (Mesopotamian):*** This epic hero's tale explores themes of:
 - ◆ Immortality in 3 ways: 1) Through Fame for great deeds
 - ◆ 2) Quest for physical immortality
 - ◆ 3) the only true form of immortality for human beings
 - ◆ Nature vs. culture and the process of social civilizing
 - ◆ Important human values

- 3 2/11 **Vergil's *Aeneid* Books 1–3 (Roman)**
 - ◆ Summary of Homer's influence on Greek drama, poetry and art, and Greek influence on Roman poetry
 - ◆ **Book 1:** Introduction to Aeneas and the poem's themes
 - ◆ Landing on the north coast of Africa
 - ◆ Introduction to Dido, Queen of Carthage, preparation for their encounter
 - ◆ **Book 2:** Aeneas' story of the conquest of Troy
 - ◆ **Book 3:** Trojans' adventures, like Odysseus', on their journey from Troy
- 4 2/18 **Vergil's *Aeneid* Books 4, 6, 12**
 - ◆ **Book 4:** Encounter with Dido: tension between personal feelings and adherence to patriotic duty
 - ◆ **Book 6:** the elaborate journey to the Underworld, inspiration for Dante's *Inferno*
 - ◆ Aeneas' unusual challenges in entering and leaving the Underworld
 - ◆ Aeneas meets his father's spirit and learns of Rome's illustrious future
 - ◆ **Book 12:** Aeneas battles the local hero in order to conquer the land, marry the princess and found Rome
 - ◆ Vergil's questioning the values required for empire and the impacts on human feelings and morals
- 5 2/25 **Summary of Homeric echoes from Vergil to H.D.**
 - ◆ **H.D., *Helen in Egypt* (1961), pp. 1-108: Helen and Akhilleus 1**
 - ◆ Modern, female-centered envisionings of the archetypal hero and heroine
 - ◆ Elaborates 2 ancient myths: 1) the real Helen in Egypt, while her phantom image is in Troy; and 2) these 2 archetypes meet on Leuké (White Island) after their deaths
 - ◆ Explores female identity, psychology, eroticism, agency
- 6 3/3 **H.D., *Helen in Egypt*, pp. 109-207: Helen and Akhilleus 2**
 - ◆ Continued exploration of these 2 archetypes
 - ◆ Intersections of myth, poetry and identity
- 7 3/17 **H.D., *Helen in Egypt*, pp. 208-304: Helen and Akhilleus 3**
 - ◆ Continued exploration of these 2 archetypes
 - ◆ Intersections of myth, poetry and identity
- 8 3/24 **Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad* (2005), pp. 1-141**
 - ◆ Modern, female-centered envisionings of *Odyssey*-inspired tales that explore the poem's themes from the perspectives of both Penelope and the 12 hanged maids
- 9 3/31 **Atwood, *The Penelopiad*, pp. 143-196, and Zachary Mason, *The Lost Books of the Odyssey*, pp. 1-108**
 - ◆ Continued exploration of *The Penelopiad*'s themes
 - ◆ Mason: Modern, male-centered envisionings of *Odyssey*-inspired short tales that explore the mirror images or undersides of prominent themes of Homer's 2 poems
 - ◆ Exploring themes in counterpoint between these two works
- 10 4/7 **Mason, *The Lost Books of the Odyssey*, pp. 109-228**
 - ◆ Continued exploration of *The Lost Book*'s themes
 - ◆ Concluding exploration of thematic counterpoints
 - ◆ Concluding review of course's works and themes