

Ancient Women Speak:
Contemporary Rewritings of Classical Epics from the Women's Point of View
ENGL 3742, Fall 2019
TR 12:30-1:50, PY 210

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TR 11-12:00, and by appointment

In this course we will look critically at the ancient Greek and Roman epics (*The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, and *Metamorphoses*), attempting to read them from the perspective of female characters, who remain largely silent. Ancient women's motives may be considered opaque (Helen), their views on male characters' actions may be suppressed by the narrative (Leda, Penelope, Eurydice), they themselves may be constantly misunderstood (Cassandra) or unquestioningly maligned (Circe), or their experience may be entirely ignored by the narrative (Briseis, Lavinia, Galatea). One of the objectives of this course is to practice reading any narrative from the perspective of the "other"—that is, anyone who lacks control (or has only partial control) of the narrative, regardless of their gender or any kind of difference in their status (others to consider include Patroclus and Polyphemus). This approach may be considered deconstructive, post-colonialist, feminist, and/or queer. In seeking new perspectives, we will realize the extent to which other voices have been and still are inevitably silenced in both literature and history.

We will read contemporary rewritings of these classical texts to help us imagine the lost experiences of women in particular. The hegemony of classical Western texts has come increasingly under attack in recent years, and this course was designed in part as a way to interrogate those texts so that we recognize their limitations (and the concomitant limitations of their contexts) without dismissing them as valueless. After all, their limitations are historically inseparable from the limitations of Western culture, literature, and society that persist to this day. Thus an understanding of ancient literature, myth, and culture, together with a creative search for new perspectives, is a secondary objective of this course. Students will be asked to compare ancient and modern texts, both orally and in writing, with an emphasis on changes in perspective. No prior knowledge of classical culture and literature is required.

- Aug. 27** Introduction. Poems about Leda by Rainer Maria Rilke, William Butler Yeats, and Mona Van Duyn (D2L)
28 *Last Day for Add/Drop Without the Dean's Permission*
29 Homer, *Iliad* 1; Lodge, "Polyphemus and Postcolonialism" (D2L)
- Sept. 3** Ovid, *Heroides* 3; *Iliad* 3, 6:240-529, and 22:361-515
5 Pat Barker, *The Silence of the Girls*, Part I
10 *The Silence of the Girls*, Part II
12 *The Silence of the Girls*, Part III

- 17 *Heroides* 16-17; Margaret George, *Helen of Sparta*, Afterword, Prologue, and Chapters 1-9
- 19 *Helen of Sparta*, Chapters 10-20
- 24 *Helen of Sparta*, Chapters 21-32
- 26 *Helen of Sparta*, Chapters 33-43
- Oct. 1 *Helen of Sparta*, Chapters 44-56
- 3 *Helen of Sparta*, Chapters 57-67
- 8 *Helen of Sparta*, Chapters 68-80
- 10 Christa Wolf, *Cassandra*, pp. 3-76
- 15 *Cassandra*, pp. 77-138; poems about Cassandra by Nina Kossman and Yannis Ritsos (D2L)
- 17 Homer, *Odyssey* 10:133-574 and 11:1-141; poems about Circe and the Sirens by Gabriel Zaid, Virginia Hamilton Adair, Louise Glück, and Margaret Atwood (D2L)
- Iliad Paper Due***
- 22 Madeline Miller, *Circe*, Chapters 1-8
- 24 *Circe*, Chapters 9-17
- 28 ***Last Day for "W"***
- 29 *Circe*, Chapters 18-27
- 31 *Odyssey* 19-21
- Nov. 5 *Odyssey* 22-24; *Heroides* 1
- 7 Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*
- 12 Vergil, *Aeneid* 1-2
- 14 *Aeneid* 4 and 7:1-134, 327-627; *Heroides* 7
- Odyssey Paper Due***
- 19 Ursula K. Le Guin, *Lavinia*, pp. 1-90
- 21 *Lavinia*, pp. 90-181
- 26 *Lavinia*, pp. 181-272
- 28 ***Thanksgiving Break***
- Dec. 3 Ovid, *Pygmalion*; Miller, "Galatea and Pygmalion" (D2L)
- 5 Ovid, *Orpheus*; poems about Eurydice by Marina Tsvetaeva, H.D., and Margaret Atwood; Alexander Kondratiev, "Orpheus" (D2L)
- Aeneid Paper Due***
- Final Paper Proposal Due***
- 10 ***Final Paper Due***

Course Requirements:

1. Participation (15%). Participation in class discussions will help you to understand and think critically about the material. Studies have shown that expressing your ideas orally improves not only your verbal skills, but also your ability to think critically. I encourage you to speak with all of your classmates and respond to one another's ideas during discussion, rather than addressing your thoughts only to me. Ideally, I should be listening to your mature discussion, stepping in only as necessary.

2. Presentation (15%). At the beginning of the semester, you will sign up for a presentation on the contemporary prose reading for the day (several days also include poetry). There will be no presentations on the days we cover the classical texts themselves. Presentations exclusively on contemporary poetry will be permitted only under extraordinary circumstances (for example, if you must reschedule your presentation and no other option is available). If you miss your presentation you will receive a 0 unless you have a note verifying that you were absent due to a legitimate, unforeseen circumstance.

Your presentation should be approximately 10-15 minutes long. Your choice of topic is open: the only requirement is that it should be relevant to the reading for the day, or at least to the book we are currently reading. You may compare the contemporary work to the classical text, provided such comparison is relevant to the reading. If the reading refers or alludes to classical myths or characters we have not yet discussed in class, you may research, explain, and, as relevant, interpret those references. If you are not sure whether the reading alludes to any classical myths, feel free to ask me. Alternatively, your presentation may be limited to an interpretation of the text, or observations on the reading for the day, but it should not be merely a summary. You may wish to imagine the narrative from the perspective of a minor or “silenced” character. If you are interested in theory and would like to apply it to the reading for the day or to the book we are covering, you may take that approach. If you feel additional knowledge about classical culture, literature, or mythology would be helpful for an understanding of the work, you may focus your presentation on that. Please feel free to be creative. If you would like to do something other than what I have suggested here but you are not sure whether I would approve of it as relevant to the contemporary text, please do not hesitate to send me an email or speak to me about your idea. The use of PowerPoint or other visual materials or handouts for your presentation is permitted but by no means required or preferred. You are not required to consult any outside sources, but if you do, you must refer to them in your presentation. MLA or APA format is not required for presentations.

At the end of your presentation, you should accept any questions from the audience, then pose at least two questions to initiate discussion for the day.

3. Three Short Papers (15% each). You will submit one short paper for each of the epics we cover most thoroughly—*The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and *the Aeneid*. Due dates are listed above in the course calendar. Your choice of topic is open, provided that your paper deals with at least one recent or contemporary rewriting of the epic (either poetry or prose). You may choose to compare the recent work(s) to the original epic, or to some aspect of it, including related myths. Or you may compare aspects of two or more recent works to one another. Alternatively, you may choose to offer an in-depth interpretation of some aspect of the recent work(s), or you may want to apply a theoretical approach. You might also wish to choose a different character from the classical epic and write a paper imagining events from that character’s perspective. These are just a few suggestions. I encourage you either to

ask me to approve your topic beforehand or to discuss it with me in more detail. I will also be available to discuss potential topics if you are not sure what to write about. Each paper should be 4-5 pages long. It is okay if it is a bit longer, but if it is less than four full pages long with standard formatting, your grade will be reduced for insufficient length. No research is required, but if you do choose to use outside sources, please cite them in MLA or APA style (with in-text citations). If you are unfamiliar with MLA or APA format, you may consult the MLA or APA websites, visit the Writing Center, or see me.

4. Final Paper (25%). As with your other assignments, your choice of a topic for the final paper is open, provided it is relevant to the course. You may use one of my suggestions for the shorter papers above. You may focus on one contemporary work or include as many as you wish. You may choose some aspect of the course as a whole for your paper: for example, you may write about the importance of perspective and/or the silenced voice of the “other” in general, providing examples from the course. Your work may be purely interpretive, or you may choose to do a research paper. For instance, you may write about different views of Helen through the centuries, and you may include art and film as well as literature if you wish. Or you may wish to do research on the historical role of women in Greek and/or Roman culture, or on their portrayal in classical literature. Again, you may wish to take a theoretical approach. Be creative! No research is required, but if you do choose to use outside sources, please cite them in MLA or APA style (with in-text citations).

You must give me an informal proposal for your final paper by the last day of classes. You may submit it in writing (about half a page), email it to me, or discuss it with me, and I will either approve your topic outright or offer you suggestions. The final paper should be 8-10 pages long (again, eight full pages is the minimum), and it is due on **December 10**.

5. Attendance. You must attend class to help you master and contextualize the material. You are permitted two unexcused absences. Absences will be excused only on the basis of a note from a doctor, dean, military official, or coach. Your final grade will be lowered by one point for each unexcused absence in excess of the two permitted unexcused absences.

Course Policies:

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty: If you plagiarize on any paper, or engage in any other form of academic dishonesty as defined by the MSU Student Handbook and the course Academic Dishonesty Policy, you will get an F in the course and disciplinary proceedings will be initiated in accordance with the MSU Student Handbook.

Midterm Progress Report: I will submit a Midterm Progress Report to your WebWorld account if you are at risk of earning a D or an F in the course. Midterm grades will not be reported on your transcript; nor will they be calculated in the cumulative GPA. Students

earning below a C at the midway point will receive an email from Tutoring and Academic Support.

Late Papers: Grades for late papers will be reduced by one-third of a letter grade per day (e.g., A > A-), including weekends and holidays, unless you have a legitimate reason for submitting the paper late and you have spoken to me about it. If your paper is late, you should email it to me as soon as possible to stop the clock.

Cell Phones: No cell phones should be visible in class, except if we are collectively seeking a response to a question. If you wish to consult an e-text on your cellphone or iPad, please tell me ahead of time.

Food and Beverages: You may bring only bottled water to class, in accordance with the building rules.

Email Communication: The only way I can communicate with you outside of class is through email. You are responsible for checking your “preferred” email regularly for any reminders, clarifications, or other communications from me.

Safe Zone Statement: This classroom is a “safe zone” in which all students will be treated and will treat one another equally, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, political beliefs, age, or ability. Diversity of thought is encouraged.

Required Books:

Recent/Contemporary Works

These are the editions ordered through the bookstore. You may use any edition for these books. They are/will be available on reserve at the library as well.

Atwood, Margaret. *The Penelopiad*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2005.

George, Margaret. *Helen of Troy: A Novel*. New York: Penguin, 2006.

Barker, Pat. *The Silence of the Girls: A Novel*. New York: Doubleday, 2018.

Le Guin, Ursula K. *Lavinia: A Novel*. New York: Mariner Books, 2009.

Miller, Madeline. *Circe: A Novel*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2018.

Wolf, Christa. *Cassandra: A Novel and Four Essays*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984.

Optional Contemporary Work

Students who are interested in queer studies may choose to read this novel in addition to the required novels, and they may choose to use it for papers and presentations on *The Iliad*. It is available for purchase online.

Miller, Madeline. *The Song of Achilles: A Novel*. (2012).

Classical Texts

We will only be reading excerpts from these texts, but online translations are out of copyright and very bad, so you will have to use these particular editions (with the exception of *Heroides*). They are available at the bookstore and on reserve at the library.

LATTIMORE TRANSLATION OF *THE ODYSSEY*

LATTIMORE TRANSLATION OF *THE ILIAD*

MANDELBAUM TRANSLATION OF *THE AENEID*

ISBELL TRANSLATION OF *HEROIDES* (PENGUIN)

Note: You may read *Heroides* online at www.theoi.com, though the translation is dated. I recommend using the recommended edition because it is easier to read and includes helpful short introductions and notes.

D2L Texts

Other texts will be posted on D2L, as noted in the course schedule.

Research and Creative Activity Opportunities at MSU

Enhancing Undergraduate Research Endeavors and Creative Activities (EURECA) is a program that provides opportunities for undergraduates to engage in high-quality research and creative activities with faculty. EURECA provides incentives and funding through a system that supports faculty and students in a cooperative research process. For more information contact the Office of Undergraduate Research, (940) 397-6275 or by sending a message to eureca@mwsu.edu or better yet, stop by the UGR office located in the atrium of the Clark Student Center, room 161. Information and resources are available at www.mwsu.edu/eureca.