English 203 (World Literature)

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Office hours: Mondays, 4:30-6:30 PM, Tuesdays, 4:30-5:30 PM., and Wednesdays, 4:30-6:30 PM. No need to make an appointment.

To the students of English 203:

Welcome! I have four goals for this course:

--- To introduce you to a range of important writing from literary history’s first 3000 years, presented in chronological order. It is, of course, impossible to cover the spectrum of literature produced over this period in a full (or even satisfactory) fashion, but English 203 lets you sample productions of seminal authors working in old and new forms.

--- To give you a literary vocabulary: terms that enable precise, insightful discussions of literature, so you can assess style as well as content. With these terms, you can move beyond the kind of content-oriented discussions that occur in book clubs. To state it more simply, you can learn to describe not just what authors say but how they say it.

--- To tentatively explore with you the relationship between literature and history.

--- To engender in you an appreciation of great literature that makes you want to spend the rest of your life reading it.

Toward these ends, we’ll examine representative writings in the context of cultures that formed them, viewing literature as the product of particular historical moments, generic traditions, and individual talents. We’ll analyze the formal properties of each text, isolating the way style expresses content.

The class combines lectures, discussion, and group work.

Apart from assigned textbook chapters, most of what you’ve read up to now is probably fiction. There is no fiction on this syllabus. That’s because pre-modern literature is dominated by other forms that include epic, history, lyric, hagiography, autobiography, philosophical dialogue, and essay. These forms can be off-putting for contemporary readers who are used to novels. Partly to make the reading more accessible, I am organizing this class around a thematic question: what constitutes a significant loving relationship? With each of the readings on our syllabus, our task it to try to figure out how the author or authors answers this question. Sometimes there is no stable answer or the text seems to present a set of conflicting suggestions. This makes our work more interesting.

Texts:

*The Norton Anthology of World Literature, Vol. I.* Ed. Martin Puchner, et al.

*The Symposium* (Plato). Trans. and Intro., Christopher Gill.

*The First Free Women: Poems of the Early Buddhist Nuns*. Ed. Matty Weingast.

Course Requirements:

Attendance

--- Attend and remain for the duration of all classes. Schedule dental appointments, job interviews, and college-advising sessions at other times.

After eight absences, you’ll automatically receive the grade of F. No distinction is made between excused and unexcused absences.

Reading

--- Complete every reading on time, engage actively with the assignments, spearhead discussions, and make claims that demonstrate forethought. Ask questions about anything you don’t understand. Be curious. Have fun.

Assignments

--- There is both a midterm and a final examination. Each test consists entirely of identifications. No obscure quotations are used. Everything on these exams is either a crucial section of a text and/or something discussed in class.

--- There is a short (5-7page) paper, which makes a substantive claim about a work from the syllabus, demonstrating close reading techniques practiced in class. You can write about *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Hebrew Bible, or Plato’s *Symposium* (specific assignment to be distributed).

A Word About Plagiarism

In all writing for the class, ideas must be your own; do not restate the contents of online summaries, books, or journal articles. Obviously, do not use any form of AI, which is obvious to professors. All of this constitutes plagiarism. Plagiarism is the unattributed use of someone else’s ideas or language -- deliberate or unintentional. Don’t do it. Indicate where your ideas end and another thinker’s begin. If you’re not sure whether to cite -- mention someone and provide a parenthetical citation in the text -- or not, err on the side of caution: cite. Or, consult with me, another English professor, or a tutor at the writing center.

So, you are free to deepen and enhance your writing with the interpretations of a scholar or two (trained experts who write books and articles rather than someone who maintains a website for fun), but if you do, acknowledge those writers by name and include the title you’re using and, where possible, page numbers. Provide citations according to MLA style. Utilize an expert’s ideas to make your own clearer; do not hand mastery of the paper over to a chosen scholar.

Grading Breakdown:

--- Twenty-five percent for each exam, 25 percent for the essay, and 25 percent for in-class participation.

Class Decorum:

--- English 203 is a technology-free zone. You must avail yourself of the books. In class, keep laptops, phones, and other electronic devices out of sight.(This rule does not apply to students with particular needs, who require such items. If that’s your situation, please speak with me about it.)

--- Don’t bring food to class, but feel free to have beverages.

--- Latecomers, come on in, but please be quiet and take a seat at the side of the room, not moving furniture or walking in front of the lectern.

--- Don’t come to class if you’re sick. To be clear, if you are experiencing COVID-like symptoms or features of any other virus, stay out of the classroom. If you do come, you will be asked to leave.

**--- Even an illness-related absence does not excuse you from coming prepared for the next class. Please get a list of 5-7 people whom you can contact to get class notes and find out what is planned for the next session.**

**--- If you contact me by email, please include your full name as well as the course title and section number. Then give a brief, clear statement of your request. I only answer emails in which students introduce themselves and explain what they need. There is no way for me to respond to an email that reads, “Sorry I missed class. My car fell apart. What did we do?” I won’t know which class or who the person is.**

--- Trigger warnings: During recent semesters it has become common practice to include on syllabi trigger warnings: notes that prepare students for disturbing content. Here is my attempt at a trigger warning:

The author Doris Lessing said that a story or line of poetry has the power to destroy empires. I agree.

Important literature is riveting, unsettling, sometimes violent, rarely simple. While philosophy generally strives toward consensus, literature divides with its conflicts, ambiguities, and tensions. Few significant writers of literature have started with the determination not to offend people: quite the opposite. Serious authors tend to challenge readers’ most cherished beliefs. This is not gratuitous assault but part of the process by which writers counteract others’ confirmation biases. Reading the texts people have argued about for centuries is *gloriously* *unsafe*.

I believe that you are not so fragile that you will shatter upon contact with thoughts, phrases, or situations you find unsettling or cultural assumptions that seem offensive. Because this class reaches back into early history, we inevitably encounter behavior that shocks us – even practices that appear extremely detrimental – but characters take in stride. While this can be uncomfortable, it often shakes us out of our own cultural complacency, asking us to re-evaluate our assumptions, which, in 300 years, may seem appalling to many – even most – people.

Literary experts tell us that conflict, problems, and tragic errors are the stuff of narrative; they generate stories and propel them forward. Without them, there is usually no reason for a narrative to exist. So, if the authors on the syllabus upset or discomfit you, they have done their job. Please come to our readings forewarned.

Schedule:

08-31 Course introduction and opening remarks.

09-04 Labor Day: no class.

09-06 Reading: personal selections from class members. These should open up for us the following questions, to be revisited throughout the class:

--- Why bother to read?

--- Why bother to read things written long ago, in premodern, non-industrialized cultures whose denizens express religious feelings? Aren’t such books naïve and outdated? Can anything written several thousand years ago be “relevant?”

--- Are the books on this syllabus intrinsically bad because their authors are male (--- oh wait, are they?).

--- Are the books on this syllabus intrinsically bad because their authors are western (---oh wait, are they?).

--- Are the authors on this syllabus prejudiced because they’ve been taught in colleges forever? (---oh wait, have they?).

--- When we read texts that offer messages or lessons, must we reflexively accept them?

09-11 *Epic of Gilgamesh* (anonymous).

09-13 *Epic of Gilgamesh*

09-18 *Epic of Gilgamesh*

09-20 *Epic of Gilgamesh*

09-25 Yom Kippur: no class.



09-27 Professor’s conference: no class.

10-02 The Hebrew Bible: Genesis 1-4; 6-9; 11.

10-04 The Hebrew Bible: 12, 17, 18. 21, 22.

10-09 The Hebrew Bible: 12, 17, 18. 21, 22.

10-11 *The Hebrew Bible.* Professor’s CCSU Author’s Reading. Attendees are excused from class.

10-16 *The Symposium*

Note: this is a good time to visit me during office hours with a rough draft of your essay. You might make an appointment at the CCSU Writing Center, which also takes walk-ins. Its tutors can help you check your papers for errors at the level of the sentence, organize your ideas, develop your paragraphs, and make sure that you’re following MLA style correctly:  <https://ccsu.mywconline.com/>.

10-18 *The Symposium*.

10-23 *The Symposium*.

10-25 “Friend” (Mitta), “Free” (Another Mutta), “Conqueror” (Jenta), “The Elephant” (Dantika), “Great Woman” (Uttama).

10-30 “Red Hair” (Bhadda Kapalani), “Greatest Joy” (Nanduttara), “Friend of the Dark” (Mittakali), “From a Good Home” (Sukula), “Beyond Compare” (Anopama). Essay due. No extensions.

11-01 The New Testament, Luke 2; Luke 15; Matthew 5-7; Matthew 13.

11-06 The New Testament, Matthew 5-7; Matthew 13.

11-08 The New Testament, Mark 3:31-4, John 1.

11-13 Midterm

11-15 Augustine: from the *Confessions* (pp. 765-774; 776-8)

11-20 Augustine, from the *Confessions* (p.780, 788)

11-22 Thanksgiving break: no class.

11-27 *Beowulf*.

11-29 *Beowulf*.

12-04 Michel de Montaigne, “Of Friendship:” https://naomigryn.com/Ebooks/Of-Friendship-Montaigne.pdf

12-06 Katherine Philips, “To My Excellent Lucasia, On Our Friendship;” “Friendship’s Mystery, to my Dearest Lucasia:” https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44861/friendships-mystery-to-my-dearest-lucasia

Date of final exam to be announced.

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Second Set of Lecture Notes

Plato’s *Symposium*

--- **Dates: The *Symposium* was composed circa 385 BC. The dinner itself, if it took place, is datable to 416 BCE.** According to Martha C. Nussbaum (see below), the framing device, with its dialogue between Apollodorus and his friend, occurred in 404 BCE.

--- **Milieu:** An Athenian aristocrat, Plato travelled in circles in which same-sex male attraction and amorous feeling was considered natural, typical. In general, Plato does not speak for himself but as the representative/mouthpiece of his teacher, Socrates, who shares this assumption. (Socrates left no writing of his own behind.) Platonic philosophy does not feature a superior teacher uttering fiats and dicta but rather an energetic conversation between speakers. These interlocuters are generally from the leisured classes. In the *Symposium* male eroticism is the starting-point from which a theory of love emerges as the result of a series of speeches. The historian KJ Dover reminds readers that none of these speeches necessarily epitomize general Greek thinking: “Plato differed from most Athenians of his time in his possession of wealth and leisure, in boundless zeal for the study of philosophy and mathematics, in a suspicious and censorious attitude to the arts…” He does not express a viewpoint that Greeks would have shared unanimously.

--- The *Symposium* is a dialogue of Plato’s middle period, along with *Phaedo*, *Republic*, and *Phaedrus*. The dialogue form was popular at the time, especially in Plato’s circle. (Most dialogues by other authors have not survived.) Plato’s work of this period usually contains explicit statements about his Theory of Ideas, which, in its mature form, comes from this phase of his career. In the *Symposium*, the assertion comes at the end of Diotima’s lesson, when she describes the lover’s ascent to union with perfect beauty.

--- Earlier Platonic dialogues are more **eristic** (contentious). Socrates often stands in for Plato and either solves an **aporia** (seemingly irresolvable logical problem) or a less thorny conundrum. Sometimes he plants a question in an interlocutor’s mind. Or, he dismantles his opponent’s assumptions. The *Symposium* has only one truly eristic moment: the discussion (with the poet Agathon) of whether love must be love of something. Otherwise, there is minimal dispute or cross-examination. Characters speak at length, uninterrupted. Juxtaposed, their speeches provide space for Plato to showcase different styles of rhetoric on display in **panegyrics** (orations of praise).

--- Plato has an old quarrel with rhetoric, because it is based on opinion rather than knowledge. Professional rhetoricians and sophists – teachers of eloquence who trained students to produce arguments on either side of a question – were numerous and influential in fourth-century BCE Athens. Plato (and Socrates) considered their work ignoble, since it excited public opinion, toying with listeners rather than helping them grasp stable truths. In the *Symposium*, the agreed-upon plan for the dinner party is rhetorical: to deliver speeches of praise. Socrates pretends not to understand this goal so he can later sabotage it.

--- Some of the debate, as far as there is one, attempts to define love correctly and assess how broadly the concept should be used. Phaedrus would use it of all lovers, Pausanius only to denote spiritual relationships. Eryximachus would have it describe the entire universe. Aristophanes (with his androgynes) and Socrates (with Poverty and Contrivance) create myths in an attempt to elucidate the origin of love. Alcibiades gives only one example: the story of an individual relationship.

--- **Myth**: As Plato uses them, myths are oral stories taken from tradition. This does not mean that a myth is false, which is the contemporary connotation. Contemporary readers find it strange that at crucial moments in an argument Plato falls back on mythological tales such as that of the androgyne, or the birth of eros from Poverty and Contrivance. But close reading reveals that both stories are a. invented by Plato and b. explanatory in terms of their function in the text. The story of the original androgyne asserts, at the rudiment of sexual desire, longing for what resembles us and the yearning for wholeness: the lover is a partial self without the beloved to complete them. The myth of the birth of eros, however, attempts to explain a paradox: love is both rich (in ideas, inventions, practices) and poor (in its need for a beloved). Plato’s myth solves the problem through a genealogical allegory: one of the parents was Contrivance (i.e., clever resourcefulness) and the other Poverty (i.e., deprivation).

Though these tales may put forth theories, they do not prove them or even make them probable as actual events. Plato’s use of invented myths continues to vex scholars of Greek literature.

--- **How can the truth come from a woman (the fictional Diotima) when Greek culture had such a low estimation of women?** Some have argued that Socrates cannot learn the truth from another man because a. readers might assume he had gotten it in exchange for sexual favors and b. because in matters of homosexual desire, men are biased. Even if this is true, does it matter that truth comes from a woman? David Halperin claims that it does. Love, in Diotima’s account, is reciprocal and procreative; these are not features of Greek love between men, where the beloved is passively aloof, and procreation is impossible. According to Halperin, these “feminine” qualities have been inserted in the dialogue by a male thinker that associates procreation with passion – which a woman would not. Halperin argues that Diotima is made fictional and contradictory to remind readers that the ultimate ideal is male and, in this case, Socrates himself. Eros is described as a philosopher who goes out shoeless in the winter; Socrates is then pictured doing just this. Diotima is supposed to have contradicted, long ago, ideas that Aristophanes has just expressed. She is a deliberately flimsy disguise. The voice of authority in this dialogue remains male.

The classicist Froma I. Zeitlin approaches this issue differently. She considers Diotima “the one kind of feminine authority the culture acknowledges as legitimate;” Diotima is a priestess with prophetic abilities. She has a prestigious profession that makes her exceptional – appropriate as a speaker in this dialogue. As someone exempt from the realm of masculine politics and interactions she has no agenda, no self-interest. She has the requisite distance to advise men; the hazards of love are not dangers she is exposed to. Zeitlin also notes that in introducing Diotima, Plato allies femininity with sexuality – an old association. Ironically, Diotima tells a groups of male speakers how to avoid women’s allure and, “through the sublimations of pederastic love, even give birth to themselves.”

I confess that I find Halperin’s argument strained and confusing and Zeitlin’s logical and compelling. Professor Zeitlin develops her claim in a more expansive discussion of Plato and other classical authors: *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (The University of Chicago Press,1996).

--- **Why does Alcibiades speak last?** A soldier, Alcibiades interrupts the dinner party and tells a story about Socrates intended to illustrate the latter’s excellence. Known for and aware of his physical beauty, Alcibiades once set out to seduce Socrates, convinced that he could obtain guidance and wisdom from this famous teacher. He pursued him, believing that Socrates would follow the expected course when they met and assume the role of *erastes* (aggressor, lover of, and guide to a younger man). Socrates did not. Finally, Alcibiades arranged a dinner at which he and Socrates ate alone, detained his guest until it was too late to leave, and then went into his room and climbed into bed with him. When Alcibiades put his arms around Socrates, Socrates showed no physical excitement. Alcibiades’ vanity was wounded, but he admired Socrates’ “endurance” and utter self-control. He learned that there are, in Dover’s words, “unseen beauties far excelling the beauties of the body,” and the triumph of rationality over physicality is one.

Socrates is not immune to physical beauty. It arouses strong emotions, one of which is desire. The feelings that beauty awakens, like beauty itself, are fleeting, but in the *Symposium*, they provide glimpses of eternity, allowing people to momentarily see the realm of unchanging forms. Eros is not a dependable sensation; attraction waxes and wanes, and the sexual experience itself is ephemeral. Eros is valuable because it draws human beings toward the world of eternal forms and toward the Good.

According to Martha C. Nussbaum, Alcibiades talks last to present a comprehensive alternative to Socrates’ dismissal of individuals as worthy love objects. By opposing autobiographical narrative to pure reasoning and needy, unrestrained behavior to stoic self-possession, Alcibiades comes to represent everything that Socrates abandons: aspects of human gratification that the Platonic philosopher must turn away from. He also stands for the tangible claims of literature against the abstract ones of philosophy. Nussbaum develops this idea in “The Speech of Alcibiades: A Reading of Plato’s *Symposium*, *Philosophy and Literature* 3 (1979).