

# The Classical Roots of Western Literature

Summer 2003: July 21<sup>st</sup> - August 8<sup>th</sup> • Brown University  
Sayles 204 • 9AM - 12PM.

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Office Hours: MW 1-2 & By Appointment



Botticelli's "Vergil leading Dante"

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## Course Description and Objectives:

While many aspects of modern culture trace their origins to the world of ancient Greece and Rome, the influence of classical antiquity is nowhere more significant than in literature. To this day, the works and stories of antiquity remain a source of conscious inspiration and a pervasive, latent presence that guides the form and content of literature.

This course aims to familiarize students with some of the ancient authors, works, and subjects that had the greatest impact on the development of Western literature. By the completion of the course, students should be able to:

- Explain what is meant by the "Classical tradition" and its relevance to contemporary literature
- Identify the major classical myths and stories that influenced Western literature
- Understand why authors engage the Classical tradition
- Appreciate how artists allude to, emulate, develop, and rival ancient authorities
- Describe the difference between the major types of literature (genres) created in antiquity and how those genres influenced the development of Western literature
- Recognize the continuing influence of Classical literature in contemporary culture

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## Required Texts; Total = \$78.79

- **Knox** = *The Norton Book of Classical Literature*. Bernard Knox, ed.. W.W. Norton & Company, 1993. ISBN: 0393034267; \$29.95
- **Shakespeare** = Shakespeare. *Julius Caesar*. Folger Shakespeare Library Series. ISBN: 0671722719; \$4.99
- **Plautus** = Plautus. Erich Segal trans. Oxford World's Classics. ISBN: 0192838962; \$9.95
- **Greek Atlas** = Robert Morkot. *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Greece*. Penguin. ISBN: 0140513353; \$16.95
- **Roman Atlas** = Chris Scarre. *The Penguin Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*. Penguin. ISBN: 0140513299; \$16.95

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## Course Website, Format, & Grading:

**Website:** The course website is available at [www.bretmulligan.com](http://www.bretmulligan.com). On the homepage, under the heading "Currently Teaching," you will see a link to "Classical Roots of Western Literature." The website will host an updated syllabus, copies of handouts should you misplace those distributed in class, and links to resources related to the authors, texts, and subjects we are investigating.

**Format:** In this course, we will investigate the classical roots of Western literature through a series of modules focusing on the genres of epic, satire, history, philosophy, drama, and poetry. For example, when we investigate drama, on the first day we will read selections from Sophocles's *Antigone* and discuss the conventions of drama in antiquity. On the next day we will read selections from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and discuss how Shakespeare is both influenced by and reacts against the dramatic tradition he inherited from antiquity to produce a work that engages the classical tradition while articulating his own literary identity. We will also explore the wider influence on Western intellectual history, in this case, for example, *Antigone*'s influence on the development of Hegelian dialectic.

In conjunction with our interpretation of major ancient texts, students, working in small groups, will conduct brief presentations on works related thematically to the primary text for the day.

The course will conclude with a series of faculty-mentored projects in which students will be encouraged to reconsider a favorite work – be it T.S. Eliot or J. K. Rowling - in light of their new-found familiarity with the scope and depth of the classical roots of western literature.

A typical class time will consist of a mixture of class lecture, discussion, and group work. We will also have two field trips during class time: one to the RISD museum and another to the manuscript collection at the John Hay library. “Movie nights” may be offered if student interest is sufficient.

**Grading:** In addition to a detailed written evaluation of your performance in this course, you will also receive an “FYI (for your information)” grade, which will allow you to compare your performance vis-à-vis performance expectations for a regular college course. Your “FYI” grade for this course will be based on class participation, a final project, journal writings, class presentations, and quizzes in the following ratios:

- **Class Participation**            **40%**
- **Final Project**                   **20%**
- **Journal writing**               **20%**
- **Class Presentations**       **10%**
- **Quizzes**                         **10%**
- **Attendance**                    **+/-**

People learn at different rates, have different proficiencies, and bring to a course varied knowledge of the material – this is part of the joys of learning in a university setting, as you benefit from the strengths of others and in turn lend your own expertise to your peers. In this course, you will never be evaluated against other members of the class. Only your own abilities and efforts will be taken into account when determining evaluating your performance. That is to say, there will be no curve.

**Class Participation:** Attendance is very important to the general success of the course. Your preparation grade is **neither** a measure of simple attendance **nor** that you answer every question in class correctly – many of the issues we will confront in this course have been vexing the human intellect for millennia and while solutions would be welcomed, they are hardly expected. Moreover, learning is an experimental process and oftentimes the experiments of even the most dedicated and intellectually curious students go awry. This grade will reflect, however, **regular, careful preparation** of assigned material and the **consistent, enthusiastic attempt to share your interpretations** with your peers.

**Final Project:** For your final project, you will investigate the classical influence on a modern work of literature. Preferably, this is a favorite work, one with which you are intimately familiar, and passionately eager to discuss with your peers. Alternatively, if you want to explore a new work, suggestions will be forthcoming. You have two options for the format of your final project: 1) a traditional 4-5 page academic analysis of the text or 2) a web-based project that presents your academic analysis in a multimedia format. I will be happy to provide a brief tutorial to students who wish to undertake a web-based project but lack the requisite computer skills.

Regardless of your format, your final project will consist of five graded sections: 1) a brief description of the project (5%); 2) a rough draft of your project (15%); 3) an evaluation of a peer’s project (20%); 4) a class presentation on your project (10%); 5) a final version (50%).

**Journal writing:** To facilitate your enjoyment of the literature we read and to stimulate class discussions, you will be expected to write a brief journal entry for **every class**. Essentially, this will capture your first reactions and/or further considerations as you read (or re-read) the day’s assignment. Your journal grade will be based on your consistent and intelligent consideration of the day’s assignment. Among other possibilities, a successful journal entry can be a series of questions that the text provoked and that you would like to discuss with the class, relating a character or event to a personal experience or another text, or a brief critical analysis of a passage or character. More creative responses – i.e. short stories, poems, and artwork – are encouraged,

although some of the entries must be of the more traditional variety. Not every text will strike you with the same force and one or two “light” entries are acceptable.

**Presentations:** In groups of two or three, students will present a work to the class for consideration. A successful presentation will accurately describe the work and how it relates to the main reading for the day. Presentation topics can be found on the website and students should familiarize themselves with potential topics as soon as possible. Suggestions for presentations on other works will certainly be considered and appreciated. In general, presentations should last at least 15 minutes, with an upper range of 30 minutes (certain presentations may exceed this measure).

**Quizzes:** Because of the rapid pace of the course, make-up quizzes will not be given without approval **prior to the date** of the quiz - and then at my sole discretion.

**Absences:** In a condensed course such as ours, one absence is equivalent to missing an entire week of a regular college course. Accommodations for the vicissitudes of fate and health can be made with my express **prior** approval. Several or unexcused absences will result in the reduction of your “FYI” grade by **10 points** for each unexcused absence and a notation of truancy in your written evaluation. Only in cases of severe personal crisis or serious medical incapacitation will this policy be altered - and then at my sole discretion.

**Tardiness:** The course moves rapidly and our meeting times are brief. Be on time. If you are late, explain it to me after class. Habitual, unexcused tardiness will be treated as an unexcused absence.

**Academic Integrity:** Having attended an Honor Code institution myself, I treat issues of academic integrity with the utmost seriousness. Collaborative work on assignments is allowed and even encouraged provided that all work you submit under your name represents your own knowledge, not that of your partner. Good faith mistakes can and do happen; but willful violators of academic honesty, either by cheating on quizzes or in plagiarism of written work, will reap the whirlwind.