

HCOL 185 ♣ Comparative Epic

The University of Vermont ♣ FALL 2016

MWF 12-12:50, Classics Seminar Room, 481 Main Street, Room 207

Instructor: Professor M. D. Usher (Mark)

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Course Description: Epic poetry is a repository of the values of the society that produces it, and, in turn, shapes the culture in which it flourishes. This interdisciplinary course investigates that premise and introduces you to facts and concepts that will help you interpret the material on this syllabus (and, indeed, other ancient literature as well) within its historical context. Oral poetics, the notion of symbolic culture, the importance of reciprocity and exchange in pre-industrialized societies, the dynamics of an oral tradition, and the morphology of traditional narrative are all central concerns. Special emphasis will be placed on how the relative literacy or orality of a given culture affects the form of its thought and art. In short, this course is about traditional cultures from the past and the modern appreciation of those cultures in the present, epic poetry being the point of entry. The coverage is broad and ethnically/linguistically diverse: We will be reading works from Greece, the Ancient Near East, Iceland, Africa, Finland, and India.

Course Requirements and Grading: There will be short quizzes on the content of the assigned readings at the beginning of every class period (simple identification and short-answer). The point of this is to give you an incentive (and reward) for keeping up on the reading, and to ensure that you are prepared for class. These quizzes will comprise 40% of your grade. The other components of the grade will be as follows: two 3-4-page essays: 20%; one research project (= 5-page paper and presentation) on modern analogues of traditional narrative structures and/or oral-poetic performance: 20%; class attendance and participation (= preparedness and discussion in class): 20%. NOTE: Quizzes missed due to an unexcused absence cannot be made up. An unexcused absence is one for which I have not received prior notification.

Required Texts:

The Epic of Gilgamesh. Translated by N. K. Sandars. Penguin. ISBN: 0-14-044100-X

Homer. *Iliad*. Translated by Michael Reck. TEXTS TO BE PROVIDED

Homer. *Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles. Read by Ian McKellen. Penguin Audiobook (CD). ISBN-10: 014305824X

Hesiod. *Works and Days and Theogony*. Translated by M. L. West. Oxford World's Classics. ISBN: 0192839411

Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali. Translated by D. T. Niane and G. D. Pickett. Longman. ISBN 0582264758

The Vinland Sagas: The Norse Discovery of America. Translated by Magnus Magnusson. Penguin. ISBN: 0140441549

The Kalevala. Translated by Keith Bosley. Oxford World's Classics. ISBN: 0199538867

The Bhagavad-Gita. Translated by Barbara Stoler Miller. Bantam Books. ISBN: 0553213652

W. J. Ong. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word.* Routledge. ISBN: 0415281296

Other items (PDFs to be provided):

S. J. Tambiah, "The Magical Power of Words," *Man* N.S. 3 (1968), pp. 175-208.

Peter Berger, "On the Obsolescence of the Concept of Honor," *European Journal of Sociology/Archives Européennes de Sociologie/Europäisches Archiv für Soziologie*, Vol. 11, No. 2, La foi et les mœurs or Faith and Morals (1970), pp. 339-347.

Jared Diamond, "Vengeance is Ours," *The New Yorker* (April 21, 2008), pp. 74-87.

Schedule:

Foreplay

8/29 (M) [Lecture] Introduction to the course; playlist
8/31 (W) [Discussion] Ong chs. 1-2 (pp. 5-30)

Gilgamesh

9/2 (F) [Lecture/Discussion] Orientation to *Gilgamesh*; Sandars pp. 61-96; Quiz 1
9/5 (M) **LABOR DAY**
9/7 (W) [Discussion] Sandars pp. 97-119; Quiz 2
9/9 (F) [Discussion] Ong ch. 3 (pp. 31-77); **no Quiz**

Homer, *Iliad*

9/12 (M) [Lecture/Discussion] Orientation to Homer; Books 1-3; Quiz 3
9/14 (W) [Discussion] Books 4-6; Quiz 4
9/16 (F) [Discussion] Books 7-9; Quiz 5
9/19 (M) [Discussion] Books 12 and 16; Berger, "Obsolescence of Honor"; Quiz 6
9/21 (W) [Discussion] Books 18 and 19; Quiz 7
9/23 (F) [Discussion] Books 21-24;); Diamond, "Vengeance Is Ours"; Quiz 8

Homer, *Odyssey* [use Audiobook!]

- 9/26 (M) [Workshop] **Draft of 1st Essay Due (no Quiz)**
9/28 (W) [Discussion] Books 1-4; Quiz 9
9/30 (F) [Discussion] Books 5-8; Quiz 10
- 10/3 (M) [Discussion] Books 9-12; Quiz 11; **FIRST ESSAY DUE**
10/5 (W) [Discussion] Books 13- 15; Quiz 12
10/7 (F) [Discussion] Books 16-18; Quiz 13
- 10/10 (M) **FALL RECESS**
10/12 (W) [Discussion] Books 19-24; Quiz 14
10/14 (F) [Film/Discussion] Clips from *O, Brother, Where Art Thou?* **no Quiz**

Hesiod, *Works and Days* / *Theogony*

- 10/17 (M) [Lecture/Discussion] Orientation to Hesiod; *W&D*, West pp. 37-61; Quiz 15
10/19 (W) [Discussion] *Theogony*, West pp. 3-33; Quiz 16

The Kalevala

- 10/21 (F) [Lecture/Discussion] Orientation to the *Kalevala* and rune singing; Cantos 1-2; Quiz 17
- 10/24 (M) [Lecture/Discussion] Cantos 3-5; Tambiah, “Magical Power of Words” (pdf); Quiz 18
10/26 (W) [Discussion] Cantos 6-10; Quiz 19
10/28 (F) [Discussion] Cantos 16-19; Quiz 20; cinematic trailer to *Sampo* (1959), aka *The Day the Earth Froze*, a Soviet-Finnish B-movie version of the *Kalevala*
- 10/31 (M) [Workshop/Discussion] Cantos 39-44; Quiz 21; **Draft of 2nd Essay Due**
11/2 (W) [Discussion] Cantos 45-50; Quiz 22
- 11/4 (F) Film: Selections from *Jade Warrior* (2006), a Finnish-Chinese martial arts version of the *Kalevala*

The Vinland Sagas

- 11/7 (M) Orientation to the Icelandic Sagas, Eddic and skaldic poetry; Magnusson pp. 49-72; Quiz 23; **SECOND ESSAY DUE**
11/9 (W) [Discussion] Magnusson pp. 75-104; Quiz 24

Bhagavad Gita

- 11/11 (F) [Discussion] Stoler Miller pp. 22-55 (Teachings 1-5), 83-109 (Teachings 9-11) and 143-154 (18th Teaching); Quiz 25
- 11/14 (M) Yoga demonstration/lecture with Lesley Gibbs, co-director of the Green Mountain School of Yoga

Sundiata

- 11/16 (W) [Lecture/Discussion] Introduction to *Sundiata* and griot music and poetry; Niane pp. 1-46; Quiz 26
- 11/18 (F) [Discussion] Niane pp. 47-84; Quiz 27

11/21 (M) – 11/25 (F) † THANKSGIVING BREAK

- 11/28 (M) [Workshop] **Draft of RESEARCH PAPER DUE**
- 11/30 (W) [Film] *Mongolian Bling*
- 12/2 (F) [Film/Discussion] *Mongolian Bling*; Quiz 28

Afterglow

- 12/5 (M) [Presentations]
- 12/7 (W) [Presentations]
- 12/9 (F) [Presentations]; **FINAL RESEARCH PAPERS DUE**