

CLS137(F11): Greek and Roman Biography

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Please drop by to ask questions, discuss the course, and exchange ideas!

Course overview

We will study the ancient stories of ancient lives: not just the usual political biographies, but also the lives of writers (especially philosophers), women, and early Christians. Our main goal is to appreciate how (auto)biographers shape their stories artistically and imaginatively. They would not be worth reading in a General Education course if they merely recorded facts; in fact, some of our texts are purely fictional! Rather, they can be interesting to us because they memorialize their subjects in terms of their own judgements, values, and artistic purposes. Through such lenses, lives may take on political, religious, comic, or philosophical significance. By studying how an author gives meaning to the matter of a life, we can reflect on the terms and principles by which we make meaning of our own lives, worlds, and stories. The assignments will include our own creative attempts to reshape life stories. They will develop our ability both to understand ancient conventions and concerns and to reflect on our own.

The three projects

Project 1: Roman women. You will carefully study a modern scholar's reconstruction of an ancient Roman woman's life (in our textbook *Roman Women*). Your argument must show how the specific evidence for this woman's life could have been developed into a meaningful story in one of the ancient biographical genres (supported by specific citations from ancient biographies, showing how you are applying their method). You will explain your own purposes, interpretations, values, and judgements as a (hypothetical ancient) biographer. N.B. The purpose of this assignment is to enter *positively* into the processes by which ancient biographies construct meaning. In fact, ancient biographies tended to neglect female lives (which is why we are studying reconstructions), but we will not take the easy way out by saying, for example, "This ancient set of values had so strong a masculine bias that they would mean treating this female life in the following dismissive way..." Rather, we are doing a thought experiment: What if the ancient biographical techniques had been applied, with the same amount of interest, to women's lives? In your paper's conclusion, you are encouraged to discuss the paradoxes of this thought experiment—how the biographical approach for which you argue would have contradicted, threatened, or complicated its own values. The project will be posted to the course wiki.

Project 1, part 2. You will respond to the projects of two classmates, showing how historical evidence unused (or incompletely considered) in their projects could be interpreted so as to complicate the project's overall thesis and argument.

Project 2: Special topic. You will choose and present to the class a special topic. The goal is to become well acquainted with one particular critical method and analytical question, to show how it can be used to achieve interpretive insights into our course readings, and to pool these approaches as a class so that we can attack our final projects with a fuller scholarly toolkit and a more sophisticated level of argument. Available topics will include:

- a. Sayings and stories. How does a finished biography relate to a collection of sayings or quotations (for example, the surviving fragments of Presocratic philosophers and sophists' own words, or a text like the *Gospel of Thomas*)?
- b. Rhetorical devices. Select a major rhetorical principle of early Christian literature (beginning from David Aune's *Westminster Dictionary of New Testament and Early Christian Literature and Rhetoric*: held for you at the library's reference desk—ask there), and analyze how it is deployed in our (pagan and Christian) readings, and what it would mean to introduce it into material where it has not been deployed.
- c. Shakespeare. What did Shakespeare do with Plutarch's *Life of Coriolanus* in his own *Coriolanus*? What would a Shakespearean tragedy *Alcibiades* have looked like?
- d. Philosophy meets religion. Analyze the subtle and complex connections between philosophical lives (including our course readings and other sources such as Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*) and religious lives (perhaps considering infancy gospels, etc.).
- e. The beginnings of Greek biography. What elements have been inherited in our readings from the eulogies for virtuous leaders that were the first Greek prose biographies (Isocrates' *Evagoras*, Xenophon's *Agesilaus*)?
- f. Alexander the Great. How did the historical deeds of the iconic king and general get turned into a tremendously popular ancient novel (the *Alexander Romance*, in our *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature*)?
- g. Imperial depravity. Roman enthusiasts may go into a source such as Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* and present how its methods and imaginary relate to our assigned readings.

Final project: Make it new/make it old. You will create both a life story and a critical analysis of your storytelling methods in relation to everything you have learned about the lenses and purposes of the ancient biographical genres. You have three choices: (1) retell an ancient biography in a different ancient form (for example, what would a *Life of Jesus* by Diogenes Laertius or Plutarch look like? or an Augustinian autobiography of some other ancient person?); (2) tell a modern life story through an ancient biographer's lens; (3) adapt an ancient biography into a modern form that retains its intended purposes and effects (for example, if the life unfolds on Facebook, what would it mean for politics, death, and conflict to be treated in the manner of *The Gospel according to John*? This is *not* the easiest option!). The class will present its work collectively to a campus-wide audience, and you are encouraged to use video, performance, visuals, etc., while remembering the twofold nature of the assignment (narrative and analytical components). The audience has to understand, through your introduction, explanation, and interpretive arguments, *how* the story you present creates meaning. The audience must come away from your presentation informed about how ancient biography works and creates meaning, through your accounting of how your own story is told so as to shed light on ancient literary themes and techniques.

Grading

Attendance, prepared participation, unannounced reading quizzes, etc.	7½%
Rotating service as chair of class discussion	7½%
Project 1, part 1	15%
Project 1, part 2	5%
Project 2	25%
Final project	40%

Course wiki. <http://wareh.wikia.com> (for posting Project 1, etc.)

Moodle. <http://nexus.union.edu> (for retrieving readings)

Required books

1. William Hansen (ed.), *Anthology of Ancient Greek Popular Literature*, Indiana UP
2. Augusto Frascetti (ed.), *Roman Women*, U of Chicago P
3. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, vol. 2 (Books VI-X), Loeb Classical Library
4. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Garry Wills, Penguin
5. Plutarch, *Selected Lives*, ed. Judith Mossman, Wordsworth
6. *The New Testament of the New Jerusalem Bible*, Doubleday

Schedule of assignments

Th 9/8	<i>Life of Pindar</i> and <i>Life of Aristophanes</i> [Moodle : Lefkowitz] Plutarch, <i>Comparison of Cicero with Demosthenes</i> [pp. 613-617]
Tu 9/13	<i>The Aesop Romance</i> [<i>Popular Literature</i> , pp. 106-162]
Th 9/15	<i>The Passion of SS. Perpetua & Felicity</i> [Medieval Sourcebook / Moodle] Prinzivalli, "Perpetua the Martyr" [<i>Roman Women</i> , pp. 118-140] Diogenes Laertius 6.20-60 [<i>Life of Diogenes</i> , pp. 23-63]
Tu 9/20	Diogenes Laertius 6.60-81 [<i>Life of Diogenes</i> , pp. 63-85] Diogenes Laertius 6.1-19 [<i>Life of Antisthenes</i> , pp. 3-23] Diogenes Laertius 8.1-77 [<i>Pythagoras & Empedocles</i> , pp. 321-391]
Th 9/22	Gregory of Nyssa, <i>Life of Macrina</i> [Medieval Sourcebook / Moodle] Diogenes Laertius, 8.78-9.29 [11 lives, pp. 391-439] <i>Secundus the Silent Philosopher</i> [<i>Popular Literature</i> , pp. 64-75]
M 9/26	Project 1 due: Roman women (part 1)

Tu 9/27	Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> , Books 1-2
Th 9/29	Plutarch, <i>Life of Alcibiades</i>
Tu 10/4	Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> , Books 3-5
Th 10/6	Lives of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides [Moodle : Lefkowitz] Plutarch, <i>Life of Coriolanus</i> (begin)
F 10/7	Project 1, part 2, due
Tu 10/11	“Introduction to the Synoptic Gospels” <i>The Gospel according to Mark</i> “Introduction to the Gospel and Letters of John”
Th 10/13	Project 2 due: Special topic Plutarch, <i>Life of Coriolanus</i> (finish) and <i>Comparison of Alcibiades with Coriolanus</i>
Tu 10/18	<i>The Gospel according to John</i>
Th 10/20	Plutarch, <i>Life of Demosthenes</i>
Tu 10/25	<i>Matthew</i> or <i>Luke</i> [each will be assigned to half of the class]
Th 10/27	Plutarch, <i>Life of Cicero</i> (begin)
Tu 11/1	Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> , Books 6-8
Th 11/3	Plutarch, <i>Life of Cicero</i> (end)
Tu 11/8	Augustine, <i>Confessions</i> , Books 9-10
Th 11/10	Final projects
Tu 11/15	Final projects

Academic honesty and citation requirements

You must read and understand the college policies on academic honesty as described in the 2011-2012 *Student Handbook*. All work submitted for this course must be your own; any idea of another person must always be cited clearly and specifically. (This is just as true of loosely repeated ideas as of quoted ideas. And an “idea” is anything that contributes to the quality of your work: for example, not just literary analysis, but also the selection of which passages are compared or discussed.) If you ever have any question about proper citation or the propriety of collaboration, please consult with me. **The penalty for using ideas that are not your own, in any assignment, without proper attribution, may be a failing grade in the course. I have imposed this penalty before: it is painful, and I do not want to do it again. Violations could also result in expulsion from college or a record of dishonesty that would exclude you from professional school. If you have consulted any secondary source, please make absolutely certain that anything in your work attributable to it (ideas, evidence, argument, words) is completely and specifically cited.** This goes for all secondary sources, recommended or otherwise, including web content I link, the introductions to our textbooks, etc. Whenever you make use of a secondary source, you must keep track of exactly how, and report it. (The principle is that you should receive credit for your own contributions to your work, not, for example, someone else’s clever idea to link two passages to each other.)

Statement on disabilities

It is Union College policy to make accommodations for individuals with disabilities. If you have any disability or special concern, please let me know what your needs are in order that they may be accommodated. All discussions will remain confidential to the extent permissible by law. Students with disabilities needing academic accommodations must also: (1) register with and provide documentation to the Dean of Students Office; (2) bring a letter to the instructor from the Dean of Students Office indicating what academic accommodations you require. This must be done within the first two weeks of the term. For more information about services available to Union College students with disabilities, please contact the Dean of Students Office: Shelly Shinebarger, Director of Student Support Services, Dean of Students Office, shinebas@union.edu, (518) 388-6116.