

Myth, Reason and Faith: Gilgamesh to Genji



HUMN 128 • CRN: 10739 • Comparative Humanities

Fall 2011 • TR 9:30–10:52 pm • COLE 118

Dr. James Mark Shields • #577-1336 • james.shields@bucknell.edu

Office hours: W 10:00–12:00, or by appointment • Marts 3C

In a world that is, for better or worse, becoming increasingly “globalized” by the day, it is vitally important that we reflect upon ideas, values, and practices that make up the various cultures and civilizations of the world. While it is no longer assumed, as it once was in some circles, that ideas themselves drive history, it is indisputable that ideas, and the practices and values with which ideas are intimately connected, play a vital role in shaping individual and social understandings of self, society, history, nature and the world.

This course is a survey of intellectual history from the beginnings of civilization in West Asia through the early “middle ages” in Europe and Japan. By examining nine key texts from various historical periods of time and cultural milieus, the student will reflect upon the relations between “myth,” “faith” and “reason,” and the way these often intertwined categories have helped to shape and transform religious doctrines, cultural values and political and economic structures.

The primary objective of the course is to allow students to engage receptively and critically with various key texts from “Asia” and the “West” in the period extending from roughly 2000 BCE through 1200 CE. Students will develop writing, reading, speaking, listening, and information literacy skills necessary for collegiate-level academic work, and will develop capacities for independent academic work and become self-regulated learners. Students will be exposed to a number of historically significant texts (myths, sacred scriptures, philosophical works, novels and poetry), with which they will be required to “engage” on a critical and interpretive level. This is an *interactive* course; the student will be asked to respond and engage with the course material, and with the ideas and opinions of the instructor and other students—though, it is hoped, always in a civil and polite fashion. Evaluation for the course will be based largely on the demonstration of both oral and written critical engagement with course material.

Readings:

BOOKS:

B1: *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Free Press, 2006)

B2: *Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation*, trans. Roger Ames & David Hall (Random House, 2003)

B3: *Ramayana: A Shortened Modern Prose Version*, trans. R. K. Narayan (Penguin Books, 2006)

B4: Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Hackett, 2000)

B5: Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan: A Philosophical Tale*, trans. Lenn Evan Goodman (Chicago, 2009)

B6: Murasaki, *Tale of Genji*, trans. Edward Seidensticker (Oxford Classics, 2008)

PDF articles (on Moodle):

M1: Kwame Antony Appiah, “Cosmopolitan Contamination”

M2: Selections from *The Book of Genesis*

M3: Selections from *The Book of Job*

M4: Selections from *The Gospel of Mark*

M5: Selections from Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*

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COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. ATTENDANCE

Attendance is mandatory. Since this course requires student interaction and discussion, it is absolutely necessary for the student to attend each and every class. Only sickness with a note is considered a valid excuse. Each absence without excuse will result in a 2-point deduction from the participation grade. Being late without an excuse will count as half an absence, thus a 1-point deduction. Five absences without a note will result in automatic failure.

2. PARTICIPATION

20%

Class participation, including discussion of readings and questions posed both in and outside of class, is a requirement. Participation is a matter of quality not quantity. You do not have to speak every class, but rather show that you have done the readings and are willing and able to engage, in a thoughtful way, with the topics under discussion. Good questions are also an important aspect of participation.

3. ENGAGEMENT PIECES (EPs)

20% x 3 = 60%

A large part of this course will be devoted to writing, understood as a *process* rather than simply a *means* of communication. In order to achieve this, we will be employing methods of *exploratory* writing, i.e., writing that is itself part of the process of developing one's thoughts and arguments. Each student will be required to write a total of three 2000-word (roughly 5-6 pages) "engagement pieces," in response to a major issue or question raised in the lectures or the readings. These pieces will take a variety of forms, and each will have its own specific requirements. Generally, the EPs will be graded in terms of the student's ability to critically engage with a specific text, issue or question (note: critically does not mean "negatively"). Any opinion or idea is valid, providing you can back it up evidentially (or, failing that, rhetorically). You will have the opportunity to hand in drafts of your work, and will receive written and oral feedback. As the term progresses, evaluation of the EPs will become more demanding.

4. PRESENTATION

20%

Each student will explore an important issue associated with one of the major themes of the course, and present their findings in a 15-minute in-class presentation. Topics and presentations schedule will be assigned early in the semester, along with more detailed instructions. These presentations may take the form of a Powerpoint presentation but must then adhere to strict limits on number of slides presented and present a coherent argument for this choice of medium.

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SCHEDULE OF TOPICS & READINGS

I. A Sumerian Quest

Wk 1	R 01/17	Myth, Faith & Reason	M1–Appiah
Wk 2	T 01/22	The World’s First Story	B1– <i>Gilgamesh</i>
	R 01/24*	Of Friendship & Immortality	B1– <i>Gilgamesh</i>

II. A Chinese Primer

Wk 3	T 01/29	Origins of Chinese Civilization	B2– <i>Daodejing</i>
	R 01/31§	The Way	B2– <i>Daodejing</i>
Wk 4	T 02/05	Virtue	B2– <i>Daodejing</i>
	R 02/07†	PRESENTATIONS I – China	

III. An Indian Epic

Wk 5	T 02/12	Origins of Indian Civilization	B3– <i>Ramayana</i>
	R 02/14*	Rama’s Journey	B3– <i>Ramayana</i>
Wk 6	T 02/19	FILM: <i>Sita Sings the Blues</i>	B3– <i>Ramayana</i>
	R 02/21§	PRESENTATIONS II – India	

IV. A Greek Odyssey

Wk 7	T 02/26	Origins of Greek Civilization	B4– <i>Odyssey</i>
	R 02/28†	The Siren’s Song	B4– <i>Odyssey</i>
Wk 8	T 03/05	The Hero Returns	B4– <i>Odyssey</i>
	R 03/07	PRESENTATIONS III – Greece	
Wk 9	T 03/12	SPRING BREAK	
	R 03/14	SPRING BREAK	

V. Abrahamic Admonitions

Wk 10	T 03/19	Creation Stories	M2– <i>Genesis</i>
	R 03/21	The Lament of Job	M3– <i>Job</i>
Wk 11	T 03/26	The Enigma of Yeshua	M4– <i>Mark</i>
	R 03/28*	Poor Brothers in the Imperial Capital	M5– <i>Romans</i>
Wk 12	T 04/02	FILM: <i>The Moors in Spain</i>	
	R 04/04§	An Islamic Odyssey of the Mind, I	B5– <i>Hayy ibn Yaqzan</i>
Wk 13	T 04/09	An Islamic Odyssey of the Mind, II	B5– <i>Hayy ibn Yaqzan</i>
	R 04/11†	PRESENTATIONS IV – Abrahamic Cultures	

VI. Japan’s Shining Prince

Wk 14	T 04/16	Japan’s Golden Age	B6– <i>Genji</i>
	R 04/18	Genji’s Young Loves	B6– <i>Genji</i>
Wk 15	T 04/23	Genji Matures	B6– <i>Genji</i>
	R 04/25	Genji’s Legacy	B6– <i>Genji</i>
Wk 16	T 04/30	Course Conclusions	

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GRADING POLICIES

Grading for participation is quite straightforward: the more engaged you are in the class, the higher your grade. I am particularly fond of the 3 e's: energy, effort, and enthusiasm. Evaluation of your oral presentation is based on three criteria: preparedness/research (8%), style/fluency (8%), and props (i.e., handouts, slides, Powerpoint, etc.) (4%).

In grading all written assignments I ask the following questions:

1. Does the paper have a thesis?
2. Is the thesis interesting / relevant to the course?
3. Is the paper free from long quotations / excessive borrowing of ideas?
4. Is the paper reasonably well written (i.e., sentence structure, grammar, spelling)?
5. Is it long enough / not too long?

If the answer to any of the above is 'no', the paper will receive a 'C' grade of some form. If the answer to more than two of the above is 'no', the paper will receive a 'D' grade. If all of the above are answered by 'yes', the following additional questions apply:

6. How thoughtful / original is the paper?
7. How well organized is the paper? Does it have a conclusion?
8. Is the style efficient, not wordy or unclear?
9. Does the writing betray any special elegance?
10. Does the paper go 'beyond' the course material to explore other possibilities?

Depending on the answers to these questions, the paper will receive some form of A or B grade.

When it comes down to it, there is absolutely no reason for anybody to get a grade lower than B- in this class. The only way you can get a C, D or F is if you fail to attend and/or do not do the work.

GRADING RUBRIC:	95-100%	=	A	4.00	Near Perfect!
	89-94%	=	A-	3.67	Excellent
	83-88%	=	B+	3.33	Very Good
	77-82%	=	B	3.00	Good
	71-76%	=	B-	2.67	Average
	65-70%	=	C+	2.33	Below Average
	59-64%	=	C	2.00	Acceptable, but...
	53-58%	=	C-	1.50	Not so Good
	47-52%	=	D	1.00	Poor
	0-46%	=	F	0.00	Not Acceptable

Engagement Piece #1:

- ✱ So far we have read three classic texts (*Gilgamesh*, *Daodejing*, *Ramayana*) from three ancient civilizations: Mesopotamia (Sumer), China, and India. Each text, in its own fashion, presents an ideal of what it means to be “fully human.” For this assignment, choose TWO of these texts and compare the “ideal” being presented for humanity. Then consider some of the following questions: *How do they differ; what are some shared features, if any; how does the style of the text contribute to the presentation of the ideal; which is more persuasive, in your view; how do these expressions resonate with your understanding of human life, or with the understanding of such expressed in contemporary US culture; how do they differ?* Focus on specific passages to back up your argument.
- ✱ Minimum 1800 words (single-spaced is fine)
- ✱ Draft due Tuesday, Sept 27th before 5 pm (uploaded to Moodle)
- ✱ Final paper due Tuesday, Oct 4th before 5 pm (uploaded to Moodle)
- ✱ See Grading Policies for general guidelines on writing

Engagement Piece #2:

- ✱ Over the past few weeks we have read two texts of immense significance for Western thought (and civilization) from the ancient period until the present: Homer's *Iliad* and Plato's *Apology*. For this assignment, I want you to focus on the concept of "heroism" in these two texts, by comparing the figure of Socrates to that of Achilles and/or Hector. In your analysis, consider some of the following questions: *Who, in your reading, is the 'hero' of the Iliad? What qualities does he (or she) possess? In what ways, or by what actions does the hero fulfill these qualities? What, if anything, is his or her weakness – and how does that play a role in the message of story? How, and in what ways, is Socrates a 'hero' (in the Greek or modern senses)? What advice might Socrates give to Achilles, or Hector—or vice versa? What is your understanding of heroism, and how does it differ to what is presented in these texts?* Focus on specific passages and scenes to back up your argument.
- ✱ Minimum 1800 words (single-spaced is fine)
- ✱ Draft due Tuesday, October 25th; Word doc posted to Moodle
- ✱ Final paper due Tuesday, November 1st; Word doc posted to Moodle
- ✱ See Grading Policies for general guidelines on writing

Engagement Piece #3:

- ✱ For this third and final Engagement Piece, I would like you to explore your creative capacities, as follows:

You are a time-traveler who finds him/herself face to face with AT LEAST TWO authors or main characters from one of the texts we read from the section on Abrahamic Civilizations (Genesis, Exodus, Ecclesiastes, Job, Mark, Romans, Augustine's *Confessions*). You engage in conversation, and debate, concerning some of the actions and/or ideas presented by that author or character; you should also have the characters engage with each other (they must come from different texts). Some possibilities: Yahweh, Adam, Eve, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Jacob, Job, Satan, the 'J' author (a woman?), the author of Ecclesiastes, Yeshua (Jesus), the author of Mark, Paul, Augustine. If you choose to use someone *not* on this list, let me know beforehand. Try to mix it up. The dialogue should be yours, but the characters should reflect their 'real' selves (i.e., as we see them in these texts). Keep description and background information to a bare minimum – focus on the dialogue.

- ✱ Minimum 1800 words (single-spaced)
- ✱ Draft due Tuesday, November 22nd at 5:00 pm; uploaded as Word doc to Moodle
- ✱ Final paper due Tuesday, November 29th at 5:00 pm; uploaded as Word doc to Moodle
- ✱ See Grading Policies for general guidelines on writing