Great Books, Big Ideas from Antiquity

Why read? Why read texts written hundreds, even thousands of years ago in languages not spoken anymore? Because of their formal beauty; because they captured an ephemeral sentiment or formulated an idea for all time; because western culture is not just built on them but with them. We owe to the Homeric poems the notion of an odyssey, to Aeschylus and his companions the ‘tragic,’ to Herodotus the idea of history as an investigation of the past, to Cicero the art of rhetoric, to Ovid countless tales and myths and parables (of Icarus, say, or Pygmalion), and to Thucydidès and Tacitus realpolitik. This course will, in the course of ten weeks, cover the first half of our journey through ancient literature from Homer to St. Augustine. We will read, mostly in selection, the Iliad, Odyssey, (Ps)Aeschylus’ Prometheus bound, Sophocles’ Antigone, Herodotus, Thucydidès, and Plato’s Phaedrus. Every week will focus on one particular text and concept or method, and by the end, participants should have an educated idea of the history of Greek literature, in its archaic and classic periods, a sample of its enduring literary masterpieces, and a notion of some of the major contributions Greece made to western civilization.

SYLLABUS

1. Week (Sep 27):
   “Swift-footed (hot-tempered) Achilles:” Homer, Iliad, first half, at least 1, 2 (without the catalogue of the ships), 6, 10
   ➢ Concepts, topics: orality; shame-honor culture
     (Additional reading)

2. Week (Oct 4):
   “To always be the best and preeminent over all:” Homer, Iliad, second half, at least 16, 18, 22, 24
   ➢ Concepts, topics: the notion of the hero, then (and now?)
     (Additional reading)

3. Week (Oct 11):
   “Son of Laertes, versatile Odysseus, after these years with me, you still desire your old home?” Homer, Odyssey, at least 5, 9, 11, 14, 23
   ➢ Concepts, topics: travel towards self-discovery (nostos)
     (Additional reading)
4. Week (Oct 18):  
“I conferred the gift of fire:” [**Aeschylus**], *Prometheus bound*  
- Concepts, topics: ancient and modern notions of the ‘tragic’; Aristotle  
  (Additional reading)

5. Week (Oct 25):  
“Reverence towards the gods must be inviolate:”  
**Sophocles**, *Antigone*.  
- Concepts, topics: ancient and modern notions of the tragic (cont’d); Hegel  
  (Additional reading)

6. Week (Nov 1):  
“The presentation of the historical inquiry by Herodotus:” **Herodotus**, *Histories*, book 1  
- Concepts, topics: The beginning of historical inquiry; tragic (?) history  
  (Additional reading)

7. Week (Nov 8):  
“So then he saw some of the men practicing athletic exercises and some combing their long hair: and as he looked upon these things he marveled:” **Herodotus**, *Histories*, books 7-9 (sel.)  
- Concepts, topics: The ‘other’ (ethnography, anthropology); the thinking on thoughts  
  (Additional reading: Gilbert Ryle).

8. Week (Nov 15):  
“War is a most violent master …:” **Thucydides**, *The Peloponnesian War* (sel. from 1, 2, 3, 6).  
- Concepts, topics: Political realism, idealism, and the breakdown of civil society  
  (Additional reading)

>> **THANKS GIVING BREAK <<**

9. Week (Nov 29):  
“But perhaps rhetoric has been getting too roughly handled by us, and she might answer…:” **Plato**, *Phaedrus*  
- Concepts, topics: love (and) words  
  (Additional reading)

10. Week (Dec 6):  
“I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas…”
Concepts, topics: Why read the Classics? The Problem of a Canon (Reading: TBD).

**Required texts**