



**ANCIENT**

# **EPIC**

CL CV 2790

From Homer and Hesiod to *Halo* and *The Hunger Games*, epic narratives explore the nature of humanity. What does it mean to be mortal? How does one function within society? Why is individual identity so important? Ancient epic poetry and its modern counterparts, (novels, film, video games), address these questions through the evolving media of word and image, and they adapt fundamental epic themes to fit new cultural concerns and anxieties. Come explore the world of epic through the ancient epic stories of heroes like Gilgamesh, Achilles, and Odysseus; through the literary epics of poets like Apollonius, Vergil, and Ovid; and through modern epic forms like Richard Adam's novel *Watership Down* and Microsoft's *Halo*.

Fall 2014

Prof

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with *Prof.*

*Christensen*

\*counts toward Humanities Exploration (HF) requirements

## CL CV 2790-001 :: ANCIENT EPIC

**Fall 2014**  
**3 credit hours**  
**Fulfill HF requirement**

**Tuesday & Thursday**  
**2:00-3:40 p.m.**  
**OSH 107**

Epic is one of the world's earliest and most enduring narrative forms. By exploring epic "texts," (e.g. things that can be read; including not only literature, but also visual narratives such as those found in Greek vase painting and video games), we will be able to define:

- 1) what an epic is,
- 2) what an epic does, and
- 3) how epic has been and still is used to define, reflect and challenge cultural norms.

Our in-class time will include lectures and discussions about specific "texts." Outside of class you will be asked to read selections from assigned texts and complete various types of writing assignments.

Have Questions? See the FAQ below or send me an e-mail at **alexis dot christensen at utah.edu**

**Textbooks:** (available at the University Bookstore or from on-line sellers like amazon.com)

**\*\*ALL READINGS WILL BE IN ENGLISH\*\***

**\*\*MOST READINGS WILL BE EXCERPTS FROM THESE TEXTS, RATHER THAN THE ENTIRE TEXT\*\***

*The Aeneid*, by Virgil and translated by R. Fagles. Published by Penguin Classics in 2010. ISBN 9780143106296. This epic poem tells the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas as he leads his family and the Trojan War refugees to Italy in search of a new homeland. Considered by many to be our earliest preserved literary epic in Latin, the *Aeneid* was written by the Roman poet Virgil and published after his death in 19 B.C.E. at the insistence of Augustus, first emperor of Rome.

*Argonautika*, by Apollonios Rhodios and translated by P. Green. Published by University of California Press in 1997. ISBN 9780520253933. The *Argonautika*, or the Voyage of the Argo, relates the story of Jason's quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece from the distant shores of the Black Sea with the help of a crew of Greek heroes and a foreign princess well-versed in witchcraft. This poem was composed in the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.E. by Apollonius, who was once chief librarian at the famous library of Alexandria.

*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, author unknown and translated by N.K. Sandars. Published by Penguin Classics in 1960. ISBN 9780140441000. The story of Gilgamesh is one of the oldest known epic narratives, dating at least as early as ca. 1800 B.C.E. The ancient Mesopotamian hero travels to distant lands and slays monsters with his sidekick Enkidu. But his greatest feat is a quest for immortality.

***The Essential Homer***, by Homer and translated by S. Lombardo. Published by Hackett Publishing Co. in 2000. ISBN 9780872205406. This text includes large portions of the ca. 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. epic poems the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These poems are attributed to an oral poet known as Homer and served as models for later Greek and Latin epic poetry. The *Iliad* focuses on the anger of the Greek hero Achilles during a month-long period near the end of the Trojan War and the effects of this anger on Achilles, his fellow Greeks, and the enemy Trojans. The *Odyssey* relates the story of Odysseus' return home from the Trojan War and his explores his identity as a hero, a father, and a husband.

***Metamorphoses***, by Ovid and translated by S. Lombardo. Published by Hackett Publishing Co. in 2010. ISBN 9781603843072. Both playful and horrifying, Ovid's epic poem traces the history of the world from the creation of the universe to the rise of the first Roman emperor, Augustus. The *Metamorphoses*, completed in 8 B.C.E., was a popular source for Graeco-Roman mythology throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

***Watership Down***, by R. Adams. Published by Scribner in 2005. ISBN 9780743277709. Yes, this is the one about the rabbits. Originally published in 1972, Adams' novel tells the story of Hazel and his fellow rabbits as they search for a new home after Hazel's little brother Fiver warns them to leave their warren just before it is destroyed.

**Other "Texts":** (provided on Canvas)

***Batrachomyomachia***, author unknown. A mini-epic, or epyllion, about frogs and mice battling it out in good Homeric fashion. This poem has been attributed to the Homer of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* fame, but almost certainly dates to the Hellenistic or Roman Imperial periods.

***Carmen 64***, by Catullus. Written by the Roman poet Catullus in the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E., this poem, another epyllion, tells the story of the Athenian hero Theseus and his quest to slay the Minotaur. Theseus' quest, however, may be the least interesting thing about this poem. The story is related through scenes embroidered on a coverlet on the marriage bed of Peleus and Thetis, future parents of the great hero Achilles. Catullus makes these scenes come alive through the voice of Ariadne, the Cretan princess who gave up everything to help Theseus complete his quest.

***Civil War***, by Lucan. The *Bellum Civile*, or *Pharsalia*, is an historical epic that focuses on the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great in the 40's B.C.E. Lucan wrote the poem in the 60's C.E. during the troubled reign of the emperor Nero, leaving it unfinished when he was compelled to commit suicide by the emperor himself in 65 C.E.. This is a difficult, but fascinating adaptation of the epic form for the purposes of historical narrative and political criticism.

***Living Epic: Video Games in the Ancient World***, by R. Travis. A series of essays published on Roger Travis' blog and elsewhere on the internet since 2008. Through his posts, Travis lays out his theory that video games not only share narrative patterns with epic poetry, but that they also share an experiential component found in the shared experience of oral storytelling, the original form of epic poetry.

***Poetics***, by Aristotle. Written by the Athenian philosopher Aristotle in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., the *Poetics* is our earliest surviving text on literary theory. While he has a lot to say about Greek tragedy, Aristotle also lays out the fundamentals of good storytelling as he sees them in various literary forms including epic.

***Republic***, by Plato. In the early 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., the Athenian philosopher Plato laid out a vision of the ideal state and presented it through the voice of Socrates. Education is a recurring theme of the *Republic* and the reader is warned of the dangers posed by storytellers. They corrupt the youth with violent and immoral tales. Especially dangerous are those poets who tell epic stories, filled with bad, and even false, examples of behavior by heroes and gods alike.

***Theogony***, by Hesiod. Composed in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., this epic poem details the origins of the universe, the gods and mankind. Zeus is the rightful king of the gods and mortals must endure difficult lives because they have failed to honor the gods properly.

## **FAQ**

Q. This looks like a lot of reading. Are we going to read all of these texts?

A. No, we will read only selections from most of these texts. A number of these works are quite short, and the longer texts, like Virgil's *Aeneid*, we will focus on particular excerpts.

Q. Do I need to buy the editions of the books that are listed here and are available at the bookstore?

A. I strongly suggest that you do buy the editions I selected. I picked the textbooks based on their accessibility and ease of reading. There are many free translations of these texts available on the internet, but most of them are free because they are out of copyright. This means that the translations are ca. 100 years old or more and the translators had different concerns and styles back then, often making the English even a chore to get through for modern readers.

Q. I'd prefer to buy e-book versions of the textbooks. Is that okay?

A. Yes, most of the texts are available in e-reader formats. One word of caution, e-books often do not indicate pages and line numbers in the same way that hard copy books do. This can make looking for a passage during a class discussion frustrating.

Q. I find poetry hard to read. Are all epics written in poetic form?

A. Yes, one of the defining features of ancient epic is its poetic form. And poetry is hard to read, especially for modern audiences. Most of us don't read poetry on a regular basis. I've tried to choose translations that are geared toward us as modern readers. And once you get started reading poetry, it becomes easier and easier as you go.

Q. Greek and Roman names are hard to remember and to spell. And there are hundreds of them! Will I need to know all of them?

A. No, you will not need to remember all of the names you encounter. We will concern ourselves with the major players. You will never need to know who Gorgythion or Archeptolemos are in Homer's *Iliad*. And as far as spelling goes, my rule of thumb is to spell a name like it sounds and as long as I can understand who you're talking about in in-class writing assignments I don't take off points for spelling; writing assignments out of class are a different matter since you have the opportunity to check your spelling.