

HERTOG 2018 SUMMER COURSES LITERATURE & POLITICS

PLATO'S *SYMPOSIUM*

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This seminar will examine Plato's meditation on *eros* in what is perhaps his most beautiful dialogue, *The Symposium*.

We will consider the following questions as we read: What is the relation between the love of beauty and sexual pleasure? How does *eros* relate to moral excellence, and to moral failure? Is political ambition an extension or betrayal of the love for another human being? Do lovers seek to complete themselves by merging with their "other halves," or is love ultimately a longing for immortality that no other human being could satisfy? Does *eros* point the way toward our happiness, or is it the mark of our misery?

Peopled by political figures implicated in both the greatness and the collapse of Athens, the *Symposium* invites its readers to investigate the complexity of properly ordering our loves, an endeavor necessary both to fulfilling private lives and to a strong and decent public order.

Books:

- Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Hackett Classics)

Resources

To learn more about the ideas and figures discussed in this course, we encourage you to explore a project supported by the Hertog Foundation: **The Great Thinkers** (<http://thegreatthinkers.org/>) and **Contemporary Thinkers** (<http://contemporarythinkers.org/>) websites. These sites are aimed at introducing important thinkers in Western thought, with a particular emphasis on politics and philosophy.

Monday, July 9, 2018

9:00 a.m. to Noon

Session 1

Readings:

- Introduction; Plato, *Symposium*, 172a–185e

Discussion Questions:

1. Who tells the story of Plato's *Symposium*? Why does that matter?
2. What is the setting of the speeches that are the focus of the work?

3. Who are the characters involved in this dialogue?
4. Why do these friends decide to engage in this contest of speeches?
5. What does Phaedrus suggest that love is, and why does he consider it good?
6. What does love have to do with the virtues necessary for political life, according to Phaedrus?
7. How does Pausanias differentiate between “heavenly” and “common” love?
8. Describe the various customs regarding love that Pausanias enumerates. Why does he consider the erotic customs of Athenian customs superior?
9. How do erotic desire and ambition interact in Pausanias’ account of love?
10. What does the ideal relation between a lover and a beloved look like on Pausanias’ account?

Tuesday, July 10, 2018

9:00 a.m. to Noon

Session 2

Readings:

- Plato, *Symposium*, 186a–194e

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Eryximachus change the frame of reference within which we are considering the nature of love? What does this change of perspective have to do with his argument that love needs to be governed by the art of medicine?
2. How does the form of Aristophanes’ speech differ in form from the previous speeches? How does the manner in which he speaks relate to his argument about the nature of love?
3. According to the story Aristophanes tells, what are the essential steps in the development of human beings as we now know them?
4. What is it that lovers really desire, according to Aristophanes?
5. What is the relation between love and political ambition in Aristophanes’ story? Between love and piety?

Wednesday, July 11, 2018

9:00 a.m. to Noon

Session 3

Readings:

- Plato, *Symposium*, 195a–203b

Discussion Questions:

1. Why does Agathon depart from the perspective taken by the previous speakers in order to talk about the character of Love? How is this new focus appropriate to who Agathon is?
2. What are the attributes that Agathon ascribes to the god *Eros*?

3. What are the argumentative steps by which Socrates convinces Agathon that he did not know what he was talking about in the speech he delivered to great applause just moments earlier?
4. Why does Socrates introduce the apparently fictional Diotima into the dialogue?
5. What does Diotima mean when she says that Love is a spirit that exists between the mortal and the immortal?

Thursday, July 12, 2018

9:00 a.m. to Noon

Session 4

Readings:

- Plato, *Symposium*, 203c–212c

Discussion Questions:

1. What is the lineage of Love, according to Diotima?
2. Why, according to Diotima, do we desire the good? Why do we desire the beautiful?
3. Why is pregnancy so central to Diotima's account of love? What are the variety of ways in which one can be "pregnant"?
4. In what sense might lawgiving be an erotic activity?
5. What are the stages in the "rites of love" to which Diotima introduces Socrates?
6. How does Diotima's speech respond to each of the previous speeches?

Friday, July 13, 2018

9:00 a.m. to Noon

Session 5

Readings:

- Plato, *Symposium*, 215a–223e
- Review the *Symposium* in its entirety

Discussion Questions:

1. Alcibiades announces on his entrance that he is "plastered." What effect should that have on our judgment of his speech?
2. What are the images Alcibiades uses to describe Socrates, and what do they tell us about him?
3. How does Alcibiades's encounter with Socrates affect his political ambition?
4. Does Alcibiades's love of Socrates make him unhappy?
5. Does Socrates love Alcibiades?
6. What is the significance of the conversation Socrates has with Agathon and Aristophanes after everyone else falls asleep?
7. What can this dialogue, set in a strange context and a distant time, teach us about love? Political ambition? Ourselves?

SHAKESPEARE'S ROME

Paul Cantor, professor, University of Virginia

We will study Shakespeare as a serious political thinker. Shakespeare's Roman plays are a sustained effort to understand what he and his contemporaries regarded as the most successful political community in antiquity and perhaps in all of human history. The Renaissance was an attempt to revive classical antiquity; Shakespeare's Roman plays are one of the supreme achievements of the Renaissance in the way that they bring alive the ancient city on the stage.

We will study the plays, not in the order in which they were written, but in historical order. *Coriolanus* portrays the early days of the Roman Republic, indeed the founding of the Republic, if one recognizes the tribunate as the distinctively republican institution in Rome. *Julius Caesar* portrays the last days of the Roman Republic, specifically the moment when Caesar tries to create a form of one-man rule in the city, while the conspirators try to restore the republican order. The issue of Republic vs. Empire stands at the heart of *Julius Caesar*. *Antony and Cleopatra* portrays the early days of the Roman Empire, the emergence of Octavius as the sole ruler of Rome (he went on to become Augustus Caesar, the first official Roman Emperor).

The way Shakespeare arranged his three Roman plays suggests that he was centrally concerned with the contrast between the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire. The Roman plays thus offer an opportunity to study the phenomenon Plato and Aristotle referred to as the regime (*politeia*)—the way a particular form of government shapes a particular way of life. From classical antiquity down to the eighteenth century and such thinkers as Montesquieu and the American Founding Fathers, Rome has been one of the perennial themes of political theory. Shakespeare's Roman plays are his contribution to the longstanding debate about Rome, and also occupy a very important place in his comprehensive understanding of the human condition. The plays are evidence of the crucial importance of politics in Shakespeare's view of human nature, as well as of his sense of the limits of politics.

Books:

- *Coriolanus* (Signet Classic edition)
- *Julius Caesar* (Signet Classic edition)
- *Antony & Cleopatra* (Signet Classic edition)

Monday, July 16, 2018

9:00 a.m. to Noon *Coriolanus*

Readings:

- *Coriolanus*, Acts I–V

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Shakespeare characterize the two parties in Republican Rome, the patricians and the plebeians? The two parties are opposed in their interests, but how do they manage to communicate and to some extent work together?

2. What in Coriolanus's character causes him to fail in his bid to become consul?
3. What is the understanding of immortality in republican Rome, and how does it affect the character of the Romans?
4. How are the women in *Coriolanus* portrayed? In particular, what is Volumnia's role in the play? What is the relation of the family to the city of Rome?
5. How would you compare the Volsces with the Romans? Why is Coriolanus able to achieve rule among them, when he was not able to do so among the Romans? How would you compare Aufidius with Coriolanus?
6. Why does Coriolanus eventually abandon his effort to conquer Rome?
7. What do the Romans learn from the story of Coriolanus? What do the patricians in particular learn? What do the plebeians in particular learn? How will these lessons affect the future of Rome as a republic?

Tuesday, July 17, 2018

9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. *Coriolanus*

Readings:

- *Coriolanus* (continued)

Discussion Questions:

See questions from previous assignment

10:30 a.m. to Noon *Julius Caesar*

Readings:

- *Julius Caesar*, Acts I–V

Discussion Questions:

1. Compare the opening scene of *Julius Caesar* with that of *Coriolanus*. What does this comparison tell us about the changes that have occurred in the republican regime? How do the plebeians of *Julius Caesar* differ from those of *Coriolanus*? How has the role of the tribunes changed?
2. In Shakespeare's portrayal, what are the strengths and weaknesses of Julius Caesar? How has he gotten to the point where he is on the verge of achieving one-man rule in Rome?
3. Why does the conspiracy form against Julius Caesar? Who are its leaders, and what does each contribute to the enterprise?
4. Why does the conspiracy fail? What are some of the conspirators' specific mistakes, and why do they make them? Could the Republic have been saved?
5. What is Antony's role in the play? Can you compare him to any character in *Coriolanus*? Why does he succeed in defeating the conspirators? What implications does his reaction to Caesar's death have for his future in *Antony and Cleopatra*?

6. How would you compare Brutus's funeral oration with Antony's?
7. How has the status of women changed since the days of *Coriolanus*?
8. How has religion in Rome changed since the days of *Coriolanus*? What does the presence of soothsayers in the play suggest?
9. Cassius is a professed Epicurean; Brutus is a professed Stoic; Cicero is the only "named" philosopher to appear in any of Shakespeare's plays. What does the presence of philosophy in the Rome of *Julius Caesar* suggest?
10. What is the attitude toward suicide in the closing scenes of the play? Has the Roman attitude toward military victory changed?

Wednesday, July 18, 2018

9:00 a.m. to Noon *Julius Caesar*

Readings:

- *Julius Caesar* (continued)

Discussion Questions:

See questions from previous assignment

Thursday, July 19, 2018

9:00 a.m. to Noon *Antony and Cleopatra*

Readings:

- *Antony and Cleopatra*, Acts I–V

Discussion Questions:

1. How have the political circumstances changed now that the Roman Empire is coming into being? How do these changes affect the lives of the characters in the play?
2. What do you make of Pompey's rhetoric and actions in Act Two, scenes six and seven? How and why have the terms of politics altered for him?
3. In Act III, scene 1, we see Ventidius, a Roman commander on the frontier of the empire. What does this scene reveal about how politics has changed in Imperial Rome? What are the implications of this scene for the future of Rome?
4. How has the status of women changed in the Empire?
5. How has religion changed in the Empire?
6. How has Rome become Egyptianized in *Antony and Cleopatra*? What does this development tell us about Imperial Rome?
7. Antony expresses a wish to live "a private man in Athens" (Act III, scene 12). If all that matters to him and Cleopatra is their private love affair, why don't they simply abdicate and disappear into the teeming masses of the empire?

8. What is Enobarbus's dilemma, and how is it representative of the changed conditions of the Empire?
9. How has the notion of nobility changed in the world of *Antony and Cleopatra*?
10. For the first time in the Roman plays, we hear talk of an afterlife in *Antony and Cleopatra*. What is the significance of this development?

Friday, July 20, 2018

9:00 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. *Antony and Cleopatra*

Readings:

- *Antony and Cleopatra* (continued)

Discussion Questions:

See questions from previous assignment

10:30 a.m. to Noon Open Forum on the Plays