

LIT 352 | Ancient Heroines, Modern Voices Fall 2026

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Course Description:

This undergraduate course investigates the cultural construction, transmission, and transformation of major female figures in ancient Greek literature and their subsequent reinterpretations in modern texts. Concentrating on Helen, Penelope, Cassandra, Circe and Medea, the course interrogates how these figures are embedded within the poetic, political, and philosophical conditions of archaic and classical Greece, and how their meanings are reconfigured across later historical moments.

Our inquiry begins with sustained close readings of Homeric epic and Attic tragedy, including the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as selected plays by Aeschylus and Euripides. These works are approached not merely as repositories of myth but as culturally situated performances that articulate and regulate gendered norms. Students will examine how femininity is constructed at the intersection of *oikos* and *polis*, speech and silence, visibility and marginalization. Particular attention is given to the narrative and dramaturgical mechanisms through which female figures are idealized, demonized, eroticized, or rendered politically disruptive.

The course then turns to modern rearticulations by Christa Wolf, Margaret Atwood, Madeline Miller and James Joyce, whose texts engage in complex dialogues with their classical antecedents. These rewritings frequently displace the authority of the canonical narrative, foreground suppressed perspectives, and expose the ideological investments that underpin inherited mythic structures. Through comparative analysis, students will assess how modern authors mobilize ancient material to interrogate questions of authorship, agency, historical memory, and the politics of representation.

Theoretical frameworks from feminist criticism and reception studies will guide our discussions. Drawing on the work of Nicole Loraux and Rita Felski, we will consider how interpretive communities shape the meanings ascribed to female figures and how gender operates as a site of both symbolic contestation and cultural continuity. Judith Butler's account of gender as performative and culturally reiterated, provides a critical lens through which to reassess the apparent stability of "the feminine" in both ancient and modern contexts. Reception theory, informed by scholars such as Lorna Hardwick, further enables us to conceptualize classical texts not as static, but as dynamic forms within an ongoing network of cultural fermentation.

By the conclusion of the course, students will have developed a sophisticated understanding of how female figures function as sites of ideological production, aesthetic experimentation, and historical reimagination across temporal and cultural boundaries.

Course Approach

This course adopts a **seminar-based, research-oriented approach** that integrates close textual analysis, theoretical inquiry, and collaborative discussion. Key topics—such as the cultural construction of femininity, narrative authority, gendered speech, and the afterlives of classical female figures—will be explored through sustained comparative reading of ancient epic and tragedy alongside modern rewritings.

Students will engage texts in translation, complemented by critical readings drawn from feminist theory, gender studies, and reception scholarship.

Methodologically, the course combines philological attentiveness to language and form with historically contextualized interpretation and theoretically informed analysis.

Seminar meetings will center on structured discussion guided by focused questions that foreground issues of gender, power, authorship, and cultural memory. Lectures will provide historical and intellectual frameworks—such as the cultural context of ancient Greek epic and the emergence of contemporary feminist revisions—while ensuring that sustained interpretive work remains central. Particular emphasis will be placed on examining how meaning shifts across temporal and cultural boundaries, and how interpretive frameworks themselves shape our understanding of ancient and modern texts.

Key academic skills will be developed progressively throughout the semester. Close reading exercises will strengthen students' ability to analyze literary form, rhetorical strategies, and thematic complexity. Students will practice

comparative analysis through short response papers that place ancient and modern texts in dialogue. A scaffolded research assignment will guide them through the stages of formulating a research question, engaging critically with secondary scholarship, and constructing a theoretically informed argument. Draft workshops will provide structured opportunities for peer feedback, fostering revision skills and critical self-reflection. Oral communication skills will be cultivated through presentations and participation in moderated debates on interpretive questions.

Collaborative learning forms a central component of the course. Students will regularly work in pairs or small groups to analyze specific passages, apply theoretical frameworks, or map thematic correspondences across texts. Occasional group presentations will require students to synthesize research findings and present them to the class. Structured debates will encourage students to articulate and defend interpretive positions while engaging respectfully with alternative viewpoints.

By combining individual research, collective inquiry, and theoretically informed discussion, the course aims to cultivate both intellectual independence and collaborative critical engagement.

Learning Objectives

- **Demonstrate good knowledge** of major female figures in ancient Greek epic and tragedy and explain their historical, cultural, and literary contexts.
- **Analyze and interpret literary texts comparatively**, assessing how ancient representations are reconfigured in modern rewritings through close reading and theoretically informed argumentation.
- **Apply feminist, gender, and reception theory** to the study of both classical and contemporary texts.
- **Conduct independent research**, critically engaging with primary sources and relevant secondary scholarship to develop coherent, well-supported written and oral arguments.
- **Collaborate effectively in seminar discussion and group work**, articulating informed perspectives, responding constructively to alternative interpretations, and contributing to collective critical inquiry.
- **By synthesizing literary representations of women** with contemporary feminist theoretical frameworks, students may endeavor to recuperate and articulate the muted narratives of the past—accounts that persist largely in mediated, secondhand forms. Such work aspires to unearth obscured voices and render legible those histories long consigned to silence.

Course Requirements

This is a reading-intensive, discussion-based course. Students are expected to complete approximately **40 pages of reading per week**, consisting of primary texts (ancient epic and tragedy; modern rewritings) and scholarly articles or monograph chapters (generally one article or chapter per class session). Thorough preparation of all readings is essential, as seminar meetings rely on sustained, text-centered discussion and theoretical engagement.

1. Seminar Presentation (25%)

Each student will deliver one **20-minute seminar presentation** during the semester. The presentation should introduce a key scholarly article, theoretical framework, or major interpretive debate relevant to the week's readings. Students are expected to synthesize critical arguments, situate them within broader methodological contexts (e.g., feminist theory, gender studies, reception studies), and formulate focused questions to guide class discussion. Presentations will be assessed on clarity, analytical rigor, engagement with scholarship, and the ability to stimulate critical dialogue.

2. Peer feedback sessions (15%)

Students are required to engage critically with the presentations delivered by their peers and to provide written evaluations for each presentation. Students are expected to offer constructive commentary that highlights both strengths and areas for improvement.

3. Research Paper (40%)

Students will complete a substantial research paper of **at least 2,000-2,500 words**. The paper must engage closely with selected primary texts and incorporate relevant secondary scholarship. Students are required to formulate an original research question and develop a sustained, theoretically informed argument.

The research process will be scaffolded through:

- a written proposal
- optional individual consultation with the lecturer.

The final paper should demonstrate skills in textual analysis, historical contextualization, theoretical application, and

scholarly writing.

4. Paper Proposal (10%)

Students must submit a research proposal of up to 500 words outlining their intended final paper. The proposal should present a clear and focused research question, situate the topic within its historical and literary context and include preliminary bibliography.

5. Participation and Engagement (10%)

Active and informed participation constitutes a significant component of the course. This includes consistent attendance, careful preparation of readings, thoughtful contributions to seminar discussions.

Successful completion of the course requires sustained reading, intellectual independence, analytical precision, and collaborative critical engagement.

Evaluation and Grading

Evaluation Criteria will be available on Moodle at the start of the course.

CYA Regulations and Accommodations

Attendance Policy

Attendance is essential. Illness or other extenuating circumstances must be reported to the Student Affairs Office, and students must submit the relevant form (for illness, the Student Affairs form; for exceptional circumstances, a request to the Academic Director). More than three unexcused absences will result in a reduction of the final grade.

Make-Up Work

Students are responsible for completing all work missed due to any absence, whether excused or unexcused. It is the student’s responsibility to contact the instructor promptly to obtain information regarding missed assignments and applicable deadlines. Make-up work must be completed within the timeframe specified by the instructor. Failure to complete required make-up work will result in a reduction of the final course grade.

ePolicy on Original Work

All submitted work must be your own original work. Any material drawn from the work of others—including ideas, quotations, images, or other content—must be clearly acknowledged and properly identified with accurate in-text citations along with a complete bibliography.

AI Policy

Artificial Intelligence tools may be used to support learning and academic work in this course, provided their use is limited and academically appropriate. AI use is permitted for brainstorming ideas, clarifying concepts, receiving feedback on grammar and identifying potential sources for further research. AI tools may assist in the development of your work, but they may not replace your own critical thinking, analysis, or original writing. Submissions must reflect your individual understanding and intellectual engagement with the material. Simply submitting AI-generated text as your own work is not permitted.

Students are responsible for verifying the accuracy of any information, references, or citations suggested by AI tools. All sources must be properly cited according to course guidelines. To ensure the integrity of submitted work, I reserve the right to ask students to orally explain or defend the content and reasoning behind any submission.

Improper use of AI may be considered a violation of academic integrity policies.

Use of Laptops

In-class or onsite use of laptops and other devices is permitted if this facilitates course-related activities such as note-taking, looking up references, etc. Laptop or other device privileges will be suspended if devices are not used for class-related work.

Class Schedule: SELECTED CHAPTERS from the reading each week (up to 40 pages in total)

Class Day	Day/Date	Topic / Readings / Assignments Due
1	Sep 7	Introduction: the role of women in archaic and classical Greece.
2	Sep 9	Theoretical framework: women erased and re-imagined.

		Reading: Loraux, <i>The Children of Athena: Athenian Ideas about Citizenship and the Division between the Sexes</i> .
3	Sep 14	"Dreadfully like a goddess is she to look upon": Helen in <i>The Iliad</i> . Reading: Homer, <i>The Iliad</i> , Blondell, <i>Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation</i> .
4	Sept 16	Helen beyond Troy. Reading: Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Euripides, <i>Helen</i> , Foley, <i>Female Acts in Greek Tragedy</i> , Blondell, <i>Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides</i> .
5	Sept 21	The afterlives of Helen. Reading: George, <i>Helen of Troy</i> , Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa."
6	Sept 23	Penelope as a symbol of loyalty. Reading: Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Cohen, <i>The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey</i> .
7	Sept 28	Penelope's lament. Reading: Atwood, <i>The Penelopiad</i> , Hauser, "'There Is Another Story': Writing after the Odyssey in Margaret Atwood's <i>The Penelopiad</i> ."
8	Sept 30	Two sides of the same coin: Penelope and Helen in Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i> . Reading: Joyce, <i>Ulysses</i> , Felson-Rubin, <i>Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics</i> . Nelson, <i>Time and Identity in Ulysses and the Odyssey</i> .
9	Oct 5	Dramatic Representations of women. Reading: Zeitlin, <i>Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature</i> , Hardwick, <i>Reception Studies</i>
10	Oct 12	Princess Cassandra, cursed never to be believed. Reading: Aeschylus. Agamemnon, McClure, <i>Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama</i> .
11	Oct 14	Cassandra finds her voice. Reading: Wolf, <i>Cassandra</i> , Pickle Wolf. "'Scratching Away the Male Tradition': Christa Wolf's 'Kassandra'."
12	Oct 19	Women as bearers of war trauma. Reading: Meineck, Peter and Konstan, David (eds). <i>Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks</i> , Caruth, Cathy. <i>Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History</i>
13	Oct 21	Medea: mother, foreigner, witch. Reading: Euripides, <i>Medea</i> . Rabinowitz, <i>Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women</i> .
14	Nov 2	Medea, an exiled intellectual. Reading: Wolf, <i>Medea: A Modern Retelling</i> , van Zyl Smit, Betine. "Medea the Feminist."
15	Nov 4	Circe, an enduring symbol of a dangerous "femme fatale". Reading: Homer, <i>Odyssey</i> , Segal, "Circean Temptations: Homer, Vergil, Ovid."
16	Nov 9	Modern retelling of Circe Reading: Miller, Circe, Yarnall, <i>Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress</i> .
17	Nov 16	Untamed women: comparing Medea and Circe. Reading: Clauss, James J., and Sarah Iles Johnston, (eds). <i>Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art</i> , Yarnall, Judith. <i>Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress</i> .
18	Nov 18	Modern representations of mythical females in cinema and art.

19	Nov 23	The importance of reclaiming the female narrative voice. <i>of Literature.</i>	Reading: Felski, <i>Uses</i>
20	Nov 25	To what extent have male narratives informed our views on women? Reading: Butler, <i>Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.</i>	
21	Nov 30	Homer, Aeschylus and Euripides: comparison of their portrayal of female figures.	
22	Dec 2	Student Presentations	
23	Dec 7	Student Presentations	
24	Dec 9	Peer feedback	

COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Texts:

- Aeschylus. Agamemnon. Translated by Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press, 1953.
 Atwood, Margaret. The Penelopiad. Canongate, 2005.
 Euripides. Helen. Translated by James Morwood, Oxford UP, 2007.
 Euripides. Medea. Translated by Diane Arnson Svarlien, Hackett, 2008.
 George, Margaret. Helen of Troy. Viking Adult, 2006.
 Homer. Odyssey. Translated by Emily Wilson, W. W. Norton, 2017.
 Homer. The Iliad. Translated by Emily Wilson, W. W. Norton, 2024.
 Joyce, James. Ulysses. Random House, 1922.
 Miller, Madeline. Circe. Little, Brown, 2018.
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 Wolf, Christa. Medea: A Modern Retelling. Translated by John Cullen, Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 1998.

Secondary material:

- Blondell, Ruby. Helen of Troy: Beauty, Myth, Devastation. Oxford UP, 2013.
 Blondell, Ruby. Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides. Routledge, 2002.
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 Yarnall, Judith. Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress. U of Illinois P, 1994.
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