30 April 2021 (updated 8 October 2021)

English 210 – Ancient and Modern Superpowers: The Roman Epic and American Political Discourse

Nicholas Mennona Marino

COURSE DESCRIPTION

It is often said that America is the New Rome. Both nations rejected absolute monarchy for a constitutional republic. Both empires relied on militaristic might expanding out from the home continent to the farthest reaches of the known world. Both nations had to separate themselves from their cultural predecessors (the British for the USA, the Greeks and Etruscans for the Romans). Furthermore, as both nations grew, they became more diverse racially, religiously, and culturally. Perhaps the most apt literary genre for such superpowers is the epic, which J.A. Cuddon[[1]](#footnote-1) defines as “a long narrative poem, on a grand scale, about the deeds of warriors and heroes” and this genre often expresses “national significance” through embodying “the history and aspirations of a nation in a lofty or grandiose manner” (Cuddon 264). This course will focus on the Latin language epics of the Romans (read in translation), composed from the 1st century BC to the 1st century AD, during the transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. Situated from the perspective of what it means to be the citizen or resident of a superpower nation, this course will attempt to draw parallels between ancient epics and contemporary political realities.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

* Students will learn about how epic poems reflected Rome’s gradual transition from Kingdom to Republic to Empire
* Students will connect the political elements in Roman epics to both Roman and contemporary American politics
* Students will question how epics can be used to manipulate history and provide a revisionist or idealized account suitable to national or political interests
* Students will explore how Roman epics both relied on Greek models while also distinguishing the Romans from the Greeks in terms of religious and cultural practices and will compare that process to how Americans had to do the same with the British

ASSESSMENTS

Students will compose reader response essays and post questions in Moodle discussion forums for each text. Students will also be responsible for composing two research papers, each of which will link at least one of the course readings with an issue in contemporary American politics.

TEXTS

Ancient

Lucan, *Pharsalia*

Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*

Virgil, *Aeneid*

Modern

Jane Addams*,* “Why Women Should Vote” (1910)

George W. Bush,“Second Inaugural Address” (2005)

George W. Bush,“Statement on the Intelligence Authorization Act” (2004)

“The Declaration of Independence” *(1776)*

Bret Easton Ellis “post-empire” (from *White*)

Ruth Bader Ginsburg,“Speaking in a Judicial Voice” (1992)

Lyndon B. Johnson,“Address on Voting Rights” (1965)

John F. Kennedy, “First Inaugural Address” (1961)

James Madison, “On Property” (1792)

Barack Obama,“A More Perfect Union” (2008)

Rand Paul,“A Conservative Realism Foreign Policy” (2014)

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “First Inaugural Address” (1933)

Donald Trump, “Mount Rushmore 4th of July Speech” (2020)

Secondary/Reference

David M. Gwynn, *The Roman Republic: A Very Short Introduction*

Christopher Kelly, *The Roman Empire: A Very Short Introduction*

1. Cuddon, J.A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms & Literary Theory*. Penguin, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)