

LIT102

# Myths of Ancient Greece and Rome

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**Required Text:** *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Sophocles*, David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press, 1992. ISBN: 0226307654. \$46.00.

**Course Description:** Classical Mythology is a unique subject. Its primary texts are ancient, poetic accounts that are essentially fictional. Yet these accounts are based on an earlier oral tradition that did preserve some historical truths. Hence the Classical Myths occupy a borderland between history and fiction. Over the centuries, thinkers and artists have treated them with a seriousness usually reserved for historical events. They have taken on a life of their own.

**Course Goals:** The goal of this course is for students to gain a thorough familiarity with the characters and events described in the most important Classical (ancient Greek and Roman) myths. The principal reading for the course is a brief book written by the instructor available online in the Handouts section. Slightly over a hundred pages in length and divided into ten sessions, the book contains condensed versions of the Classical Myths as recounted in their primary sources. The accounts are quite brief. The longest, Homer's *Odyssey*, is only eleven pages long. Nevertheless, every effort has been made to include all of the significant details and a fair selection of famous quotations.

## Course Objectives:

- A. Understand the nature of the stories of Classical Mythology, which exist at the borders between fiction and history and are remnants of the particular oral culture from which western civilization emerged.
- B. Gain a thorough familiarity with the characters and events described in the most important Classical (ancient Greek and Roman) myths.
- C. Master the readings well enough to tell the stories themselves.
- D. Have a body of knowledge by which to test theories of myth
- E. Formulate questions and to make comments about the myths, thus engaging students in reflective discussions of the meanings of myths.

- F. Gain intellectual enrichment through illustrating their ideas by citing incidents from the lives of the ancient heroes and the course of the Trojan War.
- G. Understand new insights into the human condition on the basis of stories that took shape more than two thousand years ago.

**Course requirements:** Though the principal reading is brief, students taking the course for credit are expected to master it very thoroughly. Comprehension can be tested by detailed objective quizzes covering the first week of the course, and weeks two through four, five through seven, and eight through ten respectively. The final exam will be based on questions similar to those in the practice quizzes. Students who get an A or B will find that they know the stories well enough to tell them themselves, which is the most important goal of the course.

Only so much can be learned from condensed versions of ancient literature. Students taking the course for credit are required to do some reading in the unabridged, primary sources and to complete a 2,500 word term paper on the reading. My recommendation for this assignment is to read two tragedies by Sophocles, Oedipus Rex and Oedipus at Colonus, and to discuss their philosophical and ethical implications.

**Required reading:** The principal primary sources of Classical mythology have all been translated into English repeatedly and are readily available at libraries and bookstores. Students in LIT102, Ancient Myths of Greece and Rome, are required to read the Theban trilogy of Sophocles (Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus, and Antigone).

**Assessments:** Student coursework will be assessed on the basis of the following:

● **Writing Assignments (30%).** Students must submit a 2,500 word term paper in which they articulate their response or evaluation of one of the principal primary sources of Classical myths. The paper should include a general overview of the story or stories read with some notice of the ways in which the primary sources differs from the condensed version of the story in the course readings. The main focus of the paper, however, is the student's personal response to the story. This may take various forms. Many of the myths revolve around conflicting beliefs, e.g., in the Oedipus plays between belief in free will and the notion that one's fate is controlled by higher powers.

The student may trace the development of such a conflict in the reading and discuss its implications. Alternatively, the student may

evaluate the reading from an aesthetic point of view, evaluating the power of the plot, the interest roused by characters, and the use of suspense and irony. Students are encouraged to consult with the instructor in planning their papers. In every case, however, the goal is for the student to articulate his or her own reaction to the reading while demonstrating a good grasp its literal meaning.

●**Contribution to Discussion Topics (40%).** After reading the assignments for each Session and listening to the recorded lecture, go to "Discussion" in IZIO and respond to the topic posted for that Session.

●**Final Objective Quiz (30% each).** Four practice quizzes are posted and are taken in this sequence:

Quiz One. 1) Historical Introduction Quiz. 2) Quiz for Stories 1-11; 3) Quiz for Stories 12-23; 4) Quiz for Stories 24-34. A final objective quiz will be in the same format as the practice quizzes and is valued at 30% of your course grade.

### **Course Outline:**

Session I: Introduction entitled "The Historical Context of Classical Myths."

1. Read "Historical Introduction" and post comments or questions on the Discussion Board.
2. Take practice quiz on Historical Introduction and review as needed.
3. Read Stories 1 through 5 and post comments and questions.

Session II: The character of Prometheus,

1. Read stories 6 through 8 and post comments and questions.
2. Read stories 9 through 11 and post comments and questions.
3. Take practice quiz on stories 1-11 and review as needed.

Session III: Stories 12 and 13 introduce the goddess of love, Aphrodite.

1. Read stories 12 and 13 and post comments and questions.
2. Read stories 14 through 16 and post comments and questions.

Session IV: Stories of Life, Death, and Revelry.

1. Read stories 17 through 20 and post comments and questions.
2. Read story 21 and post comments and questions.
3. Read stories 22 and 23 and post comments and questions.

4. Take practice quiz on stories 12 through 23 and review as needed.

Session V: Heroes' Renown.

1. Read stories 24 and 25 and post comments and questions.
2. Read story 26 and post comments and questions.
3. Read stories 27-29 and post comments and questions
4. Select and primary text for a term paper. Options include: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and *Oedipus at Colonus* (summarized in stories 38 and 39), Books 9 through 12 of Homer's *Odyssey* (summarized in story 52), and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (summarized in stories 49-51). Advise instructor of choice. Consult with him on other possibilities.

Session VI: Stories of Tragedy.

1. Read story 30 and post comments and questions.
2. Read stories 31 through 33 and post comments and questions.
3. Read story 34 and post comments and questions.
4. Take practice quiz on stories 24 through 34 and review as necessary.
5. Read primary text for term paper.

Session VII: The Kingdom of Thebes and its king, Oedipus.

1. Read stories 35 through 38 and post comments and questions.
2. Read stories 39 and 40 and post comments and questions.
3. Read stories 41 through 43 and post comments and questions.
4. Work on term paper.

Session VIII: Euripides and Homer.

1. Read story 44 and post comments and questions.
2. Read stories 45 and 46 and post comments and questions.
3. Read story 47 and 48 and post comments and questions.
4. Take practice quiz on stories 35 through 48 and review as necessary.
5. Work on term paper.

Session IX: The Trojan War, which is NOT included in Homer's Iliad, the Odyssey.

1. Read stories 49 through 51 and post comments and questions.
2. Read stories 52 and 53 and post comments and questions.
3. Work on term paper.

Session X: Conclusion of the Odyssey and beginning of Rome.

1. Read story 54 and post comments and questions.
2. Read stories 55 through 57 and post comments and questions.
3. Take practice quiz on stories 49 through 57 and review as necessary.
4. Work on term paper.