

Research Essay

History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022

The assignment: Write a 5- to 6-page researched essay, due at the end of the semester, that takes a position on the depiction of religion within a major literary work from the ancient world.

A. Choose a work

For this assignment, you need to choose a literary work from the ancient world (before 500 CE) one of the themes of which relates to religion. For example, in *Antigone*, the conflict is driven in part by Antigone's need to respect the gods by burying her brother, despite having been forbidden to do so by the king.

Your goal will be to make an argument about how this work deals with religion—both religious custom between mortals and the relationship between mortals and the divine—and what this tells us about the particular culture this work came from.

Some possible subjects are listed at the bottom of this page, along with links to online versions of the text.

EXAMPLES

What do I mean by "religion" in this context? The idea of "religion" can encompass a lot of different things, so you have some leeway in the kinds of things you can discuss as part of showing how your work relates to religion.

Consider all of the different ways in which concepts of religion affect society; including: the actions of gods and of nature, often inexplicable or capricious; expectations of morality and behavior external to the bonds between mortals; religious iconography and monuments; sacred texts; rituals and sacrifices; magic; legends and myths that explain the way the world works; ideas of time and cosmos beyond the mundane experience of mortals; pollution and sin; death and the afterlife; salvation; the soul as distinct from the mortal body; ideological conflict with other gods or the religious beliefs of other cultures.

What you'll be doing is looking for these kinds of things in the work you're exploring and picking out three moments from the work to discuss and interpret in your essay, with the overall goal of using these interpretations to gain insight into the culture that produced the work you're writing about. This means you will be making an argument concerning what you believe this work tells us about the culture it came from. That brings us to the Proposal, in which you identify which work you're going to be exploring and sketch out what you think might be the position you'll be taking.

B. Write a one-page proposal

The assignment: The proposal is just a brief one-page preview of your essay. It should include:

- The topic you think you'll want to write about and the problem you're interested in addressing. You should be able to delineate the problem by describing the opposing views people might take. To make sure you have two clear opposing opinions, you might want to express them in the form "Some say.... Others say...."
- Your preliminary thesis statement—in other words, what you think you might be arguing in your paper.
 - Your thesis statement, both here and in the final paper, should be a statement of opinion that someone could disagree with. It can take the form of following up the description of the opposing opinions with your own: "I believe...."

Remember that your thesis is provisional. You can change anything about your approach and interpretation after the proposal; in fact, uncovering information as you do your research makes refining or changing your initial assessments very likely.

Your proposal is structured like the introduction (see the example on the course website or in the Elephant Pamphlet), and may serve as the basis for it.

The proposal is not graded, but whether you submitted a proposal on time will be factored into the final grade for the position paper. I will give you feedback on things like the feasibility of researching your topic, whether the scope is too big or too narrow for a paper like this, and some possible sources you might want to look at.

Note: The one-page proposal described here is what's due in Week 7.

C. Research additional perspectives

The bulk of your essay will involve describing, analyzing, and drawing conclusions about three moments from the work that you think most clearly reveal the author's understanding of religion. We'll call the work you've chosen to write about the *main text*.

To support your analysis, I want you to find at least two other additional sources that provide perspective on the work you are studying.

These *additional sources* can be either

- (a) primary sources—sources also from the ancient world—that comment on the subject of the main text, or on the main text itself; or
- (b) secondary sources by modern scholars that focus on interpreting your main text.

You can have two primary sources, two secondary sources, or one of each. In your paper, you'll use these additional sources to support the arguments you make about the main text.

EXAMPLES

An example from the first category: Suppose your main text is *Bacchae*, a tragedy that Dionysos, the Greek god of wine and ritual madness, as its antagonist. To get a handle on Euripides's take on this strange and anomalous god, you could take a look at another ancient work featuring the same god to use as a contrast—*Frogs*, for example, a comedy by Aristophanes in which Dionysos interacts with some famous playwrights (including Euripides). Looking at how differently Aristophanes handles Dionysos will help you gain insight into how Euripides saw Dionysos and the role he had in human society.

An example from the second category might be a scholarly discussion of the main text—for example, a book of essays about the themes that surface in *Bacchae*. Or it might be about a specific topic you're focusing on in the main text—for example, a scholarly article about the way Dionysos was viewed by the Greeks.

My response to your proposal will include some suggestions as to useful additional sources for your essay.

Tertiary sources are not allowed. These include textbooks, encyclopedias, and most websites. See the Research and Citation Center for more on sources.

For guidance on finding full-text online primary and secondary sources, see the Research and Citation Center.

D. Write your essay

- In your introduction, briefly describe the problem and state the position you will argue as a thesis statement. Your introduction should follow the format of the proposal (see above).
- In the body of your paper, make three assertions as to why your thesis statement is valid. For each assertion, describe and discuss the evidence from the primary and secondary sources.

EXAMPLE

For example, if you were writing the Hannibal/elephants paper described in the website, you could start one section with an assertion that elephants were not a bad idea inherently, then discuss evidence showing the effective use of elephants in war.

Then begin the next section with an assertion that Romans were adaptable in war, and discuss evidence showing how Romans changed their military tactics and strategies to meet new kinds of war and new enemies.

Your third section could begin with an assertion that it was Roman adaptability that trumped the effectiveness of Hannibal's evidence, and discuss the evidence that showed how the Romans overcame the use of elephants in the fight with Hannibal.

- Each section starts with an assertion followed by evidence, and each section builds on the previous sections to make an overall argument. Your evidence should come primarily from your main text, with support for your analysis coming from the two additional sources you've chosen.
- End with a conclusion that shows how your three assertions came together to support your thesis.

Your essay must have citations for all quotes, paraphrases, and ideas from both your main text and your additional sources. There must also be a bibliography that lists your main text and all additional sources. We'll talk about this in class, and see the Research and Citation Center for more.

Optional Draft. You may submit an optional draft two weeks before the final due date. It should include most of your paper (at least two thirds of the final content, with sections to be written described in square brackets). I'll give feedback, but not a grade, to help you refine your final paper. To make sure I see it soonest, please email me your optional draft rather than uploading it to BlackBoard.

Possible subjects and links

Possible subjects for this assignment include the following. Links may be found on the web page.

Plays

- *Antigone* by Sophocles (Athens, 5th century BCE). Antigone fights to bury her treasonous brother despite having been forbidden to do so by the grudge-bearing king.
- *Bacchae* by Euripides (Athens, 5th century BCE). Spurned by Thebes, Dionysos tricks its queen into rending her own son to pieces.
- *Eumenides* by Aeschylus (Athens, 5th century BCE). Tormented by the Furies for murdering his faithless mother at Apollo's behest, Orestes appeals to the justice of Athena.
- *The Birds* by Aristophanes (Athens, 5th century BCE). Pisthetaerus convinces the birds to create a great city in the sky, and thus regain their status as the original gods.

Epic Poetry

- *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Sumer, Bronze Age BCE). The king of Uruk, saved from abusive rule by his god-given friend Enkidu, seeks to defeat the forest guardian and defy his own mortality.
- *Theogony* by Hesiod (Greece, 8th century BCE). The origins of the Greek gods and the personalities and intentions.
- "The Death of Patroklos": books 16–18 of *Iliad* by Homer (Greece, 8th century BCE). Seeking glory on behalf of his mentor, Achilles, Patroklos is lured to his death in battle thanks to conflicts among the gods.
- "Aeneas in the Underworld": book 6 of *Aeneid* by Virgil (Rome, 1st century BCE). Required to obtain a bough of gold as a gift for the wife of Pluto, Aeneas descends to the underworld, where he witnesses the fates of the just and the unjust.
- "Gods and Mortals": books 1-2 of *Metamorphoses* by Ovid (Rome, 1st century CE). Stories of creation and the ages of humanity, plus mortal encounters with the gods by Io, Daphne, Europa, and others.

Dialog

- *Babylonian Theodicy* by Šaggil-kinam-ubbib (Babylon, 11th century BCE). A dialog between an individual experiencing suffering as a result of acts of evil done by people in the society around him, and a friend who urges a positive perspective on morality and fate.
- *Euthyphro* by Plato (Athens, 4th century BCE). Socrates, soon to be put on trial for his life, discusses the meaning of piety and justice.
- *On Divination* by Cicero (Rome, 1st century BCE). A philosophical exploration on the role and purpose of divination in Roman religious ritual and culture.

Sacred Text

- *The Book of Job* (Judea, 4th century BCE). Satan receives God's permission to test the faith a wealthy man by removing his blessings.

Satire

- *The Pumpkinification of Claudius* by Seneca (Rome, 1st century CE). The recently deceased emperor Claudius is depicted ascending to heaven, where the gods are not sure what to do with him.

Prose Fiction

- "Tale of Cupid and Psyche": books 4.27–6 of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius (Rome, 2nd century CE). The god of love and his beloved overcome various obstacles before finally being able to wed.

Prose Nonfiction

- *Numa* by Plutarch (Rome, 2nd century CE). Biography of the legendary second king of Rome, to whom was attributed the religious traditions and institutions of later Rome.
- *Isis and Osiris* by Plutarch (Egypt, 2nd century CE). A survey of Egyptian religious rites and myths from a Greek perspective.

I'm happy to discuss other possibilities, but alternative choices should be approved by me first before the due date for the proposal.