

Masterpieces and Masterminds: Literature and Thought of the West

COLT 101g, Class #22000R, Fall 2009, Tues & Thurs 12:30-1:50, THH 116

Select One Discussion Section: Mondays at 9 or 10



François Gérard, "Psyché et l'Amour" (1798)

This course is sub-titled "Psyche: Soul and Self in Literature and Thought" because our goal is to understand different ways writers and thinkers from antiquity to 1800 portray the essence of the individual or "self." We'll ask a number of simple but intriguing questions: How does an individual acquire an identity? Does an individual's identity change over time or remain constant? Can an individual transform her or his identity? Is an individual equivalent to his or her body? How fundamental is gender to an individual's sense of self? How does believing or not believing in an afterlife (a soul) influence a sense of self? Is the ability to tell one's own story essential to selfhood? How do changing forms of social power and authority impact the self?

We'll explore these questions at the very start of western literature in Homer's *Odyssey*, in the early thinking of the presocratic philosophers, and in Sophocles' Oedipus plays (*Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*). We'll see how the notion of the soul and the afterlife is developed by Plato and in myths like Cupid and Psyche. Roman poets like Virgil and Ovid will also show us how souls and bodies can change forms in epic (*Aeneid*) and in poetic myths (*Metamorphoses*). The powerful influence of Christianity on ideas about the soul and self will emerge from the New Testament, the Gospel of Thomas, and Augustine's autobiography, *Confessions*.

Dante (*Inferno*) will dramatize the medieval Christian script of the soul's salvation or damnation, and from Petrarch and Boccaccio we'll appreciate the influence on the self of non-Christian ideas about love. Renaissance humanism will challenge these medieval beliefs through stories like the Faust legend (we'll read Christopher Marlowe's Elizabethan tragedy, *Dr. Faustus*), and an early female psychological novel (*The Princess of Cleves*) will show how the modern age began to "liberate" the self from control by others. From the Romantic age we'll learn how individuals pursued their freedom through Jean-Jacques Rousseau's philosophical self-reflections, Mary Wollstonecraft's call for women's liberation, and Wordsworth's poetic exploration of childhood, memory and the imagination.

This course, which is an option for the Literature Concentration of the L/M/CT Track of the COLT Major and Minor as well as for the Global Cultures Track of the COLT Minor, is a Category I (Western Cultures and Traditions) GE course.

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