

## **ENGL 310/370/347/394 Milton and Hermeneutics**

Messiah College, Fall 2011, MW 3-4.15 pm

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### ***Course Description***

We will have two primary points of focus in this course. The first will be Milton's major poems—*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*—which critically engage and interpret both biblical and classical traditions. For this reason we will also read selected texts from the Bible, Virgil, and Euripides to more precisely discern the nature and extent of Milton's engagement with these texts. The second point of focus will be Hans-Georg Gadamer's theory of hermeneutics, which provide a basis for examining how Milton read and responded to significant texts, which in turn will give us the opportunity to reflect on our own interpretive assumptions and choices as readers. While we will, as in any literature course, fundamentally concern ourselves with the question of what is living for, we will also reflect on the question of what is reading and writing for, why do we read and write as we do—what are our fundamental assumptions and practices when it comes to reading texts? We might think of this as a course entitled (in the spirit of the seventeenth-century) “Reading Milton reading, or reading us reading Milton reading, or reading us reading Milton reading us reading” (when we get to the hermeneutical circle, this will make a kind of sense to you). These questions have deep significance for both Milton's and our own Christian faith(s).

### ***Course Objectives***

1. To deepen and extend our understanding of the traditions and methods of literary study, especially the hermeneutical tradition and Gadamer's theory of interpretation.
2. To provide us with the opportunity to become engaged with the texts of significant writers—Milton, Virgil, Euripides, and Gadamer.
3. To foster in you the ability to read with sensitivity and care, and to pay critical attention to your reading responses.
4. To help you understand our cultural heritage, and to understand the extent to which our cultural heritage—especially Virgil, Milton, and the Bible as a major parts of that heritage—shapes us as both readers and human beings.
5. To encourage you to encounter significant questions of meaning and identity—it would not be unfair to say that much of what we will do is philosophical (often theological at times): literature *as* philosophy, philosophy *as* literature.
6. To sum it up: we aim to improve our reading skills, to become aware of what is involved in reading texts, to strengthen our own written expression, to understand ourselves both as individuals and as a culture—in other words, to engage in the process of soul-making and answering the question, what is living for?

### ***Course Texts***

- David Jasper. *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.
- Merold Westphal. *Who Community? Which Interpretation?: Philosophical Hermeneutics for the Church*. Baker Academic, 2009.
- Vergil. *The Aeneid*. Translated by Sarah Ruden. Yale UP, 2008.
- Virgil. *Georgics*. Translated by Peter Fallon. Oxford World's Classics, 2006.
- Euripides. *Herakles*. Translated by Tom Sleight. Oxford UP, 2001.
- The Bible. King James Version preferred.
- John Milton. Major poems: I have ordered the Modern Library volume edited by Kerrigan, Rumrich, and Fallon, but you can use any scholarly edition.

### ***Course Requirements***

1. *Class attendance and discussion*: this is not a lecture course, so your participation is imperative. You are permitted two unexcused absences; any other absences must be cleared with me before the class absence. Your participation will be graded as a plus, nil, or minus on the final semester grade for the course.
2. *Hermeneutical Notebook*: your ongoing responses to questions posed in the syllabus, this will help you write your semester paper. 15%
3. *Brief papers*: these are 1-2 page response papers to questions posed in the syllabus; I'll select this option instead of the hermeneutical notebook on occasion. 15%.
4. *Semester exam*: this final comprehensive exam will be on key terms and passages clearly identified in class sessions. 20%
5. *Semester paper*: 15-20 pages displaying your engagement with the required texts for this class and answering two questions: What is hermeneutics and why should everyone know about it? Why should every Christian read the major poems of John Milton? Due December 7. 50%

AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT: Any student whose disability falls within ADA guidelines should inform the instructor at the beginning of the semester of any special accommodations or equipment needs necessary to complete the requirements for this course. Students must register documentation with the Office of Disability Services (Hoffman 101). If you have questions, call extension 5382.

Review Academic Integrity Policy:

[http://www.messiah.edu/academics/advising\\_handbook/academic\\_policies/integrity.pdf](http://www.messiah.edu/academics/advising_handbook/academic_policies/integrity.pdf)

NOTE: Since the course instructor is easily distracted, this class includes a NO LAP-TOP computers or electronic NOTEBOOKS policy, as these are not necessary to the work we are doing in this class. Turn off or to complete silence all cell-phones, smart-phones, iphones, ipods, etc. Consider this class your hour of freedom from the ubiquitous tentacles of electronic media!

*Course Schedule*

Day	Date	Assignment
		<b>August 30<sup>th</sup></b> <b>Classes begin – 8:00 a.m.</b>
Wed.	<b>August</b> 31	Introduction to Milton and his worlds Introduction to Hermeneutics Reading: Westphal 7-26, Genesis 1-3 Writing: What’s your interpretation of Genesis 3? Is this different from what it was four or five years ago? If so, how?
		Do you have any principles, criteria, or a method for interpreting the Bible? What are your assumptions about how you should read a text like Genesis 3? Do any of Westphal’s opening insights challenge any of these?
Mon.	<b>September</b> 5	Reading: Jasper 1-67 and <i>The Aeneid</i> 1-2 Writing: In your hermeneutical notebook, answer questions 5, 1, and 3 in Jasper 24, 44, and 66-67. How do you approach reading a narrative poem like <i>The Aeneid</i> ? How is your approach different from reading a lyric or a novel or a play? What knowledge of Virgil and Roman culture to you bring to your reading? What do you know about Troy or Homer’s <i>Iliad</i> ?
Wed.		7 Reading: Jasper 69-87 and <i>The Aeneid</i> 3-4 Writing: In your HN, answer questions 3 and 5 in Jasper 87. Do you find yourself sympathizing more with Aeneas or Dido at the end of book four? Why?
		In what sense might you “dis-cover” the mind of Virgil when reading these books of <i>The Aeneid</i> ? Are there any passages in these books that strike you as susceptible to an allegorical reading?
Mon.		12 Reading: Westphal 27-56, Jasper 89-98, and <i>The Aeneid</i> 5-6 Writing: In your HN, answer question 1 in Jasper 98. How important is the author, and your knowledge of the author, to any text you are reading? Is this more important with some texts than with others? Explain. How do you understand Aeneas’ journey to Hades, and what encounter there do you think is the most significant?
Wed.		14 Reading: Westphal 57-68 and <i>The Aeneid</i> 7-8 What are the implications of the “death of the author” for our reading of Virgil’s epic? What are your hermeneutics for reading the shield of Aeneas at the end of book 8?

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		What hermeneutic do you think Virgil expects you to bring to this visualized “text”? In what ways might this passage illuminate the idea of “the death of the author”?
Mon.	19	Reading: Jasper 99-118, Westphal 69-86, and <i>Aeneid</i> 9-10 Writing: In your HN, answer questions 3 and 5 in Jasper 117-18. Bring what you learn about Gadamer from Westphal to bear on how you answer question 3.
Wed.	21	Reading: Westphal 87-118 and <i>The Aeneid</i> 11-12 How might Gadamer help us read the close of Virgil’s epic? How do we understand the final conflict between Aeneas and Turnus, and how do we “judge” its finish?
		Do you think the <i>Aeneid</i> is a finished poem? Do you think Virgil really wanted it burned after his death? If so, how would this affect our reading of the poem?
Mon.	26	Reading: Jasper 119-137 Writing: In your HN, answer <i>either</i> question 2 on 130-31 <i>or</i> question 4 on 131-32. To what extent do we (yes, we) already read with a postmodern hermeneutic? How has this shaped our encounter with Virgil’s text? How might it shape our encounter with Milton’s text?
Wed.	28	Reading: <i>Paradise Lost</i> 1 How do the opening 26 lines ask you to read this poem? What do you learn from the opening 26 lines that awaken certain hermeneutical tasks for you as a reader?
		Can you make any connections to Virgil in this opening book of Milton’s epic? Any significant similarities? Significant differences?
Mon.	<b>October</b> 3	Reading: <i>Paradise Lost</i> 2-3 Writing: Analyze Belial’s speech; why does the narrator judge him as he does at the beginning and the end of the speech? How biblical are these two council scenes? How do they compare and contrast? How do you think they serve Milton’s larger purpose?
Wed.	5	Reading: <i>Paradise Lost</i> 4 Writing: Where in this book do you experience the most distance from Milton’s horizon? Where do your horizons most easily join?
		Give special attention to Eve’s account of her first waking moments: in what sense is this biblical? Why do you think Milton makes use of Ovid’s account of Narcissus in Eve’s story?

Day	Date	Assignment
Mon.	10	Reading: <i>Paradise Lost</i> 5-6 Writing: How do you understand Raphael's roles as divine historian, epic poet, and interpreter of events in Heaven for Adam? What questions does Milton dramatize in choosing to assign Raphael this role? How does Milton's representation of angelic combat compare/contrast with Virgil's?
Wed.	12	Reading: <i>Paradise Lost</i> 7-8 What does Milton do with the Genesis text(s) in Raphael's account of creation and Adam's account of his own creation?
		How does Adam's narrative of his first waking moments compare/contrast with Eve's in book 4? What is the nature of the human-angel relation in the final conversation between Adam and Raphael? How does this compare with conversations between the gods and humans in Virgil? Between God and humans in biblical narratives?
Mon.	17	Reading: <i>Paradise Lost</i> 9 Why do you think Milton felt this opening invocation to be necessary? How do you understand the conversation between Adam and Eve which leads to their separation? Why does Milton construct and present the falls of Eve and Adam separately? Writing: In what ways can this book be read as a meaningful interpretation of Genesis 3? (You might want to revisit this narrative.)
Wed.	19	Reading: <i>Paradise Lost</i> 10 Analyze Adam's long soliloquy; why do you think we don't get something like this in the biblical text? Why do you think Milton includes it?
		Compare Adam's soliloquy with Satan's in the beginning of book 4: what is the crucial difference? By the time you've finished book 10, how is Eve "measuring up" against the female protagonists/antagonists in Virgil?
Mon.	24	Reading: <i>Paradise Lost</i> 11-12 Why does Milton need to have Michael rehearse the future of humanity to Adam? What do you make of the biblical stories Milton includes in this sweeping prophecy of the future? Of the non-biblical stories?
Wed.	26	How does Milton bring biblical and classical traditions into dialogue in his epic? How would you describe the nature of that dialogue? In what ways can this be understood as a "fusing" of "horizons" in Gadamer's sense?

Day	Date	Assignment
		In what ways did your previous encounters with biblical texts and Virgil's <i>Aeneid</i> (and Homer if you've read him) shape your reading of <i>Paradise Lost</i> ? In what ways did Milton's text reshape your understanding of Genesis and/or Virgil?
Mon.	31	Reading: <i>Georgics</i> 1-2 What are your expectations for a book about farming? Why do you think Virgil, who was not a farmer, would write such a book? How does your experience of this text differ from your experience of <i>The Aeneid</i> ?
Wed.	November 2	Reading: <i>Georgics</i> 3-4 Neither was Milton a farmer; why do you think Milton would find this poem interesting? Particularly <i>what</i> do you think Milton would find interesting in Virgil's brief epic and why?
		Milton's own brief epic, which you are about to read, is not about farming, but about the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. As you think about that narrative, what possible connections could Milton make between his task and Virgil's?
Mon.	7	Reading: <i>Paradise Regained</i> 1-2 How do we understand this poem's relation to <i>Paradise Lost</i> ? What expectations do you bring to the brief epic after having read the diffuse epic? What expectations do you bring to this text from your reading/understanding of the gospels? What do you make of the differences in the gospel texts? What do you make of the three different accounts we receive of the baptism of the Son? How does this poem's Satan compare with the earlier poem's representation?
Wed.	9	Reading: <i>Paradise Regained</i> 3-4 Writing: if you had to choose one narrative of the temptation in the wilderness, which would you choose—Mark's, Matthew's, Luke's, or Milton's (note that John's Jesus is beyond temptation)—and why?
		How do we interpret the crucial moment in Milton's narrative: "Tempt not the Lord your God"? And what do you make of the Son's sharp rejection of classical literature and philosophy in favor of biblical literature?
Mon.	14	<i>Paradise Regained</i> and the <i>Georgics</i> : is there anything more than genre, size, and style in Milton's choice? Are readers who find Virgil's poem shaping Milton's going too far?
Wed.	16	Reading: <i>Herakles</i> What expectations do you bring to a play about Hercules? What pop culture (film, cartoon) representations have shaped your sense of Hercules? How do these match up with what Euripides presents?

Day	Date	Assignment
		We now switch to reading drama instead of narrative poetry. Do you approach a dramatic text differently? Are there important generic differences that we should especially attend to?
Mon.	November 21	Reading: <i>Samson Agonistes</i> How does Milton's play about a strong folk hero differ from Euripides' play about a strong folk hero? Identify consonances and dissonances between the two plays. What do you know about the biblical Samson? How does that shape your expectations for Milton's dramatic poem? How were those expectations fulfilled and/or crossed? How does the nature of dramatic irony in <i>SA</i> differ from other dramas (such as <i>Herakles</i> )?
Wed.	23	<b>Thanksgiving Break</b> <b>November 23–27, 2011</b> <b>No Classes</b>
Fri.	25	
Mon.	28	Reading: Judges 13-16 What has Milton done with the biblical text in this instance? Why do you think Milton chose to re-present this story?
Wed.	30	<i>Paradise Regained</i> and <i>Samson Agonistes</i> were published together; how do these poems relate to one another? Why would Milton publish them as a pair? Can you identify ways in which the two poems illuminate one another?
Mon.	December 5	Reading: Westphal 119-56 How might Westphal's final insights apply to our reading of Milton reading?
Wed.	7	How then shall we read? What have we learned from this course? Semester paper due.
		<b>Semester Exam</b> <b>December 14, 8-10am</b>