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## Humanities 2: Rome, Christianity, and the Middle Ages, Spring 2017

Humanities 2 focuses on the cultures and literature of the Roman Empire and the European Middle Ages. The scope of the course is to introduce students to the range of imaginative writing during this roughly fifteen-hundred-year period. The goal of the course is to illustrate the major literary forms in their intellectual and cultural contexts. The course thus begins with Virgil's Aeneid, and works through major authors (Roman and Christian) of the Late Antique world – St. Paul, St. Augustine, and Boethius – before concluding with three representative vernacular writers of the Middle Ages: Guillaume de Lorris (France), Dante Alighieri (Italy), and Geoffrey Chaucer (England).

We thus begin with Virgil's epic poem on the origins of Rome, The Aeneid. The poem was completed by Virgil's death in 19 BC, and portions of it were, in fact, read before Emperor Augustus himself. Virgil's poem quickly became a kind of template for epic and heroic writing, for political narrative, and for the ideals of poetry itself. It was read in many ways over the next millennium and a half, but one of the ways in which it was most prominently read was as an allegory. In fact, much reading and writing in the literary West sought to find allegorical ways of reading in the Aeneid, along the following lines: what is a virtuous life; how is a geographical journey a model for a moral voyage; how are reason and sensuality in conflict; is human social and political organization a reflection of a higher, possibly divine order? And, primarily because only books 1-6 (that is, the first half) of The Aeneid were closely read and studied in the Middle Ages, we will focus on those books.

As Christianity took hold in the Empire, early religious thinkers began to codify these moral, social and literary questions. We'll look at three representative figures from the first centuries of Christianity. St. Paul (died mid-60s AD) is the great theorist of the early Church, a brilliant prose stylist in his Epistles, and a codifier of ways of reading literature and the world allegorically. St. Augustine (354-430) remains one of the most original thinkers of any time, and his Confessions is both a brilliant autobiography and a chronicle of literary and imaginative understanding (and in many ways a direct response to The Aeneid). Boethius (c.480-534) brings together the inheritance of classical learning with Christian sensibility in his Consolation of Philosophy, an account in prose and verse of his personal imprisonment and spiritual growth.

All of these writers had a defining impact on the forms of doctrine, imagination, poetry, and interpretation in the course of the Middle Ages. Three writers who helped define their respective vernacular traditions, and who were all deeply indebted to Virgil, Paul, Augustine, and Boethius, were Guillaume de Lorris, Dante Alighieri, and Geoffrey Chaucer. Guillaume de Lorris (flourished c.1230) wrote the first part of The Romance of the Rose, perhaps the most popular and most vividly erotic poetic narrative of the high Middle Ages and one of the first great, long poems in French. Dante (1265-1321) wrote, most famously, The Divine Comedy. But before that, his first sustained work was the wondrous Vita Nuova ("The New Life"), a story in prose and verse of his love for Beatrice and his growth as a poet. Chaucer (1340-1400) is best known for his kaleidoscopic Canterbury Tales; but his first major poem was The Book of the Duchess – part elegy, part poetic announcement that, in many ways, synthesizes all of the traditions we will be exploring in this course.

## Weekly Syllabus

Week I: : Virgil: Rome, politics, power and heroism; Aeneid, Book 1. April 4, April 6

Week II: Virgil, Aeneid, Books 1, 2 and 3: Aeneas as story-teller; the Trojan horse; the ideals of Roman literature and virtue. April 11, April 13

Week III.

a. Virgil: Dido and Aeneas, love and duty; Aeneid, Books 4 and 5. April 18

b. Virgil: Aeneas in the underworld, allegory and memory: Aeneid 6. April 20

Week IV:

a. The Origins of Christianity and the Earliest Gospels; St. Mark and the “orality” of the Gospels. Gospel According to Mark; April 25.

b. St. Luke, The Gospel According to Luke; Christian heroism, notions of the parable and the story, romance and religion. April 21. FIRST PAPER DUE IN LECTURE, THURSDAY APRIL 27.

Week V:

a. St. Paul and Christian doctrine; ideas of understanding; Christian vs. Pagan allegory. St. Paul, First Corinthians; Romans. May 2

b. St. Augustine: The Christian hero and the rewriting of Virgil: Confessions, Book 1. May 4.

Week VI: St. Augustine, Rhetoric and Conversion, reading the self. Confessions, Books 2, 3, 6, 8  
May 9, May 11.

Week VII. Boethius: Fortune, free will, desire, and literary form: Consolation of Philosophy  
May 16, May 18. SECOND PAPER DUE THURSDAY MAY 18.

Week VIII. Guillaume de Lorris: Erotics and devotion, dream and poetry: Romance of the Rose  
May 23, May 15

Week IX: Dante: Spirituality and love, poetry and philosophy: Vita Nuova  
May 30, June 1.

Week X. Chaucer: the politics and poetics of mourning, the announcement of the poet, and the synthesis of the classical past: Book of the Duchess. June 6, June 8. THIRD PAPER DUE THURSDAY JUNE 8.