

LS 800 – Reflections on Reason & Passion

I

Fall 2021 - Wednesdays 6:30 to 9:20 pm

Instructor: Stephen Duguid (duguid@sfu.ca)

This course explores a variety of texts that express or reflect upon the human passions and upon the relationship between those passions and the realms of action, will, and reason. While there is some chronological coherence in the ordering of the texts, the primary intent is to examine issues and themes that reflect human experiences, feelings and behaviours.

Course Requirements:

Prior to each seminar discussion you are to send to me via e-mail a one to two-page assessment of how the readings for that week addressed the issue of the relation between reason and passion in human affairs. Secondly, include one question concerning one of the readings that you think would be useful in provoking discussion.

In addition, there will be two short (5-10 pp) written assignments over the course of the term.

Summer Introductory Seminar- 18 August from 6:30-9:00

The ***Letters of Abelard and Heloise*** are a series of personal letters written in the middle years of the 12th century between Peter Abelard, a French scholastic philosopher and the French nun Heloise, philosopher, writer and abbess. They had fallen in love, married and has a son before being driven apart by members of Heloise's family, driving Abelard to become a monk. The Letters begin with her attempt to re-engage after a long separation. The Letters will provide us with a crystal clear sense of how reason can so often clash with passion/feeling.

Part 1 – Origins in the Ancient West

Week 1 (8 September)

- **Plato** 427-347 BCE, *The Symposium*. A dinner party in Athens with a series of speeches on the philosophy of love, featuring the speech by Socrates in which sensuality is transcended and we move from the sensible to the ideal.

- *The Poetry of Sappho* (610-580 BCE) Called the 'Tenth Muse' in ancient Greece, she wrote immortal verse on the intense power of female love; on the themes of romance, yearning, heartbreak, and personal relationships with women. Though her work as survived mostly in fragments, she remains a poet of enduring appeal.

Week 2 (15 September)

- **Aristotle** (384 BCE – 347 BCE), *The Nichomachean Ethics*. An exploration of the nature of happiness, concluding that happiness consists in 'activity of the soul in accordance with virtue – for example, with moral virtues, such as courage, generosity, and justice, and intellectual virtues, such as knowledge, wisdom and insight.

- **Sophocles, Antigone** (441 BCE). A young woman's strong sense of specific cultural values comes into conflict with rigid political norms in ancient Thebes. A woman alone defying the power of the state.

Week 3 (22 September)

- **Lucretius** 100 BCE -55 BCE *On the Nature of the Universe*. This work of Lucretius, originally in a long poem form, is regarded as a seminal text of Epicurean science and philosophy. Included in the work are critiques of religious beliefs, the idea of the indestructibility of atoms, the story of the discovery of fire, the folly of romantic love, how eyesight works and the phenomena of clouds and rainstorms.

Part 2 Roman and Early Modern Eras

Week 4 (29 September)

- **Marcus Aurelius** (CE 121 – 180) *Meditations*. During his campaigns against barbarian tribes the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius wrote these famous meditations. Trained in Stoic philosophy, he recorded passing thoughts and maxims, musing on life and death, friendship and the qualities involved in being a leader. Stoicism shared a great many ideas with Epicureanism, the other philosophic school of the Hellenistic era.

- **Dante** (CE 1265-1290) *The Divine Comedy: Vol. 1 Inferno* (excerpts) Dante the pilgrim finds himself alone in a 'dark wood' when a shade-like figure resembling the Roman poet Virgil, sent by Dante's love Beatrice to guide him to safety. But Virgil tells him that the only route out is via first descending into Hell, and so we proceed,

Week 5 (6 October)

- **Francis Bacon** (1561-1626), *New Atlantis and the Great Instauration*

One of the most influential proponents of scientific thought as the response to the decades of Medieval 'scholasticism' epitomized by, for instance, Peter Abelard. Bacon is known as the first proponent of the 'scientific method' based on experimentation and observation.

- **Rene Descartes** (1596-1650, *A Discourse on Method*. Stressing the doubt that remains implicit in philosophy and the science of the classical era, Descartes developed a method that he argued could lead to truth. Known for the development of 'rationalism' as opposed to the reliance on 'reason'.

Week 6 (October 13)

- **Thomas More** (1477-1535) *Utopia*. More envisioned a patriarchal island kingdom that practiced religious tolerance, in which everybody worked, no one had more than his fellows, all goods were community owned and violence, bloodshed and vice nonexistent.

- **David Hume** (1711-1776) *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*

Famous for his provocative line that "Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them".

Part 3 The Enlightenment

Week 7 (20 October)

- ***Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1711 – 1778) A Discourse on Inequality.***

Rousseau's second important bit of writing (1755) that sets out his theory of how the growth of civilization corrupts the natural happiness and freedom of humankind by creating artificial inequalities of wealth, power, and social privilege.

- **Immanuel Kant, (1724-1804) "*What Is Enlightenment?*" (1784)**

Kant saw the Enlightenment as man's emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one's own understanding without another's guidance. ... "Have the courage to use your own understanding," is therefore the motto of the **enlightenment**.

Week 8 (27 October)

- **Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark***

Her most popular book, an account of her travels through these countries in 1796 while on a mission for her then partner, Gilbert Imlay. Her travels across the dramatic landscape result in sublime and romantic descriptions of the natural world along with political and social commentary.

- **Rousseau, 7th Walk** from his *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*.

An early example of romantic writing written toward end of Rousseau's life (1778) when he had been exiled on a small island in Switzerland and found it a perfect place to find peace and a clear 'sentiment of existence'.

FIRST ESSAY DUE

Week 9 (3 November)

- **Mary Shelley** (1797-1851), *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* (1818)

Mary was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin and married the poet Percy Shelley in 1816. Her first novel, *Frankenstein* is a Gothic novel in part but also a philosophical treatise based on the ideas of Rousseau, Godwin, Shelley and others. For our purposes it is also a story of 'reason' gone wrong.

Week 10 (10 November)

- **Jane Austen** (1775-1817) *Sense and Sensibility*

Written in 1811, this was her first fully developed novel and the two main characters (Eleanor and Marianne Dashwood) we have reason and passion personified as envisaged at the height of Enlightenment thought. Other characters as well speak to us as exemplars of various 'types' that Rousseau for one would see as the bane of modern culture as it was emerging at the start of the 19th century.