



CWL 241: MASTERPIECES OF THE ANCIENT WEST

**INTRODUCTION**















# TODAY'S CLASS

- Who is your teacher?
- Who are your TAs?
- What's "Comparative Literature"?
- The humanities.
- What exactly is this class, and what will we learn?
- What's up with COVID?
- What is "antiquity"?





# ABOUT ME

- **Director of the Program in Comparative Literature, Professor of Italian**
- **Work on critical theory (philosophy), genre, literature, film, television and popular culture**
- **A modernist with one foot in antiquity**
- **Despite being a full professor and department head, I am really into teaching: Humanities Council Teaching Excellence Award (2008), LAS Dean's Award for Teaching Excellence (2018), UIUC Teaching Excellence (2018)**





# YOUR TAs

## Meredith Francisco

Ancient Greek, Latin,  
Italian, English



Meredith is an PhD student in Comp Lit, working — in English, Latin, ancient Greek and Italian — on the classical reception in the Romantic period; nature and architecture; expressions of grief in poetry and gender and sexuality.



# YOUR TAs

## Sasha McDowell

French, Russian,  
Spanish, English



Sasha is a second-year graduate student in the Program in Comparative & World Literature. She graduated from the University of South Dakota in 2019 with a BA in English & French and minors in Spanish & music. Her work centers around 20th-century French, Russian, Spanish, and English literatures with a focus on surrealism, the avant-grade, and women's writing. In her limited free time, she enjoys reading (duh), embroidering, and rewatching episodes of *The X-Files*.



# YOUR TAs

## Modje Taavon

Persian, Arabic, English



Modje (pronounced: mōj) is a PhD student in the Comparative + World Literature department where she studies the influence of pre-modern Arabic and Persian poetry, philosophy, and intellectual history on medieval, early modern, and modern European and English thought. She's also interested in the art and archaeology of the Near and Middle East, translation, and literary + popular representations of female rage.



# COMPLIT

- Most of the modern formed during the era of “romantic nationalism,” which foregrounded *national* cultures (like English).
- But culture doesn’t care about national boundaries; it moves across national and linguistic boundaries. Just ask the ancient Romans about Greek culture — or modern Americans about K-pop.
- Comparative Literature studies literature and culture across nations and other borders in the original languages. If you want to know about “the rise of the novel,” it happened in English, Spanish, French and more — just in Europe.

1886. Vol. I. Nr. 1-2.  
**CLAVDIOPOLI**  
 MDCCCLXXXVI DIE XV. — XXXI. JAN.  
 IX. ANNALE OPVS.

**Novissimae Seriei**  
 VOL. I. NR. I & II.

**Totivs Seriei**  
 VOL. XVIII. NR. CLXXI-11.

## ACTA COMPARATIONIS

### LITTERARVM VNIVERSARVM

### ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR VERGLEICHENDE LITTERATUR.

### JOURNAL DE LITTÉRATURE COMPARÉE.

FOLHAS DE LITTERATURA COMPARATIVA.      GIORNALE DI LETTERATURA COMPARATA.      PERIÓDICO DE LITERATURA COMPARADA.

### JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE.

ZAPISKI PO SRAVNITEL'NOJ LITERATURE.

TIDSKRIFT FÖR JEMFÖRANDE LITERATUR.      TIJDSCHRIFT VOOR VERGELIJKENDE LETTERKUNDE.      TIMARIT FYRIR BÓKMENTA SAMANBURDH.

## ÖSSZEHASONLÍTÓ IRODALMI LAPOK.

Miservm est et vile problema, vnivs tantvm nationis scriptorem doctvm esse; philosophico quidem ingenio hic quasi terminvs nullo pacto erit acceptvs. Tale enim ingenivm in tractando fragmento (et quid aliud quam fragmentvm est natio quaeque quamvis singularissima?) acqviescere non potest.      SCHILLER. (Epistola ad Körnervm.)

FVNDATORES: MELTZL DE LOMNITZ & BRASSAI. CLAVDIOPOLI DIE XVIII. DECEMBRIS MDCCCLXXXVI.  
 SYMPTIBVS EDITORIS FONTIVM COMPARATIONIS LITTERARVM VNIVERSARVM.

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REVUE POLYGLOTTE  
 POUR L'ÉTUDE DES LITTÉRATURES CLASSIQUES ET POPULAIRES DE TOUTES LES NATIONS DU MONDE,  
 CHANSONS, CONTES, PROVERBES, LÉGENDES, SUPERSTITIONS, DEVINETTES ET AUTRES TRADITIONS DE TOUS LES PEUPLES.  
 ARTICLES DANS TOUTES LES LANGUES DU MONDE À L'AIDE DE TRADUCTIONS LITTÉRALES, INTERPRÉTATIONS ETC.

Acta Comparationis für Goethe'sche Weltliteratur, höhere Übersetzungskunst, für Folklore, d. h. vergleichende volksliederkunde und ähnliche vergl. anthropologisch-ethnographische disziplinen, enthält lediglich original-beiträge, deren nachdrucks-, bez. übersetzungsrecht vorbehalten bleibt.

Im litterar. verkehr der Acta Comparationis ist jede sprache der welt gleichberechtigt. Beiträge in entlegeneren idjomen bittet man höflichst mit interlineaversion, in einer der XII titelsprachen, event. auch transcription zu versehen. Die herren mitarbeiter wollen, auch zur vermittlung, in der regel bloss ihrer Muttersprache sich bedienen.

**KOLOZSVÁR**  
 BUREAU: FÖTÉR 30. (HONGRIE). — DEMJÉN'S UNIVERSITAETSBUCHHANDLUNG.  
 LONDON  
 TRÜBNER AND Co. AMERICAN, EUROPEAN AND ORIENTAL LITERARY AGENCY, 57, AND 59, LUDGATE HILL.



# HUMANITIES

- Sure, great books are great. But why humanities?
- Studies show that the humanities are a sound investment in your future earnings (according to *Forbes*, not *Humanities Today*)
- Unemployment rates in the humanities? Same as math. Earnings in psych, comm, biology — all about the same as English, Philosophy or Comp Lit. (See *The Atlantic*, 8/23/18). Choice of your major (with some exceptions) matters less than, say, where you live.
- The humanities are not vocational, but *this is a good thing* (viz. the MBA and architecture; the perils of monoculture; can't be automated; coming STEM glut)
- Look at data; analyze; synthesize; write well; speak well; broad cultural knowledge





- **Carly Fiorina (HP): medieval history and philosophy**
- **Peter Thiel, CEO of PayPal: philosophy**
- **Ken Chenault, CEO of American Express: history**
- **Carl Icahn, investor: philosophy**
- **Eric Shinseki, 4-star U.S. Army General: English**
- **Michael Eisner, CEO of Disney: English and theater**
- **Hank Paulson, Treasury Secretary: English**
- **Sheila Bari, Chair of FDIC: philosophy**
- **Most U.S. Supreme Court Justices: Thomas (English); Breyer (philosophy); Sotomayor (history); Kagan (history, philosophy); Scalia (history); Roberts (history); Souter (philosophy); Stevens (English); Kavanaugh (history)**
- **Harold Varmus, Nobel Prize in Medicine: English (B.A. and M.A.)**
- **George Soros, investor: philosophy**
- **Ted Turner, founder of CNN: classics**
- **Anne Mulcahy, CEO of Xerox: English and journalism**
- **Brian Moynihan, CEO of Bank of America: history**



# **THIS CLASS**

- You'll learn how to read texts, analyze their content and write clearly and meaningfully about what you've read
- You'll learn where the modern world comes from—and what constitutes “modernity” in the long view
- And you'll learn that contemporary culture has roots that run deep.





# THIS CLASS

- What we'll read and see this semester has vibrant and immediate connections to now. For instance, we'll see...
- How *Gilgamesh* connects to *Star Trek* (we can't imagine a future without a past — and the closest encounter you can have with an alien society is the ancient world)
- How all modern autobiographies — including your own life story — are indebted to Augustine's *Confessions*
- How the love songs you listen to now emerge from the poetry of Sappho and Catullus
- Why we turn to the ancient world (*300*, *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*) whenever we think about manly honor, warfare and courage



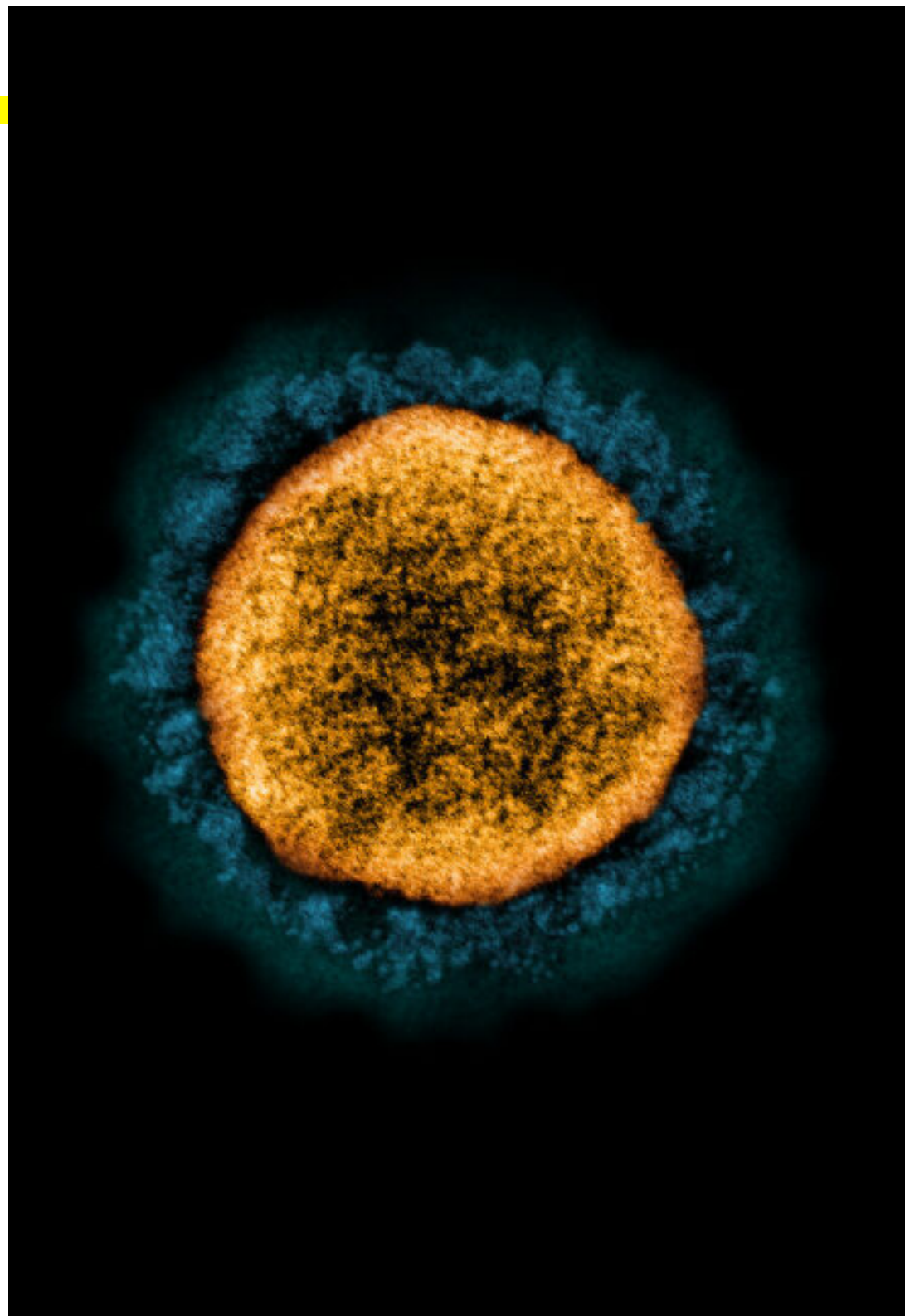






# UGH. COVID-19

- We could be having mostly normal lives right now. Unfortunately, ignorance, disinformation, vaccine resistance and refusal to wear masks has put a monkey wrench into those plans.
- The basics. Don't be outright evil, like faking your vax card, or going to a party or class if you test positive for COVID. If you do, you are ruining your *own* life as well as everyone else's.
- Right now, masks are required at all times in all indoor classes. What happens if you refuse to wear one?
- You *must not* go to class if you have COVID; inform your instructors if you are sick and handle it like any other illness.
- You may be asked at any point in class, by any of your instructors, to produce your Safer Illinois app and show that you have building access. If you do not, you'll be asked to leave. What if you don't leave?









**QUESTIONS?**



**ACTUAL  
CONTENT!**





# ANTIQUITY

- Antiquity (3000 BC–500 AD)
- Middle Ages (450 AD–1450 AD)
- Modernity (1400 AD–present)
- Antiquity:
  - pre-Christian, polytheistic or animistic, illiterate, slaves vs. citizen, pervasive sexuality, emphasis on beauty, order
  - Nietzsche: pre-moral universe, no value judgments; you can break the law, but you cannot *sin*; typically there is punishment from the gods, but no reward





# GILGAMESH

- **It's old: Gilgamesh was probably a real king who lived somewhere around 2,800 BC. Almost 5,000 years ago.**
- **It was probably first written down about 2100 BC, and the oldest surviving version of the combined epic is from about 1800 BC**
- **The standard version is from about 1300–1000 BC (the oldest part of the Bible dates to about 500 BC, by comparison)**
- **This, then, is a story that people told again and again for over 4,000 years**



# GILGAMESH

- **Written in different languages, at different times —Sumerian, Akkadian, Old Babylonian, related cultures in Mesopotamia.**
- **The standard version is in Akkadian, written on clay tablets by a scribe, Sin-liqe-unninni, around 1200 B.C.**
- **Fragmentary, incomplete— at times inconsistent (tablet 12)**
- **It was completely forgotten from about 100 BC until its re-discovery in 1853**







Turkey

Caspian Sea

Diyarbakir

Gaziantep

Waššukani

Mosul •• Ninive

Iran

Aleppo

Hatra ••

Assur ••

Kirkuk

Nuzi ••

Hama

Mari ••

Palmyra ••

Syria

Syrische Wüste

Lebanon

Beirut

Damaskus

Baghdad

Sippar ••

Babylon ••

Kerbela

Nadschaf

Kisch ••

Nippur ••

Isin ••

Lagas ••

Ahvaz

Israel

Jerusalem

Amman

Iraq

Uruk ••

Ur ••

Charax-Spasinu ••

Basra

approximate extent of the Persian Gulf until 5500 B.C.

Kuwait

Persian Gulf

Jordan

300 km



*approximate extent of  
the Persian Gulf  
until 5500 B.C.*

Uruk  
Ur

Kuwait

Persian Gulf



# WRITING

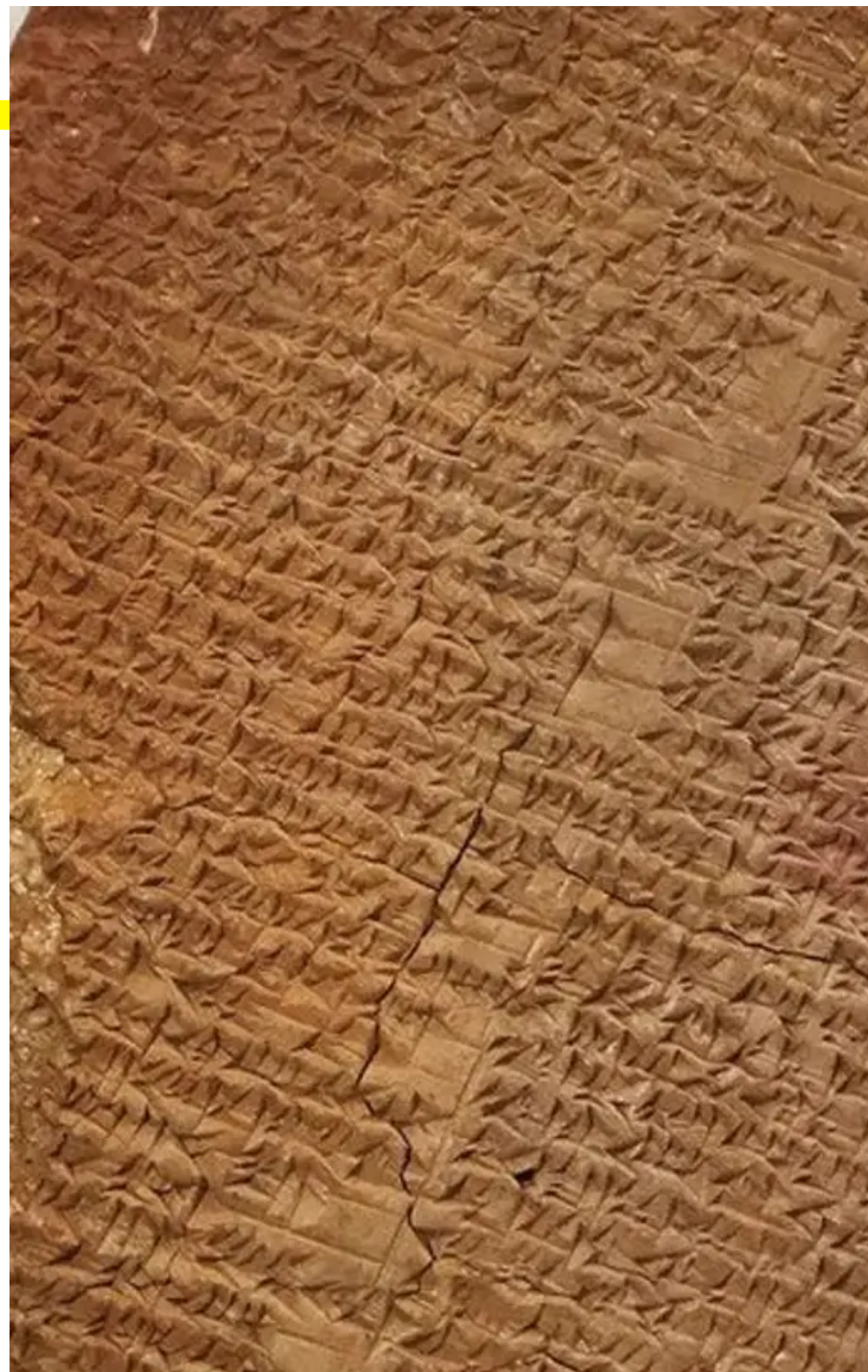
- ***Gilgamesh* is written in cuneiform, writing made by punching a wedge shape into clay, which then dries—it lasts a long time (if it doesn't break)**
- **Like other ancient writing systems (Egyptian hieroglyphics), cuneiform is not yet alphabetic — different characters represent *syllables*, combinations of letters, not single sounds. A *lot* of characters to learn; unwieldy, so only professional scribes could read and write.**
- **So, alphabetic systems became successful very fast. People forgot cuneiform — and *Gilgamesh* — around 100 BC.**
- **Technology (include writing) determines our cultural memory, at least in part**





# STILL AROUND

- The *Gilgamesh* tablet seized from Hobby Lobby late July →
- The poem is highly fragmented, and large portions are missing, but new pieces are discovered every few years (in 2015, in 2019...), occasionally significant, such as 20 new lines
- And as I hope to show on Wednesday, our fascination with *Gilgamesh* is part of a broader fascination with antiquity as an alien other to our modernity.





Gilgamesh tablet seized from Hobby Lobby in late July

