

Classical Studies 240 - Scandalous Arts in Ancient and Modern Communities

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Subject/Discipline: [Classical Studies](#)

School: [University of Pennsylvania](#)

Project Area:

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General Information and Requirements

This course examines our conceptions of art (including literary, visual and musical media) that is deemed by certain communities to transgress the boundaries of taste and convention. It juxtaposes modern notions of artistic transgression, and the criteria used to evaluate such material, with the production of and discourse about transgressive art in classical antiquity. While the Greeks and Romans certainly differed from our own culture in many respects, they did, like us, have concepts of scandalous expression, and they fretted as much as we do about the power that language, image and music could have over a society. In comparing modern and ancient notions of transgressive art, students will attempt to understand why societies and communities feel compelled to repudiate some forms of art, while turning others into "classics."

IMPORTANT: A note on the content of this course. For obvious reasons, students will encounter material in this course that some may consider offensive. This will include language and images that represent explicit sexuality, violence or blasphemy. While I will attempt at all times to maintain the highest standard of scholarly inquiry and academic discourse, there will be no attempt to censor anything we study. It is essential for all students to understand that in order to discuss this sort of material adequately, they will find themselves referring openly to material that is often deeply controversial and disturbing. This class is not recommended for students who are uncomfortable hearing, seeing or discussing such material. I am assuming that students who enroll in this course fully understand the nature of the material we will examine.

Academically-Based Community Service component: This course is affiliated with Penn's [Center for Community Partnerships](#)

(<http://www.upenn.edu/ccp/index.html>), a division of the President's Office.

Courses participating in this program are associated with Philadelphia public

schools and are engaged in a variety of academically-based activities. I will discuss this at greater length in class, but note here that we will be working with a high school class at the University City High School, which is just down 36th street at Lancaster Ave (about a 10 minute walk from the center of campus). The ultimate goal of our interaction will be to experience how academic subjects can, and should, have profound relevance for the communities in which we all live. When I have orchestrated this in the past, all of us (including the high school students involved) found it to be an often exhilarating experience. Students in this class will be expected to visit one session of the high school class per week (i.e., one 60 minute class per week). We will go down in small groups, and lead discussions on some of the topics related to our Penn class. More details will follow in class.

Requirements:

- One 60-minute visit to a class at UCHS per week (see above).
- Class participation: The success of this class will rise or fall depending on the level of class discussion. I expect therefore that all students will come fully prepared and eager to participate in discussion.
- Response papers and discussion leaders: Students will write four short response papers (2-3 double-spaced pages) spaced approximately three weeks apart. Scheduling details will follow in class. In advance of each session, I will circulate on email a suggested topic, but you may instead choose to write on any aspect of the week's readings that interests you, provided that your topic is in some sense comparative (i.e., comparing ancient and modern material). I expect an evaluation or analysis of a given problem or topic; Mere summarizing or reportage will not be sufficient. On weeks in which students are not writing a response paper, one small group of students of about 3 or 4 will be designated to take charge of class discussion. These students will probably want to caucus in advance of the class to determine what issues they would like to address. Further details will follow in class.
- Final Paper: There will be a final, research-oriented, paper of no more than 10 double-spaced pages. Details will follow later in the semester, but students might want to keep in mind that any of the response papers may be transformed into a longer paper, as long as I have approved the topic in advance.

Grading:

- Class Participation: 30%
- Response Papers: 40%
- Final Paper: 30%

Course Schedule

1) September 10: Introduction

This class will introduce the various questions and themes that will intertwine with each other throughout the course. On the one hand, we will be concerned with the very nature of classicizing itself; why, for example, does the West today classicize the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, and what are the ramifications of this? Since bestowing the status of "classic" onto something tends also to confer legitimacy and authority on it, we will consider a few examples from antiquity of content that would hardly be considered classic if produced in a modern context. In this way, students will confront some of the more subtle aspects of the ideology of a classic. The contingency of evaluation throughout history drives home the problem of trying to decide in one's own culture what criteria are "legitimate" for endorsing or repudiating a given aesthetic production. And this vexing problem accounts for the other main direction of the course, namely why a society develops a sense of the scandalous or transgressive in its art forms, and how it reacts politically and legislatively to them.

2) September 17: Framing the Debate [plus: visit to University City High School]

Foundational texts from Classical antiquity and the present day about the role of the arts in society are considered, and compared to the rhetoric of our own culture. Readings begin with selections from Plato's Republic on the problem of Athenian tragedy, and the banishment of poets from the ideal state. The Greek philosophical criteria for artistic repudiation (almost all of it moral and pedagogical) will be compared to modern criteria used for elevating or demonizing art.

- Plato: Republic (selections).
- Aristophanes: Frogs (selections).
- Wendy Steiner, The Scandal of Pleasure (Chicago 1995) pp. 1-7.
- Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind (Touchstone Books: Simon and Schuster 1987) pp. 61-68.
- James Davison Hunter, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America (Basic Books 1991) 225-49.

Newspaper Articles:

- Elizabeth Kolbert, "Americans Despair of Popular Culture," New York Times 8/20/95.
- Kasper Zeuthen, "Efforts to Kill Arts Funding Losing Steam" Philadelphia Inquirer.
- Stephen Seplow and Jonathan Storm, "TV and Kids: A Brighter Picture," Philadelphia Inquirer 12/4/97
- Paul Farhi, "New Symbols Will Flag TV Sex, Violence," Philadelphia Inquirer 7/10/97.

3) September 24: The Problem of the Audience in a Democracy

As the readings from the preceding week show, a perennial tension seems to exist, at least in the minds of critics and legislators, between the merits of a work of art and the supposed effects it will have on an audience. In a democracy, where the people have in principle unrestricted access to all art forms, who is responsible for the effects art has on them? Who decides if art is dangerous to the well-being of the polis? Who decides if an audience responds "properly" to a given work? These questions were debated as vibrantly in antiquity as they are today. We will read this week another one of Aristophanes' plays dealing with the "Euripides problem" (*Women at the Thesmophoria*). In certain circles Euripides was evidently regarded as scandalous, particularly because of the way he portrayed the behavior of women on the stage. Where modern critics may find Euripides' dramatization of female eros, including even incestuous urges, poignant and tragic, some in antiquity felt he was merely encouraging Athenian women to abandon their husbands and give themselves over to a life of sexual excess. If art such as this encourages the dissolution of the family, the dissolution of the entire polis is not far behind. Like *Frogs*, *Thesmo.* also makes connections between poetic style and moral content, adumbrating the debate still current today about whether genres, forms or structures can be considered in themselves good, bad, high, low, moral or immoral, etc.

- Aristophanes: Women at the Thesmophoria. [on reserve in van Pelt]
- Aristophanes: Clouds (selections).
- Euripides: *Medea* lines 976-1419 in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, ed., *Euripides I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1955) pp. 93-108.
- Euripides: *Hippolytus* lines 176-361 in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, ed., *Euripides I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1955) pp. 170-79.
- William Bennett, The Devaluing of America: The Fight for our Culture and our Children (Touchstone Books: Simon and Schuster 1992) pp. 17-38.

4) October 1: Obscenity I: The Power of the Word

With the terms of the political and cultural debates about art and society laid out, students will begin to examine closely specific elements that routinely give offense. We will begin this week with obscene language (visual obscenity will be considered later in the semester). The Greeks used the term *aischrologia* ("shameful speech") more or less analogously to our "obscenity" in both cultures obscene language almost always refers explicitly to sexuality, sexual body parts or activity, and excremental functions. Students will investigate the nature of obscenity from an anthropological, psycho-social and historical perspectives, and consider why it is that such language becomes transgressive, and why certain artists insist on using it. Greco-Roman culture provides several revealing myths and rituals whose meaning seems to depend on the obscene.

- Sigmund Freud, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious trans. James Strachey (W. W. Norton 1963) pp. 94-102.
- Kenneth Reckford, Aristophanes' Old-and-New Comedy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 1987) pp. 367-87 and 461-482.
- Helene Foley, The Homeric Hymn to Demeter (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1994) pp. 3-12 and pp. 28-44.
- Amy Richlin, The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Revised edition, 1992) pp. 1-31.

5) October 8: Obscenity 2: "But is it Art?"

This week students will trace the reception from antiquity through our own era of selected classical works that featured obscenity, and they will see how such authors (even in their own time) were alternately elevated and demoted depending on a variety of cultural factors. Some attention will be paid to the ways in which modern exegetical commentaries (especially those designed for school use) confront obscene texts that, despite their obscenity, have acquired the status of a "classic." Modern works that have been regarded as scandalous are compared with analogously obscene classical texts that cause little offense in our own time.

- Selections from Archilochus, Hipponax, Catullus, Martial.
- Jeffrey Henderson, The Maculate Muse: Obscene Language in Attic Comedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1975) pp. 1-29
- William S. Burroughs, from The Soft Machine (Grove Press 1966) pp. 13-25.
- Lucy R. Lippard, "Andres Serrano: The Spirit and the Letter" from Art in America (April 1990) pp. 238-45.
- John W. Whitehead, "Art as Propaganda: A Prelude to Persecution," from The Rutherford Institute Journal (January 1992).
- Jesse Helms, "Is it Art or Tax-Paid Obscenity? The NEA Controversy," Journal of Law and Policy vol. 2 (1994) pp. 99-113.

6) October 15: Representing Violence

In "real life" we have developed complex legal and social mechanisms for maintaining, at least in principle, basic order and civility. Malevolent violence against another person is generally a legal transgression. Even threatening speech can on occasion be actionable. But what happens when this sort of behavior is represented in art? This question will be addressed in this session, with special focus on the issue of whether we may meaningfully differentiate between artistic discourse's stylized, formalized, subject to generic laws of its own and the discourse of our everyday lives. The depiction of violence in art is even more complex than sex, since violence in itself it is rarely regarded as scandalous (witness its proliferation in all forms of popular media, and the general public tolerance of at least some level of violence; contrast the strict regulation of how the human body is exposed in public art). Nevertheless, the representation of violence, especially extreme violence, is continually cited as a social problem; but what are the criteria for problematizing violence? Why might some people find the violence of a traditional children's story innocuous, yet demur at the violence of a popular cartoon? Why, to cite a similar example, might we regard Edgar Allen Poe as a writer of "classic" status whose stories routinely depicted in graphic detail murder, violence, and mutilation while we disparage violence that we may find in the artists and writers of our own time? In this session we will consider various examples of non-comic depictions of violence in antiquity and discuss them in the light of modern problems in the aesthetics of violence.

Euripides: *Bacchae* lines 1041-1393, in David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, ed., *Euripides V* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1959) pp. 202-220.

A. Barton, *The Sorrows of the Ancient Romans: the Gladiator and the Monster* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993) pp. 11-46 and 176-89.

Edgar Allen Poe, "The Black Cat," in *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, ed. David Galloway (Penguin 1986) pp. 320-29.

Newspaper/Magazine Articles:

Lynn Hirschberg, "Does a Sugar Bear Bite?: Suge Knight and his Posse" (*New York Times Magazine* 1/14/96) pp. 23-57.

Jon Pareles, "Swaggering in Death" (*New York Times* 3/30/97).

Michael Eric Dyson, "When Gangstas Grapple with Evil" (*New York Times* 3/30/97).

7) October 22: Poetics of Mockery

Representing violence can become even more of a problem whenever individuals known to the audience are singled out for mockery or abuse by the subjective "I" of a given work of art. Such targeting is the material for satirical forms, and such forms always have an unsettled status within society. This week we will examine satire in its various guises, including the comedic aspects of

verbal attack and the social function of mockery. We will compare ancient satirists to a number of controversial modern examples of satire and mockery, such as Lenny Bruce and Howard Stern.

Hipponax (selections).

Aristophanes: Knights. [on reserve in van Pelt]

Howard Stern, Private Parts (Pocket Star Books: Simon and Schuster 1994-paperback edition) pp. 371-401.

The Essential Lenny Bruce, ed. John Cohen (Ballantine Books 1967) pp. 222-86.

Christopher Carey, "Comic Ridicule and Democracy," from Ritual, Finance, Politics: Athenian Democratic Accounts Presented to David Lewis ed. Robin Osborne and Simon Hornblower (Oxford 1994) pp. 69-83.

Newspaper/Magazine Articles

David Remnick, "The Accidental Anarchist," New Yorker Magazine, 3/10/97.

Raphael Lewis, "Shock Jock Goes to Bat for Teenager," Philadelphia Inquirer, 4/24/97

Claude Lewis, "Comedians Who Talk Dirty Usually Have Short Careers," Philadelphia Inquirer, 6/29/94.

8) October 29: The Poetics of Abjection

Why do writers often construct themselves as malcontents, underdogs, or otherwise oppressed victims in their works, often precisely to justify their abusive and violent subject matter? And what is the relationship between the stance of abjection, verbal abuse and comedy? How seriously do we take the indignant claims of satirists that they have a right to mock because they belong to marginalized groups with special insight into humanity? This sort of writing often appears scandalous because of its sociopathic pretenses and devices: abusive language, cruel commentary on adversaries, making comedy out of the misfortunes of others, etc. We will explore some of the theorizing about what function such writing serves, both psychologically (for the writer) and socially (for the audience).

Juvenal Satires 1, 2, 4.

Michael André Bernstein, Bitter Carnival: Ressentiment and the Abject Hero (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1992) pp. 1-33.

Linda Hutcheon, Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony (Routledge 1995) pp. 37-56.

9) November 5: On the "Carnavalesque"

Abjection, obscenity, abuse are among the many devices that serve to scandalize the hegemonic elements in a given society. As such, they carry with

them at least the pretense of subversion: artists will scandalize in order to confront in varying degrees the prevailing norms of their society. But how much subversion is already "built in" to social structures? Does every hegemonic stance imply the existence of its opposite? And if so, is it ever possible for an artist to effect genuine transgression of social norms? One approach to this question has been to invoke the model of the "carnavalesque" formulated in folklore studies and anthropology. The dynamics of actual carnival celebrations in various cultures, from ancient Rome to modern Rio de Janeiro, provide a means of organizing the ways in which conflicting power structures interact within a given society. Carnival itself, and the metaphor of the "carnavalesque" as applied to certain kinds of literature, explicitly represent attempts at subverting social norms. The fundamental question, however, remains whether political or social change is ever achieved by such activity, or whether carnival behavior or writing ends up corroborating existing power relationships. This week, then, the class will consider how scholars have applied the term "carnival" to scandalous arts, and whether such a model can explain the social and psychological function of works that seem to exist primarily to antagonize the status quo. Selections from Aristophanes and Petronius will be considered in the light of carnival studies, and will be compared to modern examples of the carnivalesque in art and literature.

Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and his World trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana U. Press 1984) pp. 1-36

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression (Ithaca: Cornell U. Press 1986) pp. 1-26.

"Trimalchio's Banquet" from Petronius, The Satyricon and the Fragments trans. J. P. Sullivan (Penguin 1969) pp. 45-88

Maurice Olender, "Aspects of Baubo: Ancient Texts and Contexts" in D. Halperin, J. Winkler, F. Zeitlin, ed., Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World (Princeton: Princeton U. Press 1990) pp. 84-113.

10) November 12: Sexuality, Pornography and the Visual Arts

Perhaps the most contentious area of aesthetics in American culture is the representation of sexuality. Exposing the human body, whether visually or verbally, has become perhaps the primary criterion of scandal in our culture, especially since it is necessarily linked to large social questions, such as violence and gender ideology. In this session we will examine the roots of this controversy, and will ask a set of interrelated questions, such as: what is the difference between pornography and obscenity? What are the historical, anthropological and psychological origins of our taboos surrounding the body? While contemporary western pornography has often been regarded as a "modern" phenomenon, with roots in 17th and 18th Century Europe, in fact the problem was articulated in Classical antiquity a period which also produced plenty of art that was then, and might be today, considered pornographic. On the other hand, attitudes toward sexuality in antiquity were somewhat different from

our own, and we will examine some of these areas of discontinuity. This week we will concentrate on the visual arts, taking up the topic of Greek vase painting, (which could be extremely and cavalierly graphic), and comparing this to the problems raised by any number of modern visual artists who have been considered scandalously "pornographic."

Robert F. Sutton, "Pornography and Persuasion on Attic Pottery," in Amy Richlin, ed., Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome (Oxford 1992).

A. Shapiro, "Eros in Love: Pederasty and Pornography in Greece," in Richlin 1992.

Wendy Steiner, The Scandal of Pleasure (Chicago 1995) 1-93.

11) November 19: Sexuality, Pornography and the Literary Arts

This week will continue the discussion from last week of the scandal of pornography, only our focus here will be on literature. We will consider some of the canonical Classical poets who have remained "classics" even as they are from time to time repudiated for graphic sexuality and obscene language. Various famous modern cases of literature considered pornographic and/or obscene will also be considered.

Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* Books 1 and 3, from Ovid, The Erotic Poems, trans. Peter Green (Penguin 1982) pp. 166-190 and 214-38.

Walter Kendrick, The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture (Berkeley [1987] 1996), Chapters 1 and 6, pp. 1-32, and 158-87.

Holt N. Parker, "Love's Body Anatomized: The Ancient Erotic Handbooks and the Rhetoric of Sexuality" in Richlin 1992.

Molly Myerowitz, "The Domestication of Desire: Ovid's *Parva Tabella* and the Theater of Love" in Richlin 1992.

12) December 3: Misogyny: The Case of Ancient Poetry and Gangsta Rap

Pornography intended for males - the most common form in our own culture - is often linked with misogyny. Some would argue that pornography exists because of misogynistic impulses in our culture; others would claim that if misogyny is not caused by pornography, at the very least pornography reinforces it. In either case, misogyny is often one of the reasons why people feel scandalized by art that exposes the human body, especially the female body. In our own culture, an obvious recent example of this phenomenon is gangsta rap, which engages in the most vituperative, verbally graphic and obscene forms of misogyny, apparently with the sole aim of scandalizing at least some audiences. Many would regard the extreme form of misogyny in gangsta rap as a "sign of our time", a unique phenomenon that can only signal social degeneration. Whatever we may think of it, however, it is worth considering that misogyny - even very

extreme forms - has a long history in western culture, and that many of the Classical authors whom we otherwise venerate, were capable of misogynistic writing at least as disturbing as that found in gangsta rap. This week, therefore, we will compare the scandalous misogyny of poets such as Juvenal to that of rappers such as NWA, Dr. Dre, Snoop Doggy Dogg and Too Short. Our discussion this week will revisit some of our earlier discussions about the folkloric, anthropological and psychological background to confrontational and aggressive expression such as we find in misogynistic literature.

Juvenal Satire 6.

Snoop Doggy Dogg: Doggystyle (recording).

Michael Eric Dyson, Between God and Gangsta Rap (Oxford 1996) ix-xviii.

Ralph M. Rosen and Donald Marks, "Peep the Murderous Styles and the Poetical Technique: Comedies of Transgression in Gangsta Rap and Ancient Classical Poetry," (section on misogyny).

13) December 10: Scandalous Arts and the Law

In the final session we will examine some of most contemporary issues of how we grapple with scandalous art within a democratic community. This discussion will allow us to reconsider the philosophical basis for censorship that we found in Plato during our first session. Modern legal thinking on censorship and obscenity, and the tensions between "free speech" and community needs will be the focus of discussion

Plato: Laws from Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, ed., Plato: Collected Dialogues (Princeton: Princeton University Press) pp. 1384-1387.

Jeffrey B. Kahan, "Bach, Beethoven and the (Home)Boys: Censoring Violent Rap Music in America," Southern California Law Review, vol. 66 (1993) 2583-2610.

The "Butler Case": Dominion Law Reports, vol. 89 (1992) R v. Butler p. 449-99; Newspaper reports as background.

Newspaper Articles

Stanley Fish, "School for the Scandalous," New York Times 11/21/97.

Chris Satullo, "Who Needs the First Amendment? Take a Look at the Penn State Case," Philadelphia Inquirer.

Patrick Casey, "Obscenity Ruling Leads to Seizure of Classic Film," Philadelphia Inquirer, 6/28/97.