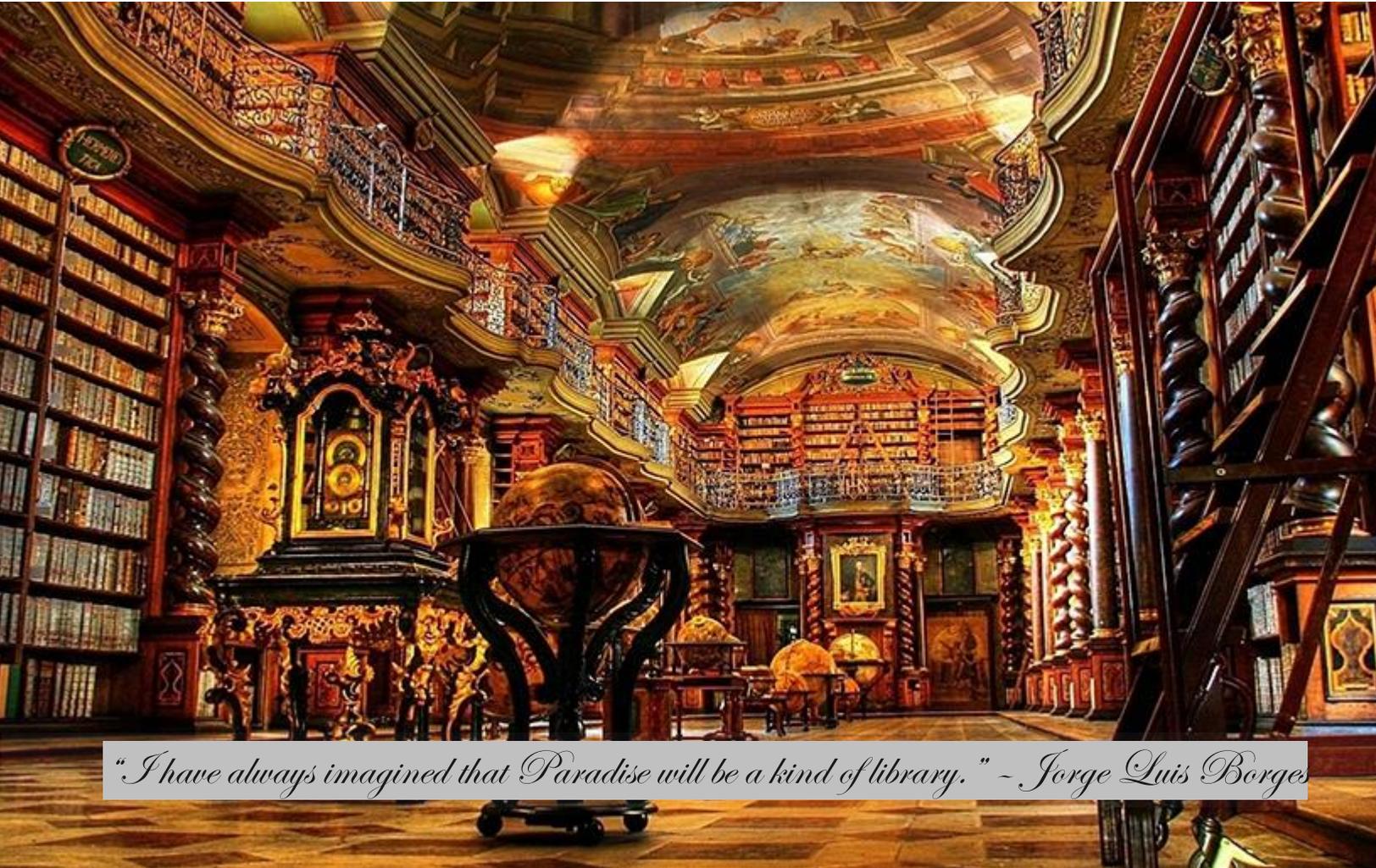


# TWICE-TOLD TALES: CLASSICAL RETELLINGS



*"I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library." - Jorge Luis Borges*

Instructors: Michael Amey, Amy Coren and Rachel Martin

Email: [mamey@nvcc.edu](mailto:mamey@nvcc.edu); [rmartin@nvcc.edu](mailto:rmartin@nvcc.edu)

Office: Bisdorf / AA 0252

Location: Bisdorf 379

Meeting times: Thursdays 1:30 – 2:30

Blog: <https://thespoilers.blog/> This is a work in progress. The instructors will be publishing their own stuff here as well as material relevant to the books under discussion.

### Course Description

This semester's course will be focusing on retellings of some of the classics. Such a choice perhaps needs some justification. One might ask, why bother with retellings when the originals are classics that have stood the test of time? There is an unfortunate tendency among some modern readers and writers to dismiss retellings of stories as symptomatic of a lack of creativity on the part of the teller. Just because retellings are, by definition, derivative, does not, however, mean that they lack in originality or that they are unimportant. Indeed, retellings of stories have had an illustrious history, and it is only recently that they have been denigrated as lesser forms of literature.

While there must have been first stories, as far back as we can trace in literary history, stories have primarily been retellings. As Walter Ong has pointed out, retellings were essential to the conservation of knowledge in non-literate societies. In many cultures where literacy is limited the tradition of retelling old tales from memory continues, as exemplified by the griots of West Africa, who, to this day, recite the epic of Sundiata, the 13<sup>th</sup> century emperor of Mali. These griots are perhaps less concerned with narrating "history" as they are with conveying a sense of identity.

When writing and literature began to supplant orature in some cultures, retellings still remained extremely important. Consequently, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* exists in numerous forms on fragmented clay tablets, and the Hebrew scribe who first wrote the story of Noah and the ark existed in the same cultural milieu as the story tellers who told of the floods of Ziusudra and Atrahasis. Undoubtedly, lost to us now, were various oral traditions of *The Odyssey*, each changed by its story teller to reflect the royal household in which it was told. At the beginning of the Common Era, the unnamed writers of the Gospels according to Mathew and Luke borrowed from the Gospel according to Mark, and possibly a missing source now called the Q source. Like other storytellers, the writers of Matthew and Luke adapt their accounts of the life of Jesus to reflect the interests of their intended audiences.

In the Middle Ages, writers valued the idea of antecedents to their own writing to the extent that if they did not have sources for their stories, they would, on occasion, invent sources or attribute their writing to other, more famous, authors. Wolfram von Eschenbach, for example, attributes his Grail narrative to a probably fictitious author, Kyot the Provençal, and Geoffrey of Monmouth writes that his *The History of the Kings of Britain* is a translation of an "ancient book in the British language that told in orderly fashion the deeds of all the kings of Britain," a claim which seems highly unlikely.

What perhaps contributes most significantly to a shift from valuing retellings to valuing originality is the advent of the printing press, and, according to Roland Barthes, the Early Modern privileging of the individual, and with it the invention of the author. Even then, though, retellings were still highly valued. The vast majority of the plots and subject matter of William Shakespeare's plays, for example, are derived from other sources.

Just as storytellers in the past adapted old tales to fit new cultural and societal norms, 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century storytellers have updated old stories to be more inclusive and

multicultural, and have made space in those stories for characters that have not been permitted a place in Western literature. Thus, Margaret Atwood has given voice to Odysseus's wife, Penelope, in *The Penelopiad*, in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys has allowed Bertha, the mad woman in the attic in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* to give a different account of events, and Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* provides a slave's perspective on the going ons in Tara, the setting for *Gone with the Wind*. For readers, the benefit of reading the originals paired with the retellings is that they complement each other – the old stories give depth to the retellings and root them in our global heritage; the new stories force us to alter our perception of what we thought we knew, and, in the process, hopefully change how we see ourselves and our society.

### **General Course Purpose**

Provides students with the opportunity to use literature as a springboard for discussion about the human condition.

### **.Course Prerequisites/Co-requisites**

A willingness to read books and talk about them.

### Goals:

The primary objectives of the course are:

- 1) to engender in students an appreciation of literature and its role in illuminating all aspects of the human condition;
- 2) to teach students how to use literary theory and reading strategies to explore literature;
- 3) to familiarize students with terminology used to discuss literature and the conventions used to write about literature;
- 4) to help students discover the connections between literature and other academic disciplines;
- 5) to develop and foster in students the ability to think critically and to express their ideas cogently

### **Recommended Texts:**

(Obviously, this is not a class in the traditional sense, so readers are encouraged to find whatever editions of the texts are most affordable. Also, it is likely that readings may get cut if the pacing of the class seems too hectic, so fear not.)

### **Textbook 1**

Author: Adams, Richard

Title: *Watership Down*

ISBN-13: 978-0743277709

**Textbook 2**

Author: Atwood, Margaret

Title: *Hag-Seed*

ISBN-13: 978-0804141314

**Textbook 3**

Author: Duffy, Carol Ann

Title: *The World's Wife*

ISBN-13: 978-0-571-19995-2

**Textbook 4**

Author: Forster, E. M.

Title: *Howard's End*

ISBN-13: 978-0486424545

**Textbook 5**

Author: Shakespeare, William

Title: *King Lear*

ISBN-13: 978-0743482769

**Textbook 6**

Author: Smiley, Jane

Title: *A Thousand Acres*

ISBN-13: 978-1400033836

**Textbook 7**

Author: Smith, Zadie

Title: *On Beauty*

ISBN-13: 978-0141026664

**Course Requirements**

- ◆ Participation – everyone should come having done (some) of the readings, and be willing to talk about them.
- ◆ Keep a notebook – this won't be collected (obviously), but I want to encourage everyone to keep a notebook about readings and class discussions.

**Grading:**

This is the best kind of class – a class for the love of learning – so there are no grades or credit to be earned. Just come and enjoy.

**Class Schedule (This is a flexible schedule, which means that, as necessary, discussions may continue on to subsequent weeks. The schedule may also change, but we will inform you of any major changes in advance)**

<b>WEEK 1:</b>	
August 24	Class introduction  READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>The World's Wife</i>
<b>WEEK 2:</b>	
August 31	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>Howard's End</i> , chapters 1-20
<b>WEEK 3:</b>	
September 7	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>Howard's End</i> , chapters 20-conclusion
<b>WEEK 4:</b>	
September 14	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>On Beauty</i> 3-154
<b>WEEK 5:</b>	
September 21	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>On Beauty</i> 154-301
<b>WEEK 6:</b>	
September 28	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>On Beauty</i> 301-443
<b>WEEK 7:</b>	
October 5	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>Watership Down</i> Chapters 1-22
<b>WEEK 8:</b>	
October 12	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>Watership Down</i> Chapters 22-35
<b>WEEK 9:</b>	
October 19	READ: <i>Watership Down</i> Chapters 35-conclusion
<b>WEEK 10:</b>	
October 26	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>King Lear</i>
<b>WEEK 11:</b>	
November 2	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>A Thousand Acres</i> Chapters 1-17
<b>WEEK 12:</b>	
November 9	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>A Thousand Acres</i> Chapters 17-32
<b>WEEK 13:</b>	
November 16	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>A Thousand Acres</i> Chapters 32-conclusion
<b>WEEK 14: No Class</b>	
November 23	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>Hag-Seed</i> Chapters 1 - 17

<i>WEEK 15:</i>	
November 30	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>Hag-Seed</i> Chapters 17 - 32
<i>WEEK 16:</i>	
December 7	READ BEFORE CLASS: <i>Hag-Seed</i> Chapters 32-conclusion