ENGL 410: Backgrounds to English Literary Traditions

Instructor: Dr. Allan Mitchell
Email: amitch@uvic.ca

Course description:

Are you interested in any of the following questions?

Who invented writing? Is knowledge more like sight or taste? How many creation stories are in the Bible? How have women critiqued patriarchy in the past? Should a ruler tell the truth? Are holiness and happiness ever compatible? Where is Utopia? What will happen during the Apocalypse?

These are issues you are invited to explore in ENGL 410, an extended study of influential texts and traditions spanning the centuries. The course is designed as a unique immersion in foundational philosophical concepts, spiritual visions, and classical mythography. It stands alone as a special two-term course in the Department of English, moving through pagan antiquity to the Middle Ages and English Renaissance. Although the readings will all be in translation, you will develop a keen sense of the multilingual and cross-cultural exchanges that have come to inform literary invention and interpretation.

Proposed reading list:

We will discuss as many texts as time permits over two terms; flexibility is necessary. The aim is to proceed at a pace that lets us pause and address several major lines of inquiry, tracking perennial ideas, images, and issues. Students will require the following for the fall term:

- Presocratic Philosophy (reserve/handout + NAWL)
- Hippocratic Corpus of Ancient Medicine (reserve/handout)

Next term’s readings may include Augustine, Boethius, Hildegard of Bingen, Marguerite Porete, Christine de Pizan, Castiglione, Philip Sidney, culminating in the study of Chaucer or Marlowe.