

GSEM 678: Birth and Becoming  
Professors Catherine Conybeare and Hoday King  
Bryn Mawr College, Spring 2005  
Th 4-6pm, Taylor Seminar Room

## Course Description

"It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before." - Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

The Western imaginary is preoccupied with death. According to dominant philosophical, political, and theological ways of thinking, death is the endpoint that gives life meaning, structure, and value. Recent feminist scholarship, however, has shown that this view of life has its source in long-held masculinist presuppositions. These scholars have suggested that we turn instead to birth. How might birth serve as a new structuring metaphor for living, thinking, and creating? What is lost, when meaning is seen to originate with endings rather than beginnings? What changes would arise, were we to privilege "becoming" and transformation over "being" and identity? What might an ethics of natality, as opposed to a Heideggerian ethics of being-towards-death, look like - and what effects might such an ethic have upon current socio-political thought and global policy? This course addresses these questions from an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing upon a wide range of materials: canonical texts of Western philosophy (Plato), landmark essays in feminist philosophy and theory (Arendt, Irigaray), films of the Hollywood Renaissance (Altman), and contemporary scholarship (Jantzen). No previous classics or film training required.

## Required Texts

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago UP 1998)  
Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (Routledge 2004)  
Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Indiana UP 1998)  
Plato *Symposium* tr. Cobb (Albany 1993)

Optional texts:

Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim* (Columbia UP 2000)  
Mary Kelly, *Post-partum Document* (University of California Press 1999)  
Sophocles, *Antigone* XX edition

Additional materials on Blackboard where indicated; otherwise on reserve at Carpenter Library Reserve Desk (please make your own photocopies). Films on three-hour reserve at Canaday Library or for rent at TLA Video (please call to confirm availability).

## Course Requirements

- Thorough preparation of texts and energetic participation in seminar discussions.

- Short paper (c. 5 pages) due March 14, a reading of a short text or object in the student's own area of study through the lens of the course subject (preceded by informal seminar presentation).
- Final research paper, 15-20 pages, on a related topic of your choosing, must be cleared with either Prof. Conybeare or Prof. King.
- Ten-minute presentations of final paper topics.

## SYLLABUS

### Week 1: 1/20

Introduction to the course

### Week 2: 1/27

Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, "Introduction" and "In Order to Begin"; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, "Introduction" (vii-xx) and "Prologue" (1-6), "The Human Condition" (7-22), "Action" (175-247)

### Week 3: 2/3

Plato, *Symposium*; Luce Irigaray, "Sorcerer Love" (Blackboard); Leo Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality" (Blackboard)

### Week 4: 2/10

Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater" (Blackboard); Jantzen, *Becoming Divine*, "Language, Desire, and the Divine"

### Week 5: 2/17

Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document*, entire monograph, plus Margaret Iversen, "The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Own Desire: Reading Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*" and Andrea Fraser, "On the *Post-Partum Document*" (both in appendix); Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage" (Blackboard); Sigmund Freud, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (selections on Blackboard)

### Week 6: 2/24

Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.3, 4.4 (to the end of paragraph 29) 'On the Immortality of the Soul', 1.6 'On Beauty' (Loeb on reserve in Carpenter); Jantzen "Contours of a Queer Theology" (on Blackboard)

### Week 7: 3/3

Brief student presentations: a reading of a short text or object in the student's own area of study through the lens of the course subject.

### Week 8: 3/10

No class. Spring Break 3/5-3/13

**Note:** Short papers due Monday, March 14

Week 9: 3/17

View Robert Altman, *Three Women* (1977). Read Luce Irigaray, "Divine Women," from *Sexes and Genealogies* (Blackboard); Marsha Kinder, "The Art of Dreaming in *Three Women* and *Providence: Structures of the Self*" (Blackboard).

Week 10: 3/24

Read Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy" (17-39), "The End of Sexual Difference?" (174-203). View Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Love Meetings* (1965) and Agnès Varda, *The Gleaners and I* (2000).

Week 11: 3/31

Sophocles, *Antigone*; Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim*  
[HK away]

Week 12: 4/7

Jerome, *Letter XXII* (available on the web at:  
[http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-06/Npnf2-06-03.htm#P583\\_110510](http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-06/Npnf2-06-03.htm#P583_110510) )

Week 13: 4/14-4/15

Distinguished Visitor Lecture, Judith Butler  
Please note: We will schedule an additional meeting of our seminar for Friday morning in conjunction with Professor Butler's visit.

Week 14: 4/21

Student presentations

Week 15: 4/28

Student presentations

Final papers due **Friday, May 13, by noon**. Note: deadline will be earlier if you are filing for a May degree (e.g., Masters); please check with GSAS.