

"The Beginning of the World"
Spring, 2018
MW 1:00-2:20; Friday 1:00-3:50
Bill McDonald

"As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be: world without end. Amen"
The Book of Common Prayer

"I am centrally concerned, however, with what takes place when one consciously sets out to experience or define what a beginning entails, especially with regard to the meaning produced as a result of a given beginning." Edward Said

This is an interdisciplinary humanities course—religion, drama, history, myth, opera, painting, literature—with a long history in Johnston reaching back to its beginnings. The premise is simple: let's study stories of beginnings in Western culture across several narratives and art forms:

- Biblical narrative (*The Book of Genesis*) and several other creation stories—Hesiod, Roberto Calasso—imagining the beginnings of the world.
- Ancient Greek drama, *The Oresteia* of Aeschylus: three foundational plays reimagining the myth/history of the House of Atreus (Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Orestes) and the beginnings of the justice system and civil society of 5th century B.C.E. Athens.
- Paintings from across Western art of the characters in Genesis—and, if there's interest, paintings/illustrations and set designs for...
- Richard Wagner's 19th century operatic tetralogy *The Ring of the Nibelung*, reimagining the mythic beginnings of Germanic culture, based directly on Aeschylus's plays.
- Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brothers*, a tetralogy of novels reimagining the stories of the *Genesis* characters, and based directly on the four operas of Wagner's *Ring*.
- Christa Wolf's novella *Cassandra*, a reimagining by a German feminist writer of the Greek prophetess in *The Oresteia*.

The next beginning point of this course is procedural. To read these texts simply in chronological order would presume a model of beginnings, of cause-and-effect descent. So, insofar as we can, we'll read/see/hear all these texts ALL AT ONCE. This is the most original part of the course, and because of that its most wonderful — and maddening — quality. We'll try to attain this unattainable simultaneity in different ways. We'll begin by reading Genesis twice, once rapidly in the very first days of the course and again, very slowly, finishing on the last day of our course. We'll begin with Aeschylus, and read his three plays very closely, line by line, speech by speech, and finish the *Oresteia* on the last day. We'll begin with *Das Rheingold*, the first opera in *The Ring*, and watch/play portions of it every Friday afternoon from the first week to the last. We'll begin with medieval paintings based on Genesis and travel with those characters down the history of Western art. We'll begin with the "Prelude" to the *Joseph* novels, and work our way slowly through Mann's four celebrative narratives, finishing on the last day.

Ready to begin?