“A classic is not a work that transcends time; on the contrary it is a work that is disconcerting in any time, including its own” (Antoine Campagnon). In this class we shall read a series of works that have disconcerted readers through the ages—works that have shaped the categories with which we think and the values that mark our civilization. In challenging norms and stretching the boundaries of imagination they revisit the perennial questions about change and continuity, morality and expediency, freedom and fate. They encourage us to think anew about the costs of imperial power, the pain of exile, the burden of the past, the mysteries of love and sexuality, the sources of personal identity, and the risks of inner transformation. Reading them in succession, tracing the development of a tradition that culminates in the work of Dante, we shall also reflect on the dynamic movement of literary history, as each author builds on and transforms the work of his predecessors.

Students will be asked to write two short papers, one longer one, and regular written responses to the readings raised in class. Texts will include Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound; Plato, The Symposium; Vergil, The Aeneid; Ovid, The Metamorphoses; selections from the Bible, including Genesis and the Gospel of Mark; Dante, The Divine Comedy: Inferno. Specific editions will be indicated on the syllabus.