

Spartacus: a Course to Die For

The name “Spartacus” has immediate name recognition among undergraduates and, I imagine, high school students. For this and many other reasons, the Spartacus story provides the ingredients for making the kind of popular General Education course that can excite student interest in a wide range of interdisciplinary topics and hook prospective Classics majors and minors. I will describe my experience teaching a writing-intensive “Spartacus: Slaves and Gladiators” at a small liberal arts college. This course works very well as a seminar *cum* lecture course with twenty students or less. It could easily be modified to fit a larger lecture format, ideally with break-out discussion sections.

Such a course can be effectively organized around four thematic topics. The phenomenon of Roman blood sports commands immediate student interest and provides an exciting way into discussions of late Republican and Imperial politics, the Roman army, material culture, daily life, and the fascinating ways Roman authors used the gladiator as a metaphor. The fact that most gladiators were slaves in the late Republic moves the course on to the topic of Rome’s slave economy. Finley’s “Slavery and Humanity” opens up discussions comparing Roman with Greek and modern examples of human trafficking. Wiedemann has conveniently collected the ancient evidence to fuel discussions of particulars about Roman slavery in theory and practice. The question of how Spartacus became a slave is a bridge to the third topic, the Spartacus War and the remarkable story of the largest slave revolt in antiquity. Here Strauss and Schiavone are expert guides. Shaw provides a handy collection of ancient sources on Spartacus and the earlier servile wars. Students quickly become engaged in debating scholars and each other in plotting the day-by-day progress Spartacus and his army make from the bottom of Italy to the top and back again. The dramatic end of this story is nowhere better told than in the famous “I am

Spartacus” scene and the image of six thousand crucifixions along the Appian Way in Kubrick’s epic movie. The final segment of the course is given to the *Nachleben* of the Spartacus story, with special attention to popular culture in the 20th century. We read selections from two historical novels, Koestler’s *The Gladiator* and Fast’s *Spartacus*, and watch Kubrick’s 1960 *Spartacus*. The movie takes us into discussions of post-World War II American politics and new cultural deployments of Spartacus as a metaphor for American values, hopes and fears, and finally brings the course to its conclusion with the Dalton Trumbo story.

Students learn how to work with different types of evidence: ancient historians and philosophers, novelists and poets, inscriptions, mosaics, forensic material, papyri, early Christian writers, various forms of material evidence from archaeology, and later popular (e.g. Gérôme, Alma Tadema) and scholarly interpretations. It is easy to slip in numerous Latin terms and phrases in the hope of sparking interest in the language itself.

This course can deliver several “learning outcomes.” It provides a rich introduction to the world of ancient Rome. Students will have a much better understanding of Classics as a particularly interdisciplinary academic field of study. Students will further hone their critical judgment by looking closely at ancient evidence, debating possible interpretations, and arguing, in class and in papers, for what they conclude is the most solid position on a question. In tandem with detailed historical and literary analysis, students will engage with the kind of big questions about the human condition that are the basis of liberal education.

There is a rich array of visual resources readily available in addition to Kubrick’s *Spartacus*: e.g., Lester’s *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966); the Starz series *Spartacus* (2010-13) Roach’s *Trumbo* (2016), *Bromans*, a British reality TV show (2017-18); Khachaturian’s *Spartacus Ballet Suite No. 1* on YouTube.

The course attracts students from across the disciplines. This mix enlivens discussion and contributes to making the course a pleasure to teach.

Bibliography

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