“The transgressive nature of biography is rarely acknowledged but it is the only explanation for biography’s status as a popular genre. The reader’s amazing tolerance (which he would extend to no novel written half as badly as most biographies) makes sense only when seen as a kind of collusion between him and the biographer in an excitingly forbidden undertaking: tiptoeing down the corridor together, to stand in front of the bedroom door and try to peep through the keyhole.”

*The New Yorker*, August 23 & 30, 1993

This seminar is an introduction to the literary art and politics of writing lives (*bios* in Greek, *vita* in Latin) in ancient Rome. Its focus will be Suetonius, the ‘transgressive’ biographer of the early second-century C.E., who peeped through the imperial keyhole of the first twelve Roman emperors in his famous *Lives of the Caesars*. The course will be structured as a chronological survey of the genre of biography in the larger context of Roman literature and political history. The earliest kinds of biographical writing in Rome may be found in funeral speeches and burial inscriptions; political pamphlets, war correspondence (*commentarii*) and memoirs; and antiquarian studies on the history of noble families, cities, and customs. We will begin with the biographical impulses found in Sallust’s character sketch of the conspirator Lucius Sergius Catilina and Cornelius Nepos’ extraordinary life of Rome’s most successful nonpartisan, Titus Pomponius Atticus. Following this introduction, I have selected four lives of Suetonius (Julius Caesar, Galba, Nero, Domitian) for reading and close analysis. In tandem with these lives of emperors, we will read other biographical narratives found in Greek biography (Plutarch), Roman history (Tacitus) and poetry (Lucan, Statius and Martial). We will assess how biography emerges as expressions of imperial panegyric or rebuke, essays on moral virtues and vices, and exposés of popular gossip and scandal. The survey will conclude with the biography of Gnaeus Iulius Agricola, the literary eulogy by the historian Tacitus, and the fourth-century C.E. lives of the emperor Hadrian, including the abbreviated chronicles of Sextus Aurelius Victor and Eutropius. The final week will be devoted to conclusions and abstract reports.

The seminar is open to all graduate students with some knowledge of classical Latin. Only selections of each life will be read in the original text. The format of the seminar will consist of weekly close readings and analysis of passages, discussion of pertinent recent scholarship and class reports on larger topics of study. The readings and topics are open to recommendations depending upon student interest and class size. Like all Classics graduate seminars, this course may be taken for 2 units (S/U grading only) or 4 units (letter grade).
All seminar participants will be asked to lead class discussion in three ways: (1) an analysis of a passage of Roman biography; (2) a review of an article or book; and (3) a longer presentation of a selected topic. Students who take the course for 4 units will also take two translation exams on prepared materials. The seminar’s aim will be a one-page abstract of a talk that may be submitted for a conference. The seminar paper (8-10 pages) will constitute a rough draft of this proposed talk.

**Course Assignments and Grading:**
Class Participation (10%) and Oral Reports (20%)  
Translation Quizzes (2)  
One-Page Abstract (ca. 850 words)  
Seminár Paper (8-10 pages)

30%  
20%  
10%  
40%

**Required Texts:**

Additional readings will be available on the Moodle Course Website (CW) under heading Course Materials.

syllabus

**Week 1**  
APR 1  
**Introduction**  
**Biography in Rome**

**Readings:**  
Stanley Fish. “Just Published: Minutiae without Meaning.”  

**Republican preliminaries**

**Week 2**  
APR 8  
**Sallust: Catiline**

**Text(s):**  
Sallust. *Bellum Catilinae* 1-8; 14-17; 20; 31; 53-54; 58; 61.

**Readings:**  
Week 3
APR 15  Cornelius Nepos: Titus Pomponius Atticus

Text(s): Cornelius Nepos. *Life of Atticus*.

Chapter 3: The Scholarly Biographer, 50-72.

Suetonius and the Lives of the Caesars

Week 4
APR 22  Suetonius: Julius Caesar

Plutarch. *Julius Caesar*.
selections from Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*

Chapter 3: The Scholarly Biographer, 50-72.

Week 5
APR 29  Suetonius: Nero

Text(s): Suetonius. *Lives of the Caesars: Nero* (chapters 1-9; 34-35; 47-55)

Chapter 7: Virtues and Vices, 142-74.

Week 6
MAY 6  Suetonius: Galba

Chapter 3: The Scholarly Biographer, 50-72.

Week 7  
MAY 13  
Suetonius: Domitian

selections from Martial’s Epigrams and Statius’ Silvae.

Brian Jones. The Emperor Domitian. New York and London:  

Tacitus and Fourth-Century C.E. Biographers
Week 8  
MAY 20  
Tacitus: Agricola

Text(s):  Tacitus. Agricola.

Readings:  Dylan Sailor. “Becoming Tacitus: Significance and Inconsequentiality  
Tim Whitmarsh. “This in-between book”; language, politics and genre  
in the Agricola.” In The Limits of Ancient Biography, eds. Brian  
McGing and Judith Mossman, 305-34. Swansea: Classical Press of  
Wales, 2006.

Week 9  
MAY 27  
Later Lives: The Emperor Hadrian

Eutropius. Breviarium ab urbe condita 6-7.  
Scriptores Historiae Augustae. The Life of Hadrian.  

Readings:  H.W. Bird. Liber de Caesaribus of Sextus Aurelius Victor. Liverpool  

Week 10  
JUN 3  
Final Thoughts