Experiencing insecurity conference abstracts

March 16th, Thursday (BU Law School, Barrister's' Hall)

2-3:30: Session 1

Alain M Gowing
'Tangled, chaotic and hideous': the triumviral proscriptions in Roman memory

The proscriptions initiated in 43 BCE by the triumvirs Octavian, Antony, and Lepidus led to the exiles, deaths, and displacement of hundreds if not thousands of individuals as well as the confiscation of property and wealth. In effect for nearly a decade, the proscriptions must have left an indelible mark on generations of Romans living under the newly established Principate. Yet the memory of the proscriptions, at least as documented in surviving texts, is largely fragmented and selective, giving prominence to mostly high-profile cases such as the murder of Cicero. Comparatively greater attention is paid to the Sullan proscription of 82 BCE. In this paper I trace the memory of the triumviral proscriptions through roughly the first two centuries of the Principate, offering an explanation for the scant or selective attention accorded them. I pay particular attention, however, and attempt to account for the significant exception to the rule of our extant sources: the Antonine historian Appian, whose lengthy and detailed account of the proscription and its many victims is an anomaly. Following an overview of the proscription itself and the ways in which our sources reflect (or constitute) the memory of its victims, I argue two essential points: 1) that the triumviral proscriptions furnished a sort of blueprint for many instances of political retribution under the Principate, beginning with trials for *maiestas* or treason, a legal concept with which *proscriptio* was closely allied; and 2) that the triumviral proscriptions led to a lingering sense of insecurity and uncertainty that remained a palpable consequence of (in Syme's words) the 'tangled, chaotic and hideous' events that gave rise to the Principate.

Michèle Lowrie
The caring leader perverted, Lucan's *De bello civili*

Lucan's three leaders, Caesar, Cato, and Pompey, each map onto a model of cares that go awry in ways that reveal different aspects of the perversion of republican norms. The figures' characterization as insufficiently caring leaders accords with their overall representation: Caesar appears the perverse heir of Aeneas, Cato an extreme and stoic Stoic, while Pompey is as incapable of leadership as he is of self-control. What unifies Lucan' strategy is the retrojection of imperial ideology about the good leader onto republican times to tarnish the collapsing Republic: it already failed to meet its own standards without presaging imperial ideals.
Whereas republican norms stress the leader's job as keeping the Republic safe (*salus*), imperial ideology highlights safety's emotional tenor. Securitas notionally separates (se-) a person or group from cares (*cura*). This is a positive value when *cura* means worry, but becomes a negative value in post-Augustan Latin, when it can mean carelessness, i.e., a dangerous distance from tending. Insecurus is not attested for classical Latin, but Lucan is one author among others who shows the normative perversion of *securitas*. The result is not the negation of carelessness,

but the reintroduction of *cura*'s disturbing aspect, anxiety, through a double negation. The layering of negation does poetic and political work that exposes the complexity of imperial ideology, which entails a promise offered only to be withheld.

4-5:30 Session 2

Gareth Williams
The Insecurities of Therapeutic Philosophy in Roman Discourse: Some Symptoms, Effects, Consequences, and Implications

Much has been made in the last decades of the rise of souci de soi and of therapeutic modalities in Roman philosophical discourse of the first centuries BCE and CE. This paper focuses not so much on the capacities or benefits of such therapies, but on the insecurities that are detectable in how they those therapeutic strategies are devised, portrayed, and implemented in such writers as Lucretius and Seneca. My aim is to explore the anxieties inherent in Roman literary attempts to articulate and sustain a coherent and pragmatic program of therapeutic relief through philosophical recourse. Those anxieties are potentially paradoxical in implication: while the goal is to generate a confident fortitude in facing life's ups and downs, a sense of vulnerability and diffidence potentially qualifies or undermines the positive value of the philosophical exercise. The paper therefore explores the tension between the constructive impetus of such writings and the signs of an underlying insecurity that works against that positive trajectory; anxiety seeps into the very task of composing the text, let alone composing the self. Further, the literary expression of such anxiety offers one suggestive way of approaching the relationship between Seneca's prose philosophy and his portrayal of psychological extremes in his tragedies.

Maia Kotrosits
Late Ancient Hagiography as Literature of Grief

Scholars have read saints' lives for their extreme feats of ascetic dedication, their refigurations of the meanings of body and sexuality, for their wild characters from the demonic to the beastly, and even for more material histories (of patronage, for example). But saints' lives are also full of sadnesses -- losses of children and parents, the heaviness of responsibility, a disillusioning world. We often tend to take these for granted as part of the landscape of ancient life. And the saints themselves are often depicted, romantically, as leaving behind or overcoming these heavy losses through their ascetic commitments. As counterpoint, this paper will stay suspended in this sadness and grief; will not quite buy this story of overcoming. It will treat grief and sadness as critical to understanding these hagiographical texts as they register the uncertain and somber ambiance of the late Roman empire.

5:30 Reception

March 17th, Friday (BU School of Theology, Room B24)

9-10 Keynote

Erica Caple James

10:15-12:30 Session 3

James Uden
Embodying the Wounded Veteran in the Roman Empire

One social group that experienced insecurity and suffering in the Imperial period was army veterans. That may be a surprising claim, because in many of our texts it is Roman soldiers themselves who impose suffering on other populations. While Roman soldiers frequently appear in Latin texts as violent ruffians who terrorize civilians (Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*) or as socially celebrated individuals who enjoy extravagant legal and economic privileges (Juvenal's sixteenth *Satire*), the reality for many veterans of the professionalized army must have been far different. Epigraphic and inscriptional evidence in particular attests to soldiers' uncertainty about where to settle after service and how to build a new life; the economic dilemmas and medical problems they faced; and – although the evidence is highly debated – a reduced life expectancy compared to civilians of the same age.
This paper argues that a trove of literary evidence throws underappreciated light on veterans' insecurity in the early Empire: the declamations recorded by the Elder Seneca. Set in a fictional world populated by stereotypical figures, the rhetorical scenarios of the *Controversiae* nonetheless allowed young Romans to investigate the ideological parameters of their own cultural world. As I show, these texts repeatedly call for young Roman men to take on the persona of the wounded veteran. A stock figure in the *Controversiae* is the *vir fortis* ('war hero') who has typically suffered some sort of injury on the battlefield, and is now embroiled in a legal and domestic crisis. What does it mean for elite Roman men to be asked to embody – if only as a rhetorical exercise – the wounds and disabilities of wounded soldiers? Is this merely what the sociologist Michael Mann calls 'spectator-sport militarism'? I argue that embodying the veteran forced Romans to acknowledge and even briefly experience the precarity and vulnerability of the disabled body. The declamations also forced Romans to confront the paradoxical status that soldiers enjoyed in ancient culture, as both paragons of masculinity and abjected bodies whose sacrifice made imperial power possible.

Luis Menéndez-Antuña
Analgesic literary strategies: how do the canonic gospels blunt the crucifixion pain?

How do literary texts convey the experience of torture when the victim's voice remains unavailable? For one, the urge to be faithful to the victims' experience hits a wall because of language's inadequacy to express torment. Furthermore, the urgency to represent the tortured body outside the logic of torture embodied by the torturer constitutes a significant dilemma for the interpreter. In this paper, I incorporate Elaine Scarry's insights in *The Body in Pain* and introduce testimonies of those who have survived torture in the present to illuminate how the gospels' accounts of the crucifixion tackle the inexpressibility of pain. Comparatively, I show how the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke simultaneously mirror and resist the torturer's logic. I introduce the term "analgesic strategy" to describe how different narrative devices (especially in the gospel of Luke) work to mystify torture and operate to defang the plot of its most grueling details (for instance, *Luke* 23:46 and *Mat* 27:52).

Tori Lee
Hic crine, hic veste: Violence and Bodily Violability in Imperial Pastoral Literature

This paper argues for a reevaluation both of pastoral literature itself and of the modern scholarship that surrounds it. I first apply frameworks of gynocentrism and critical classical reception to pastoral texts from the Roman empire, revealing that violence and violation exist at the core of the pastoral world. Then, using research on feminist pedagogy in Classics, I argue that we must refocalize our scholarship to acknowledge and address these violations in order to avoid perpetuating the trauma they entail.

Despite the common characterization of the pastoral landscape as an idealized Arcadia, violence is central to the pastoral worlds of Calpurnius Siculus (Eclogues 2 and 6) and Nemesianus (poems 2 and 3). The threat of bodily violability is constant, ranging in form from verbal abuse and threats of physical assault to sexual and intimate partner violence and rape by multiple assailants. I employ a gynocentric reading of imperial pastoral texts—pastoral "from below"—to argue that women and other dominated figures are in a constant state of bodily insecurity in imperial pastoral literature. Not only do the perpetrators of such violence remain free from punishment, but the literary form rewards their abuses with poetic power: acts of violence are generative of pastoral song and function as rites of passage for boys to transition to fully-fledged singer-herdsmen.

I then use a lens of critical classical reception (Hanink 2017) to highlight how the modern scholarly tradition has historically privileged an androcentric, or dominant, perspective in its readings of pastoral. Whether consciously or unconsciously, classicists have elided and glossed over the violence endemic to this literary mode—by calling coercion and emotional abuse "romantic," for example, or by characterizing rape as a "seduction." In doing this, the field has perpetuated harm to itself. Using feminist pedagogical research from the past two decades on teaching difficult topics in the Classics curriculum (Rabinowitz 2014, Deacy and McHardy 2014, James 2008), I end with a call to address violence in scholarship as well as in the classroom, maintaining sensitivity to pain, trauma, and suffering in ancient imperial texts and in the lives of modern classicists.

12:30-2 Lunch break

2-4:15 Session 4

Virginia Closs
Solitudo as State and Space in Early Imperial Literature

The global pandemic has provided the world with a stark lesson on the deep insecurity created by isolation and loneliness, reaffirming the importance of social connectedness and interpersonal bonds. Although Greco-Roman antiquity provides plentiful evidence of the view that solitude was a social evil and that a landscape devoid of human activity was a wasteland, recent studies (e.g., the contributions to Matuszewski 2022 and Kachuk 2021) have complicated that picture with examinations of the strong tradition of elite authors embracing solitude as conducive to writing and contemplation.

Though Roman authors of the early empire occasionally claim to crave solitude as a retreat from the churn of urban life or the cutthroat politics of imperial court, such self-marginalization

came with its own set of perils and depended upon an array of social privileges and polite fictions that were themselves precarious in nature. At the same time, the Roman imperial project was argued by its critics to create an ever-expanding *solitudo* that destroyed the preexisting societal structures and cultural traditions of the peoples incorporated into the empire. Following on recent work on *solitudo* in Cicero (Descharmes 2022; Matlock 2022) and Kachuk's (2021) wide-ranging treatment of "the solitary sphere" in the literature of the late first century BCE, this study considers the range of meanings with which Tacitus imbues the term *solitudo*. The most famous instance (*Agr.* 30.6.2: *ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*), is often stripped of the context necessary to assess its significance. Moreover, the term appears throughout Tacitus's work in ways that exploit its wide range of meanings, from the strategic space of military encounters on the edges of empire (*Hist.* 4.73.19, *Ann.* 3.74.15), to Tiberius' perverse pursuits in his retreat on Capri (*Ann.* 4.67.6, 6.6.11), to the most ironic instances of all: when Rome itself becomes a *solitudo*, or at least is perceived as such by its leaders (*Ann.* 15.42.4, 16.28.17). The spatial and ideological resonances of *solitudo* in the Tacitean lexicon sketch a sense of the existential insecurity conveyed emblematized by a single word, which could comprise the dissolution of space, state, and self in the Roman imagination.

Christopher A. Frilingos
The Suffering and the Glory: Problems in the Therapeutic Criticism of the Book of Revelation

Matters of psychology often crop up in modern commentary on the Book of Revelation. The deep archive of relevant work includes luminaries such as Carl Jung, who embedded an analysis of Revelation within the essay, "Answer to Job" (ET: 1956), describing the book as "personal" and "archetypal" in equal measure. The present paper focuses on two similar moments in the critical treatment of the Apocalypse. The first moment involves the social psychological theory of cognitive dissonance. John Gager (1975) and Adela Yarbro Collins (1984), in now classic studies, propose that Revelation's imagery and structure reflect an unbearable psychic tension between what is and what ought to be. John of Patmos and his partisans expected to triumph over malevolent powers; instead, they suffered persecution (Gager), or at least felt that they did (Yarbro Collins). The second moment involves a convergence of trauma theory and postcolonial criticism. Sarah Emanuel (2020) contends that the book is a revenge fantasy, a compensating response to a wound made by the experience of imperial oppression. To Emanuel's study, I add Shanell T. Smith's volume (2014), which also examines the cruelty done to victims of empire. Comparison of these two moments, as we shall see, exposes a pattern of using analogies of psychological disorders and therapies. So too it calls attention to a resonance between the Book of Revelation and the models of interpretation under discussion. As readers of the Apocalypse know, a narrative arc propels the reader forward through passages of intense suffering and into the setting of a New Jerusalem, a place of healing. The scholarship we will discuss, likewise, treats criticism of Revelation as a matter of problem and solution, of diagnosis and treatment. What are the limits of this kind of mimetic interpretation? Does it open a window onto ancient pain or hold up a mirror before the critic — or does it, perhaps, do both at once?

Zsuzsa Várhelyi
The ghosts of Neronian Rome: narrative and affective strategies of coping with recent traumatic experiences in the pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*

The pseudo-Senecan *Octavia*, written most likely within a few decades of the revolt that removed Nero from rule, offers a tragic depiction of the emperor's murderous reign by letting the audience watch close-up the demise of the title character, Octavia (Nero's step-sister and first wife). In this paper, I argue that unique qualities of this text allow us insight into the unfolding of trauma responses during and after Nero's rule, and into strategies of coping in the aftermath of his demise, which included a civil war. Challenging theorists who see traumatic experiences as defying historical representation (Caruth 1996), I will examine how the tragedy both holds onto its apparent historical narrative and slips, on occasion, into mythologized associations for its characters (prioritizing stories from the Trojan War). This displacement is enhanced by the gendered focalization on the affects of Octavia and other female figures, while the figure of the philosopher Seneca advocates for philosophical detachment. Reflecting Nero's violence and torture primarily back into the imperial household is a "psychic blowback" (Schwab 2010), which nevertheless works here by allowing viewers both to experience the full horror and to project it back, safely, onto the now extinct family of its perpetrator.

4:45-6:15: Session 5

Inger Kuin
Coping Without the Gods? Religious Disbelief and Insecurity in the Roman Empire

When disaster strikes humans often turn to the god(s). This is as true today as it was in the ancient world. Typically, this turning to takes the form of seeking comfort, asking for support, or seeking guidance on how to understand the calamity and how to prevent it in the future. But modern studies of non-religiosity have shown that for some people experiencing major loss and suffering, or even just witnessing it, can trigger doubts about the power and existence of the god(s). Likewise, in our sources from the first and second centuries CE we encounter some individuals who respond to cruelty, disease, or natural disaster by questioning the power and existence of the god(s) and the utility of their cult. This paper investigates how and when the experience of insecurity was thought to contribute to religious doubt and disbelief, with a focus on the Greek-speaking Roman East. The difficulty of recovering personal responses in our source materials means that it will be necessary to also consider observations about (fictional) others, alongside first-hand accounts of doubters themselves.

Basil Dufallo
"Optimism Beyond Political Trauma in Tacitus and Pliny"

This paper consists of excerpts from a public-facing book-in-progress tentatively entitled *Roman Optimism: Ancient Roman Secrets for Smiling Through the Worst of Times.* After a brief overview of the project, I turn to a discussion from chapter 1 that deals with the optimism expressed in Tacitus's *Agricola* and the Younger Pliny's *Panegyricus* about Rome's recovery from the political trauma of Domitian's bloody final years and assassination in 96 CE. Key to such recovery, these texts intimate, is the restoration of discourse about past values tied to a conviction that humankind's best qualities persist even under bad leaders. As illustrated by this material, the book as a whole argues for the lasting power of a characteristically Roman optimism centered on a belief in the inevitable recurrence of past values in innovative forms.

In framing my discussion with a non-academic audience in mind, I hope to build especially on the popular interest in ancient thought evinced by the numerous adaptations of Stoicism including William B. Irvine's *A Guide to the Good Life* (2008) and Massimo Pigliucci's *How to Be a Stoic* (2017), while offering a temporally narrower, more culturally localized perspective on optimism than long-view historical arguments for societal improvement such as Matt Ridley's *The Rational Optimist* (2010) or Stephen Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011). Roman optimism, with its knack for old-new fusion, can illuminate less synthetic modern attitudes, particularly an American optimism starkly divided between perceptions of the hyper-innovative new and the nostalgically old. Roman optimism is not the prerogative of elite males only but is also thought to be available to those who are powerless, helpless, or marginalized in some other way (though here, as with Stoicism, Roman optimism challenges us to take account of the extent to which intolerable aspects of Roman society, such as slavery and the subordination of women, limit its applicability in a modern liberal democracy). In cases where the Romans were obviously misled by their own optimism, their story provides a cautionary tale about self-delusion and complacency. And yet the traditionalist Romans, who nevertheless developed an unprecedented precursor to universal citizenship and a government program to feed poor children (Trajan's *alimenta*, discussed by Pliny), offer, even today, a model for bridging what we would call "conservative" and "progressive" political outlooks.