

HR/LIT 218: Free Speech
Thomas Keenan

An introduction to the intersections between literature and human rights, from the Greeks to the French Revolution, Salman Rushdie, hate speech and censorship on the Internet. The course will examine the ways in which rights, language, and public space have been linked together in ideas about democracy. What is 'freedom of speech'? Is there a right to say anything? We will investigate who has had this right, where it has come from, and what it has had to do with literature. Why have poetry and fiction always been privileged examples of freedom and its defense? What powers does speech have, who has the power to speak, and for what? Is an encounter with the fact of language, which belongs to no one and can be appropriated by anyone, at the heart of democracy? In asking about the status of the speaking human subject, we will ask about the ways in which the subject of rights, and indeed the thought of human rights itself, derives from a 'literary' experience. These questions will be examined, if not answered, across a variety of literary, philosophical, legal and political texts, including case studies and readings in contemporary critical and legal theory (Foucault, Derrida, Butler, Spivak, Fish, Agamben).