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ENGL 380-01, Getting a Handle on Literary History: Five Books 1550-1800, Fall 2011

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Rhodes College Department of English

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Office Hours: M/W/F, 2:00-3:00 p.m.; and by appointment.

My administrative role as Dean of *British Studies At Oxford* means that I sometimes have to be out of my office unexpectedly. I shall try to keep my Office Hours, but for your own convenience I recommend that you phone ahead (3715) before climbing all those stairs.

Getting a Handle on Literary History *Five Books, 1550-1800*

English 380 CRN: 12281

Class meets: Monday/Wednesday/Friday, 11:00-11:50 Kennedy 104

Schedule and Course Document, Fall 2011

What is literary history, why is it important, and how does one go about studying it? In this course we'll consider these questions by studying five books – not “texts” – published in print between 1500 and 1800: Songs and Sonnets (1557), the volume that initiates modern lyric verse in English; Ben Jonson's Works (1616), the first collected edition of plays and poems by a living English dramatist; Milton's Poems (1645), which shows a major writer shaping the way he wants his poetry to be read and understood; The Spectator, the periodical written and published in 1711 and 1712 by Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, one of the most important guides to the enjoyment of literature and polite culture in our history, both in Britain and North America; and finally the volume that announced that radical change in writing and reading that we call “Romanticism”: Wordsworth and Coleridge's Lyrical Ballads (1798). With each of these we'll look at the complex history of how these books come into being; what manuscripts lie behind the printed editions; what kind of audience received them; and what influence they had on the development of our literary culture. This course will use original printed editions available through the electronic resources Early English Books Online and Eighteenth Century Collections Online; and many of the classes will be more workshop than lecture.

This course has two primary points of origin, the first of which is by far the more important.

First, students beginning their studies in English now arrive with limited knowledge of either British history or literary history. As a result, certain ranges of knowledge are closed to them,

and these turn out to be ranges of knowledge fundamental to the understanding. This is not least because later writers assume that readers are aware of the history of literature in their own language.

Second, digital access to literary works (wonderful in some ways) compounds and amplifies a dissociation between the words of a text and the physical manifestation of that text in the form of a book or other paper-based publication. However, volumes – not just texts – express their culture's conditions and aspirations; they also act as turning points.

Course terms and conditions

The final grade recognizes the quality of your work over the whole course. It is awarded for a course of study successfully pursued, not simply for a few pieces of written work, and you are expected to be intellectually engaged at all times. Provided that I am confident that that is the case, the exact final grade is normally determined according to the scheme set out below. However, there are two thresholds you must cross successfully before I will award a grade above "D".

First, this is an English course, and I expect any formal piece of work to be written with correct grammar and spellings. All students now have access to word processing programs with a spelling checker, so there is little excuse for handing in misspelled work. Grammar is fundamental to communication, and degree-level written work in English has to communicate accurately. Many WP programs also have a grammar checker, though these are of limited usefulness. If you have any doubts about the accuracy of your English usage, you should use the Writing Center to gain advice. Above all, I expect you to proof-read your work and spot errors before I do – if you present work to me that you could not be bothered to read over, you must expect me to feel that you are treating the task with contempt and grade accordingly.

Second, this course requires that you master some facts concerning the literary, cultural, and political history of the time during which these texts were being written. If I become concerned that you are not mastering the material or preparing adequately for class, I shall issue a series of unannounced tests, each based on factual material found in the texts, in any study-guides I have made available to you, and in our set readings. You must achieve at least a 60% average on these tests to get above "D".

Once across these thresholds, the grade is determined as follows:

Five papers, each 15%
Participation, 25%

Everybody wants a top grade for all their courses, and – as Garrison Keillor slyly insinuates of the inhabitants of Lake Wobegon – we all think that we are above average. But life isn't really like that. Before you complain of unfair grading, bear in mind that satisfactory performance in this College is rewarded with a grade of C. A grade of B recognizes performance well beyond

the simply satisfactory. Grades of A for the course will be given to work that is genuinely and consistently outstanding, and that grade is rarely given. For your information, the median grade I gave for my courses in Fall 2004 (the last time I made the calculation) was between B and B-.

Cheating

Those I catch cheating, I fail.

Requirements

Participation

Your assessment for this course includes a substantial component for participation and you should be in no doubt that I use the full range of grades. Participation is important because learning is a not a passive activity and one person's failure to be actively engaged in a class adversely affects the experience of others. Participation can take many forms; speaking-up is only one of them. A student who is comparatively silent, but who is also obviously attentive and committed to the class is making a contribution to the overall atmosphere. Conversely, students who attend but don't bring the text, are visibly bored, wear hats or caps, fall asleep, talk among themselves, or who are repeatedly late ... such students cannot expect to be rewarded for participation even if they make the occasional contribution to discussion.

Attendance

You are expected to attend all the sessions of the course and any unjustified absence will affect your grade. With the fifth such absence, I shall assume you have withdrawn from the course, with an automatic F if your name continues to appear on the class roll. You are also expected to be on time, to remain in the classroom throughout the class, and not bring food or drink into it.

NOTE WELL: Absences to either side of a College Recess will count double against you. Tell your parents, grandparents, long-lost uncles and any mythical family members as soon as possible not to make travel arrangements for you that conflict with the schedule – I am impervious to the argument that begins, “But my mother didn’t know and has already bought the ticket ...”. You are a legal adult and I hold you responsible for your attendance at this class.

Papers

Completion of all written work is required to pass the course; failure to do so is an automatic F. All papers must be submitted by the agreed date. If you encounter difficulties, you must contact me **before** the agreed deadline. I shall deduct 10% per day for late papers up to one week after the due date; thereafter, although the paper is still necessary for the completion of the course, I shall record a zero as the grade.

The format of papers

- Please use Times New Roman 12 point and number the pages.

- Use the spell-check tool, but do so with care: some of the great virtues of the computer derive from the machine's "stupidity" – it will do exactly what you say and not think about it. Make sure you check for appropriateness any corrections proposed by the machine.
- Use the grammar checker, but with even more attentiveness.
- When you have completed your paper, use the word-count tool and write the total number of words on the front page.

Length of Papers

I don't like assigning a "set length" for papers – some writers need to develop ideas over a considerable span, others achieve high-quality work in astonishingly few words.

The latter are rare indeed and I know I'm not one of them. As a guide, I would say that you are unlikely to achieve thorough, nuanced expression of an idea or topic in under 1,500 words for the first two papers. Brevity is a great virtue in writers, but only if it is achieved without damage to sophistication. We'll discuss the final paper at a later date.

Rewrites

I encourage rewrites, but these must be substantive: merely changing a few words I've queried or deleting things I've found challengeable will not do. Indeed, if I find that I have wasted my time reading a rewrite that is not substantive, expect my frustration to be made manifest in the overall grade for the course. Bear in mind that the difference between, for instance, a paper that receives a B and one that receives an A is not the occasional error or infelicity; the difference is in quality of thought. If you decide to rewrite a paper, you should expect to start almost from scratch, using your first version as the foundation for a complete rethinking of the topic and your approach. If you approach rewriting in this spirit, it can be one of the most powerful tools for your intellectual development.

For each of the first two papers one rewrite is permitted, and it should be presented within two weeks of the return of the original paper. The recorded grade will be the average of the first and second grades.

What are the characteristics of the different grades of performance?

Rhodes is moving, with its new curriculum, to a 4 credit system, with the expectation that students will normally take four courses only per semester. More free time? Hardly. The purpose of this change is to get students to engage more deeply with the material they are studying. Students will be expected to read and write more carefully, more attentively, more thoughtfully ... and sometimes just more. For this course I will expect you to come to have spent several hours preparing for each class and to spend time after the class reconsidering and consolidating in response to our discussions.

Full description of what will lead to various grades is both impossible and unwise. Again, bear in mind that the satisfactory student should receive a C grade; a B recognizes performance well above satisfactory. A grade of A or A- is for outstanding work and is received rarely.

Here are some of the characteristics of the excellent and the poor student:

Excellent students attend the class without fail; they have always prepared for the class well; they are self-motivated learners, using the library and other resources to discover additional materials for the subject; they are curious and enquiring; and they constantly reflect on the relationship between subjects under immediate discussion and earlier discussions in the class. Their writing is ambitious and the subject of growing professional pride: they seek to grapple with substantial subjects, which they pursue with clarity, accuracy, determination, and rigour, and they reread and rewrite their work before submitting it. They seek to present their work with professionalism and proof-read it carefully before handing it in. These students are perceptive and make sophisticated, educated, and independent-minded enquiries concerning issues to do with literature, language, and culture more generally.

Poor students have poor attendance records. They have put little into preparation for class and they are visibly disengaged. In their written work they are more concerned with “set length” than with intellectual substance, and they fail to observe obvious professional standards (spelling, grammar, getting simple things like authors’ names and quotations right). They produce no preliminary draft of papers and fail to read their work through to ensure its quality and accuracy. They seek simple answers to complex questions and do the bare minimum, rarely bringing to bear any reading or thinking not explicitly required by the professor.

Active Learning

Here is a good statement for you to consider, in relation to this and every course you take at Rhodes:

Let me speak to you purely as a professor for a moment. Here is a bedrock truth. We can inform you, we can expose you to things you never heard of before, we can explain things, we can sometimes entertain you, we can often bore the hell out of you, we can set up good learning environments (or not), we can test you, we can grade you and credential you, and you can like us or hate us. But however well or badly we do those things, there is one thing that we absolutely cannot do, even if we stand on our heads – and that is: educate you. That is because the educational part of an education requires a personal investment from you that is not in the contract. If you do not make that investment of yourself, you can get a college degree without coming close to an education. By personal investment, I mean a kind of active mental engagement that falls largely outside the routine of going to school.

Theodore D. Nordenburg,
Professor of Philosophy, Mercer University [October, 2002]

The structure of the course

There will be a lecture each week

Week 1

- i Literary History
- ii Literary Language

Week 2

- i Manuscript and print, 1500-1800
- ii Education and rhetoric, 1500-1800

Week 3

- i Philip Sidney's *Apology for English Poesy* (written c.1579; printed 1595) and the early modern view of literature and literary history
- ii *Songs and Sonnets of the Right Honourable Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, and others (Tottel's Miscellany)* (1557)

Week 4

- i *Songs and Sonnets of the Right Honourable Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, and others (Tottel's Miscellany)* (1557); comparing these with manuscript versions of the same poems
- ii *Songs and Sonnets of the Right Honourable Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, and others (Tottel's Miscellany)* (1557); comparing these with manuscript versions of the same poems

Week 5

- i The hierarchy of genres in early modern literature
- ii The texts of early modern drama

Week 6

- i *The Works of Benjamin Jonson*
- ii *The Works of Benjamin Jonson*

Week 7

- i *The Works of Benjamin Jonson*
- ii Milton's *Lycidas*

Week 8

- i *Lycidas* in manuscript and print
- ii Milton, *Poems* (1645)

Week 9

- i Education and literacy, 1500-1700: an overview
- ii London and the world of “a polite and commercial people”

Week 10

- i *The Spectator*
- ii Joseph Addison’s *Spectator* essays on Milton

Week 11

- i Addison’s *Spectator* essays on “The Pleasures of the Imagination”
- ii Addison’s *Spectator* essays on “The Pleasures of the Imagination”

Week 12

- i John Denham, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and James Thompson: elegant poetry for an elegant people
- ii Thomas Gray and poetry for an age of sensibility

Week 13

- i Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*
- ii Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*

Week 14

- i Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*
- ii Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*