

ENGLISH 440: SEVENTEENTH CENTURY POETRY & PROSE
“RELIGION, SEX, & SELF-KNOWLEDGE FROM DONNE TO ROCHESTER”
SPRING 2014
PROFESSOR BEN SAUNDERS

Office: 366 PLC

Hours: Mondays, 9am-10.30am; Thursdays, 9am-10.30am

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Description

In the England of 1601, politics, philosophy, science, medicine, law, and literature had yet to separate themselves from the master discourse of religion. By 1701, however, the human and the natural sciences had begun to emerge in something like their modern forms, while (at least in theory) religious sectarianism had started to give way to the Liberal principle of toleration. The century in between was marked by terrible violence, extraordinary social upheaval, and urgent intellectual inquiry. Religious radicals had challenged the ancient authorities of crown and church in a Puritan revolution, and been challenged in turn by a monarchist backlash. Political structures, sexual mores, and philosophical paradigms had shifted ... and then shifted again. And new and disturbing questions had emerged. For example: If kings did not rule by divine right, what other forms of political authority might be imagined? If religious disputes could not be settled with certainty, what forms of certain knowledge might be found? Could the concept of an immutable nature — or of an immutable God — survive the new discoveries of science? Should we denigrate bodily desire as sinful, regard it neutrally as the manifestation of an amoral reproductive instinct, or elevate it to the peak of human experience? What was the ideal relation of the body to the mind, of the mind to the self, and of the self to others? And so on. Modern secular Western identity originates in these great intellectual crises of seventeenth-century European thought; to understand the period is therefore to understand where we “moderns” come from. In this course we will read four writers who grappled with the questions above to produce some of the most difficult and daring poetry in English literary history. We will focus particularly on the issues of theology, sexuality, and self-knowledge, as they are explored in their work.

Required Texts

John Donne

The Complete English Poems

Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions/Death's Duel

George Herbert

The Temple

Andrew Marvell

The Complete Poems

John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester

Selected Poems

All are available at the UO Textbook store. Additional readings will be supplied in photocopied form or via PDFs on Blackboard.

Method of Assessment

Grades will be based upon

- A tight paraphrase of Donne's "Elegy I: Jealousy," due on the Friday of Week I (April 4).
 - A guided close reading of Donne's "A Valediction of my Name in the Window," due on the Friday of Week III (April 17).
 - A tight paraphrase and unguided close reading of another poem (selected from a list that I will provide), due on Friday of Week VII (May 16).
 - A formal research essay (10-12 pages), due on the Monday of Week XI (June 9)
- OR**
- A recitation project (details to follow)
- OR**
- A creative final project of your choice (again, details to follow).

Grades will breakdown as follows:

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| Paraphrase of "Elegy I": | 20% |
| Close Reading of "Valediction": | 20% |
| Unguided Paraphrase and Close Reading: | 30% |
| Essay or Project: | 30% |

Anticipated Learning Outcomes

You should expect to put **at least** 8-10 hours per week into this course (on top of time spent in class), with that number rising to **at least** 12-14 hours during weeks when assignments are due. Assuming you are able to devote yourself fully to the readings and assignments, by the end of the class you should have acquired a deeper knowledge of lives and work of four major English writers. You will understand the historical contingency of both sacred and sexual values, and will have a better sense of the origins of modern western identity in the intellectual crises of seventeenth-century Europe. In addition, you will have gained experience and proficiency doing the following activities:

- Reading and responding to difficult poetic texts with a view to better understanding their conventions.
- Reading and responding to contemporary critical writings about these texts with a view to improving the quality of your own analytic practice.
- Performing formal analyses of complex and demanding rhetorical forms and arguments.
- Writing focused essays in clear, grammatical prose.
- Employing creativity and interpretive skills to produce original, persuasive arguments.

Buyer Beware

- Some of the material that we will read this quarter is of an **explicitly sexual** nature. Rochester's work in particular contains language and situations that you may be surprised to find outside of modern "adult" genres. Obviously, you are not required to like everything that you read — indeed, I hope for a more complicated response than that — but if you are likely to be disturbed or offended by such material you should reconsider taking this class.
- Late papers will not be accepted without a valid excuse (documented illness or a family emergency, for example).
- Attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences will result in a lowered grade, at the rate of 1/3 a letter grade (e.g. from A to A-) for every unexcused absence. **No further warnings will be given.**
- Certain absences may be considered "excused" (for example, in the case of documented illness; a family emergency; travel on university business). You still need to contact me to avoid being penalized, either before or (in the event of an emergency) as soon as is reasonable after the class in question.
- To use anyone else's actual **or** paraphrased words without appropriate and full citation, whether from a textbook, work of criticism, or Internet source, is to commit plagiarism. **Plagiarism will result in automatic failure of the course.** In certain cases it may also result in suspension and/or dismissal from the university. **It is not worth the risk.**
- **Always bring a text to class.** Students without books will be asked to leave.

If you have any questions about any of the above, feel free to ask. That is why I am here.

A NOTE ON SECONDARY READING

Countless books and articles have been published on the poetry that you will read this semester (a whole course could be devoted to the secondary material on Donne alone), but no amount of secondary reading can substitute for real familiarity with the poetry itself. You should not be tempted to consider critical texts as a short cut to understanding. Read the poetry first.

Having said that, the idioms of seventeenth-century English poetry can be particularly demanding, especially if the literary conventions and formal *topoi* of the period are new to you. For this reason, I recommend the following as useful guides:

Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry, by Isabel Rivers. This book provides a wealth of valuable contextual information. It has recently appeared in a second edition and there should also be at least one copy in the library.

Rhymes Reason, by John Hollander. This witty and clever book provides introductions to all the major poetic forms, with the added bonus of being very short and easy to read. Hollander provides descriptions that are themselves examples — you really have to see it to believe it. Also available at the library.

The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (3rd Edition). This compendious reference book provides excellent entries on poetic genres (Epic, Pastoral, Lyric, etc.), forms (Sonnet, Sestina, Villanelle, etc.), technical terms and concepts (metaphor, allegory, iambic pentameter, etc.) and so on. By the end of this course you should all be able to employ these terms with facility and confidence; this book is the place to start. A copy is available in the reference section of the library — simply ask at the reference desk.

The Twelve Volume Oxford English Dictionary. The meanings of words are neither historically nor semantically fixed; they can vary over time, as well as according to immediate context. The 12 volume OED will provide you with usages lost to the modern reader, significances and valances that can change the interpretation of a line or even of an entire poem. Remember, putting the right pressure on a well-chosen word can generate whole essays, and the OED is a marvelous tool for doing just that. You should know the location of the OED in the library. If you don't, now is the time to find out. Again, just ask at the reference desk.

The OED is also available online, and free to all UO students, through the Library Homepage. Look under “Electronic Resources” for dictionaries.

Finally, if you want stylistic models for the close reading of poetry, you can't really go wrong with any of the following critics (although you should bear in mind that their assumptions about the status of “literature” and the function of criticism diverge widely, are hotly disputed, and in the case of some of the older critics, widely discredited): Harry Berger, Cleanth Brooks, Rosalie Colie, Paul de Man, Heather Dubrow, T. S. Eliot, William Empson, Stanley Fish, Barbara Harmon, Elizabeth Harvey, R. I. V. Hodge, Frank Lentricchia, Patricia Parker, Christopher Ricks, Victoria Silver, Richard Strier, Helen Vendler.