ENG 365

Literature in an Age of Revolution: Seventeenth-Century Poetry and Prose

Course Description:

Seventeenth-century England has been variously described as a ‘century of genius’ and a ‘century of revolution.’ In terms of genius, it saw luminaries such as Shakespeare, Bacon, Donne, Herbert, Marvell, Hobbes, and Milton. In terms of revolution, it witnessed major transformations in politics, science and culture including the trial and execution of a king, major developments in physics and astronomy, and extraordinary religious experimentation and fermentation. It was also a period when women began publishing literature in higher numbers than in previous periods, including at least one who dared to rewrite the Bible in order to counter the claims of patriarchy. All of these changes helped engender some of England's greatest literary works, giving rise to one of the most exciting periods in British cultural history. Yet even as the period saw major changes across many different areas of human endeavour, it still remained vitally concerned with the authority of the past and with the ongoing force of classical and Christian traditions. This course is a study in the complex play of tradition and innovation in seventeenth-century English literature.

Course Outcomes:

Our basic goal in this course is to learn how to read seventeenth-century English literature on its own terms. So by the end of this course you should have a solid grounding in some of the major authors, styles, genres, and contexts of seventeenth-century English literature. You should also have a more developed sense of how to communicate your ideas in essay form and a deeper appreciation of well-wrought verse and prose.

Reading seventeenth-century literature on its own terms requires us to imaginatively inhabit the past as fully as possible, an endeavour that involves reading texts in three basic ways: 1) in terms of their literary or rhetorical form 2) in terms of the classical and/or Christian traditions animating them 3) and in terms of their own contemporary seventeenth-century contexts.

The interpretive and contextualizing skills developed in this class are transferable to other periods of literature and to other cultural phenomena more generally.

My ultimate hope is that your encounter with seventeenth-century literature will give you a wider framework in which to make sense of your world, your reading, and yourself (present and future). The seventeenth century was a period in which the love of language and reading was developed to an exquisite degree. It was also a period of remarkable change and transition. Let us see what these extraordinary texts have to teach us about the ways writers responded to such change, helping to bequeath to us the world that we have inherited.
Assignments:

1. Essay One: Literature in Context. (1,000-1,200 words plus annotated bibliography). 15%
2. In Class Test: Identification Passages and Short Answer Questions. 10%
3. Essay Two: (1,500-2000 Words plus annotated bibliography). 30%
4. Commonplace Book/Reading Journal 10% (All satisfactory reading journals receive 100%)
5. Final Exam. Essay Question Given in Advance. 25%.
6. Participation 10%