The Quest for the Holy Grail has captured the modern Western imagination, inspiring bestselling fiction, conspiratorial study, and no fewer than fourteen feature films since the silent era. Yet our twentieth- (and twenty-first) century fascination with the legendary Cup is only the most recent incarnation of a long obsession in popular Western culture – an obsession that reaches back in time to at least the twelfth century, and possibly earlier still. In this course, the legend of the Holy Grail will serve as a case study for learning about the Middle Ages and medievalism in our world today. We will study the origins and flourishing of the Grail romances in high and late medieval courtly society, but we will think about and discuss other “Grails” as well: quests for the unknown, the unseen, and the unconquered; fascination with conspiracy; and above all, the hope that human beings invest in symbols, not just of the divine, but also of transcendent kindness, compassion, and sacrifice.

Course Goals

- Learn and practice some of the basic skills and methods of the historian and literary critic
- Develop a more sophisticated understanding of the Middle Ages
- Develop analytical reading and critical thinking skills
- Practice and develop oral and written communication skills

Required Texts (available at the NYU Bookstore)


Further readings will be posted on the course website.

You will be expected to bring all readings to class in either hard copy (most preferable) or electronic form (notebook computer).

Course Requirements and Grading

As this is a seminar, students will necessarily be active participants in the course. Students are expected to come to class each week having read all assignments carefully and completely, ready for friendly and lively discussion. During the semester, each student will write five questions each week, two 500-word essays, a short critique of one film, and a final essay. Students will be asked to be as creative as possible with these projects and encouraged to use them to develop their own interests and intellectual pursuits.

“Five Questions” (due Mondays at the end of class) 15%
Two 500-word essays 10%
One 2-3 page film critique 10%
8-10 page final essay 25%
Participation 40%

* Your participation grade includes attendance, preparation, oral presentations, and active participation in classroom discussion.

Assignments

“Five Questions” Assignments: Good scholarship begins with good questions, and as the literature says, not asking questions can have disastrous results. Thus we will continually discuss and practice the art of asking strong analytical questions in this class. Each week, each student will prepare and submit five strong analytical questions, written in complete sentences. We will discuss the criteria for good scholarly questions further in class.

500-Word Essays: Students will write two 500 (+/-10)-word essays during the semester. We will discuss these essays in much further detail in class, but the main purpose of the assignment is to help you to practice critical thinking skills. For all essays, I will expect you 1) to introduce an argument that answers an analytical question (implied or explicitly stated); 2) to defend that argument with explicit reference to evidence; and 3) to conclude by explaining how that argument
contributes to a broader understanding of particular historical-literary concepts, themes, problems, and texts that are at issue in the essay.

**Film Critique**: Each student will write one 2-3 page (12 pt font, double-spaced, 1” margins) critique of a grail film. The purpose of this assignment is to allow you to explore the ways in which the Holy Grail has always been used as a vessel (pun intended) for contemplating and discussing contemporary ideals and fears. We will discuss this assignment in further detail in class, but in each critique, students should make sure take into account what kind of primary documents the filmmaker/scriptwriter used (or did not use), the skill with which the author or filmmaker marshals that evidence, and the ways in which the author or filmmaker should or should not be counted as part of the coterie of grail writers that we encounter in class. Students should also pay special attention to style, tone, and structure; the biographies of the filmmakers/scriptwriters; and the historical context within which the text or film was created.

**Final Essay**: Each student will write one 8-10 page (12 pt font, double-spaced, 1” margins) final essay during the semester. The final essay assignment will require students to place in dialogue an analysis of one or more of the primary sources read in class with an analysis of a modern grail novel. Again, we will discuss this assignment in much further detail in class and individually.

**Attendance, Late Papers, and Incomplete Policy**

In order to experience the course in full, you are expected to attend every class meeting (I’ll try my best to make it worth your while). If it happens, however, that you must miss a class due to illness or some other legitimate conflict, please contact me ahead of time. Note that even legitimate absences should be kept to a minimum. Excessive absences will result in a penalty to your participation grade. More than five unexcused absences will result in a failing grade for the course.

Late papers may be docked one letter grade for every 24 hours that they are late. I have designed assignments to be challenging, but eminently doable; thus if you find that you are struggling to meet deadlines, please do not hesitate to contact me for help. There is no shame in doing so (in fact, it’s the whole point of taking a class) and often I will be able to help you to streamline your process and to work more efficiently.

Gallatin has a strong policy on students' taking incompletes, based on two essential premises: (a) students should take incompletes only for good reasons (“I haven't finished yet” is not a good reason), and (b) students should meet deadlines for completing the required work. If a grade of incomplete is absolutely necessary, the student must request the incomplete in writing (on a form called Request for a Grade of Incomplete) well before the end of term.

**Academic Integrity, Plagiarism, and Citations**

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website
[www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

A further note: plagiarism often involves intentionally trying to pass off the words or ideas of other people as your own. But some plagiarism actually happens by accident through incomplete note taking and/or sloppy citation. Note well: *both* kinds of plagiarism, intentional and unintentional, result in the same penalty, which is possible disciplinary action. Thus, you must never allow accidental plagiarism to happen to you. You must work hard to cite every word and every idea that is not your own. Watching out for plagiarism is actually a very good way to gauge how analytical your writing is. If you find yourself wanting simply to retell what other people have written, it’s likely that you’re not being analytical enough in your thinking. This is a good time to seek help from me about how to approach your subject from a stronger critical angle.

In citing sources, you may use either University of Chicago or MLA citation style. The former is preferred by most professional historians. The latter is the chosen style of most professional literary critics. Neither citation style is better than the other, but most writers have a clear preference for which one they like to use. The only two rules are that you must use one of these citation styles, and that you must ONLY use one of these styles. You cannot mix and match.
Schedule of Classes and Major Assignments (CS = reading available on the course website)

9/7    Introduction to the Course and to the Twelfth Century

UNIT ONE: Chrétien de Troyes, His Continuators, and Robert’s Prequels – Lost Relics, New Knighthood, and Romance

9/12
Anonymous, *Beowulf* (read lines 1-1250, skim 1251-2199, read 2200-end)
Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain* (excerpt)  CS
Anonymous, *Deeds of the Franks* (excerpt)  CS

9/14
Umberto Eco, “Dreaming the Middle Ages”  CS

9/19
Chrétien de Troyes, *Perceval, Le Conte du Graal*

9/21
Stephen Greenblatt, “Culture”

9/26
The First and Second Continuations of Chrétien de Troyes’ *Perceval*

9/28
Bernard of Clairvaux, *In Praise of the New Knighthood*

10/3
Gerbert of Montreuil’s Continuation

10/5
Manesier’s Third Continuation

FIRST 500-WORD ESSAY DUE FRIDAY NIGHT 10/7

10/10  NO CLASS
10/12
Robert de Boron, Joseph of Arimathea and Merlin

UNIT TWO: Parallel Traditions

10/17
Anonymous, Perlesvaus, the High Book of the Grail

10/19
Villehardouin, Chronicle of the Fourth Crusade (excerpt)

10/24
Anonymous, Perlesvaus, the High Book of the Grail cont.

10/26
R.I. Moore, Formation of a Persecuting Society (excerpt)

10/31 SPOOKY!
Anonymous, Perlesvaus, the High Book of the Grail cont.

11/2
David Nirenberg, Communities of Violence (excerpt) CP
OR
Jonathan Riley Smith, “Crusading as an Act of Love”

SECOND 500-WORD ESSAY DUE FRIDAY NIGHT 11/4

11/7
Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival Books ???

11/9
Alfred Nutt, Studies on the Legend of the Holy Grail (excerpt) CP
C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas, “The Sarmatian Connection” CP
C. Scott Littleton, “A Further Note on the Sarmatian Connection” CP
11/14
Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival* Books ???

11/16
V. Ortenberg West-Harling, “Medievalism as fun and games” CP

11/21
Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*

11/23
ARTICLE TBA

THANKSGIVING

UNIT THREE: The Waning of the Middle Ages?

11/28

11/30
Roberta Davidson, “Prison and Knightly identity in Sir Thomas Malory’s Morte Darthur”

FILM CRITIQUE DUE

12/5

12/7
ARTICLE TBA

12/12
Alexander Murray, “Should the Middle Ages Be Abolished?”

FINAL ESSAY DUE FRIDAY 12/16

Holy Grail Novels

7. Thomas Costain, *The Silver Chalice* (1952) [library]
8. Charles Williams, *War in Heaven* (1930) [library]
9. Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) [library]
How to Ask Good Scholarly Questions: Three Basic Criteria

There are basically three criteria for good scholarly questions, presented here in order of increasing complexity. If your question meets all three criteria, chances are that it could provide you with a strong foundation upon which to build further study. In this course, we will practice asking questions in order to fuel our classroom discussions. But also, later in the semester, you will choose from the questions that you generate and build the best ones into essays. All scholarship starts with strong questions.

Criterion #1: Your question must genuinely intrigue you.

If you look at the question and yawn, it’s not a good scholarly question.

Criterion #2: Your question must be analytical in nature.

If your question articulates a genuine puzzle, has no obvious answer, and instead requires you to interpret several elements of a given topic and then formulate an opinion about it, chances are high that it’s a good question for advanced scholarship. The simplest way to test whether your question is analytical is to think about whether it would create a good discussion (at the dinner table at the dining hall, with your roommates, in the classroom – anywhere). Analytical questions have many possible “right” answers. This multiplicity of possible correct answers leads to discussion and (even better!) debate when people favor one of those answers over another. A non-analytical question, such as a fact-finding question, does not create a good discussion, for once you’ve discovered the answer, the discussion is over. Another trick is to realize that non-analytical questions tend to start with the interrogative words “what,” “who,” “when,” and “where” (What color were Benjamin Franklin’s eyes? When did the War of the Roses begin? Who was Charlemagne’s wife? Where did they get married?). These are important questions, to be sure, but they only create discussion if the facts are in dispute, and in this case they are not. Analytical questions, on the other hand, tend to start with the interrogative words “how” or “why” (How did the War of the Roses affect English attitudes toward monarchy? Why did Charlemagne marry Hildegard in 771?)

Criterion #3: Your question must be answerable with evidence.

This is often the criterion that is the most difficult to meet. There are a lot of great questions out there that are both interesting and analytical, but that are nevertheless still not good questions for scholarship. This is because many questions are ultimately unanswerable with the evidence available to you and in the time that you have. Once a question has satisfied criteria #1 and #2, you have to think carefully about how you would go about answering your question. In this class, you will always be asking questions of primary sources. So ask yourself, does your source material contain enough data/evidence to make an argument? Could you conceivably construct an answer from it? This doesn’t mean that a source has to yield one single answer (in fact, it should yield many possible correct answers). But sources only speak to certain questions. In reading your first major grail text, Perceval, or the Story of the Grail, you will probably be able to argue a strong answer to the question, “How does Chrétien de Troyes challenge notions of the ideal hero as articulated by the Beowulf poet?” But it would be quite difficult to find a viable answer to a question such as this one: “How did Chrétien de Troyes feel about crusade?”