Wandering Knights, Errant Detectives

This course will help us think through the use of wandering in literature. Our focus will be on the wandering knight and the ambit of characters around him – monsters, pilgrims, powerful women and the knight’s modern reinterpretation, the hard-boiled detective. These characters, by virtue of their movement through space and the flexible rules governing their powers, open a set of questions that few other literatures can address. We will examine wandering as a physical, psychological, and moral act that complicates notions of identity, gender, nationalism, and personal liberty. We will find that this literature is the space for critiques on the violence inherent in transgressing social boundaries. And by the end of the semester we will consider the point where wandering turns into the ultimate manifestation of being lost: the apocalypse.

As a part of this arc of questions, this class will examine what ways the idea of the wanderer in the Middle Ages has filtered into writing of the twentieth century, either through references to knights or through a similar assemblage of characters and questions. We will use these modern texts to question whether the cynicism and moral ambiguity of certain modern texts has its roots in medieval literature and in what way restrictive codes of conduct continue to pervade modern society.

In this course you will be challenged to be literary detectives, responsible for doing your own intellectual wandering. Each Sunday you will submit a 1-2 page close reading and argument. Many of the texts on the syllabus will explicitly resist attempts at interpretation. Almost all of them are tersely written and narrators will often suggest that the sole purpose of their stories is entertainment. Like a true detective, you will be asked to read through this resistance and to build an argument from minute details, in this case, based on a single passage from the text of your choosing that you think sheds light on an important issue in the text. Occasionally additional prompts will be provided for the close reading. These papers will be due every Sunday evening unless otherwise noted. You will also be responsible for writing two longer papers, each 8-10 pages in length, one on a medieval text, the other on a modern text. These can be based on close readings that you have already done in the course, but must expand on an issue you have identified. You must submit first versions for each of these papers two weeks before the final version is due. The first version will account for 25% of the grade. Improvement between drafts will be considered as part of the grade.

There will also be 3 mandatory film showings. I will attempt to schedule them on Wednesday nights so that they will be as close as possible to the Thursday class, but this might not always be possible.

The main prop of this course is student participation (40%) and this will account for much of your grade. Participation includes how you are able to translate your written reading responses into productive discussions with your classmates, as well as presentations you make during class.

Keep in mind that beyond the immediate questions of this course, the goal of this course is to help make you an active reader with intellectual ambitions that extend beyond the
classroom. You will also learn from your fellow students, and so I insist that you listen and respond to one another.

Class Notes

- Do not purchase *The Book Of Margery Kempe*. I will provide excerpts of the text in class.

- Some weeks we will have texts that are available on the Blackboard site. Please print them for class.

- For primary texts, when pages are not listed below, reading assignments will be announced in class.

- Items listed as “online” below are available on the course’s Blackboard site.

- Laptops and cell phones are not allowed in class. Tablets are fine.

- All assignments should be typed and double-spaced in 12-point Times New Roman font. You should also block quote any quotations over one line long.

- While absences are not encouraged, you may be absent two times over the semester before points are deducted from your final grade. I do not take reasons into account for these two absences. Punctuality is considered part of the participation grade. Late papers will also lose points for every day after the deadline.

Academic Integrity

Gallatin students 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 in accordance with the Student Discipline Rules of the Gallatin School of Individualized Study.

The MacGuffin

Week 1

Introduction

No Class Thursday January 26th

Week 2

Session 1: Geoffrey of Monmouth-*The History of the Kings of Britain*: read pp. 53-126
Reflection Questions: How do you found a country? How do the Trojans legitimate the change from being wanderers to being Britons? How would you describe Geoffrey’s approach to history?

Session 2: Geoffrey of Monmouth- *The History of the Kings of Britain*: read pp. 203-261

Reflection Questions: How is Arthur different from Brutus? What sense do you make of the digression about the giant on Mont St. Michel?

**The Errand Knight**

Weeks 3-4

Sessions 1-2: Chretien de Troyes- “The Knight of the Cart”: read all

Reflection Questions: What is the relationship between love and violence? What is the narrative structure of the tale?

Sessions 2-3: “The Knight with the Lion”: read all

Reflection Question: How many animals are in the text? What do they contribute to the story?

Film Screening: *Chinatown*

**Fast-Talking Broads and Femme Fatales**

Weeks 4-5

Session 1: Chaucer- “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” (on course website with graphic text): read all

Reflection Question: Do you agree with the Wife of Bath’s stated distinction between experience and authority? Does she?

Session 2: “The Franklin’s Tale” (on course website with graphic text): read all

Reflection Question: The text ends with a question. Is it a misleading one? What question would be more fitting?

Weeks 5-6

Session 3-4: Chandler- *The Big Sleep*: read all. Extra Credit for your best Bogart.

Reflection questions: Here we see our first reference to an errand knight in modern literature. How does our protagonist compare to the knights we have come across so far? How do we understand the women in the text? Are they in moral quandaries?

Excerpts: *The Book of Margery Kempe*

**First version of papers due**
**Settling Scores, Paying the Price**

**Week 6-7**

Sessions 1-2: Shakespeare- *Macbeth*: read all

Reflection question: How would you characterize the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth? Is *Macbeth* a love story?

Screening: *Scotland, PA.*

**Weeks 7-8**

Sessions 3-4-5: *Njal’s Saga*: read all

Reflection question: What is the role of the law in the text? What are the women in the text like?

**Final version of papers due**

*Spring Break*

**The Big Wide World**

**Week 9**

Sessions 1-2: Mandeville- *Travels*

Reflection question: How does Mandeville organize the world? What are the sorts of categories does he use to distinguish among the world’s peoples?

**Week 10**

Sessions 3-4: Hammett- *The Maltese Falcon*: read all

Screening: *Batman: The Dark Knight*

**Week 11**

Sessions 5-6: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

**The Wasteland or the Big Finish**

**Week 12**

Session 1-2: *The Quest of the Holy Grail*

**Week 13**

Sessions 3-4: McCarthy- *The Road*: read all.
First Version of Second Paper Due

Week 14

Sessions 5-6: *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*

Sessions 7-8: Moore-*Watchmen*: read all

Final Paper Due