

# ENG332: Selected Topic in English Literature and/or Culture II

## Course Report, Fall 2018

### Course content and schedule

The course topic for this semester was “Medieval Arthurian Literature.” The pensum centered around three long Middle English texts from the fourteenth and fifteenth century: the anonymous poems *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the *Alliterative Morte d’Arthur*, both of which were read in editions with facing-page Middle English and translation, and Malory’s prose *Le Morte Darthur*, read in a slightly modernized version of the original Middle English. For historical and literary context, selected chapters of the *Cambridge Companion to Arthurian Legend* were assigned throughout the semester. With each primary text we read matching secondary critical texts: Catherine Batt on Malory, Carolyn Dinshaw and Rick Godden on *SGGK*, and Jeff Westover on *AMA*. These presented a range of methodological and theoretical approaches: historicist, queer/feminist, disability studies and masculinity studies, respectively. In order to give the students an understanding of these approaches, the critical articles were assigned with selections from Parker’s *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*, specifically on New Criticism, Historicism, Queer Studies, and Disability Studies. Finally, three independent theoretical readings were included in order to give the students an opportunity to practice applying other types of literary thinking to the primary texts: Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”; Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”; and Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” The Parker selections and these independent theory readings (from the Rivkin & Ryan theory anthology) are intended to be applicable to other work the students are doing in other classes or with their MA thesis. The other two MA courses also assigned these types of readings from Parker and Rivkin & Ryan, coordinated to not overlap, as part of a newly developed coherent ‘theory program’ at the MA level, where theory is integrated appropriately into subject courses.

The schedule was condensed in order to accommodate the lektor-students praksis schedule. Eight 90-minute seminars were held on Tuesday and Thursday for four weeks in a row (21 August – 13 Sept). These did not overlap with the other 2 literature courses, so it was the only course being taken by almost all of the students, making the condensed work load feasible. The supervised term paper was due 19 Nov. This gave the students a chance to work on their paper after completing the pensum.

### Students

Attendance was high in the seminars (though not required). Of the 22 registered students, 21 submitted term papers on 19 Nov (1 is registered for the mid-semester submission date in March 2019). The grade distribution was as follows:

A – 6            B – 6            C – 3            D – 5            E – 1

The average grade was thus B. The overall quality of the papers was high, as remarked by both the external sensor and myself.

### Teaching and learning approach

#### *Class meetings*

Classes were a combination of short lectures, discussions with the whole class, small group work, and work in pairs. I often invited general responses to the primary text to open class (“what surprised you most about this text?” etc), in order encourage an open, collaborative atmosphere, and to gather on the board what different things they were interested in order to

give some options for aspects of the text we could discuss. Then I would lead a series of different activities covering topics I had prepared and aspects of the text they expressed interest in. Examples include: comparing the development of certain themes or characters at different points in the text; close reading short passages; searching for new evidence concerning an issue we had identified in one instance; etc. I dealt up the work and put the students into groups of 2-3, afterwards gathering their results and challenging them to synthesize their findings into a new understanding of the text. The initial emphasis in the group work was on discussing and then *writing down* their analysis, in order to get practice writing; then the sharing was done either orally or by each group writing their results on the board themselves. Interspersed with these activities and discussions, I gave short lectures on relevant historical context, manuscript context, poetic form, etc., often handing out excerpts from additional sources.

Before each class I sent out an announcement on MittUiB with directions for how they could prepare for the next class meeting. For primary text readings, it was often open-ended questions to guide their reading. For secondary texts, it was often very specific directions about how to mark up the structure of the essay, identifying argument statements, different kinds of evidence, analysis, and overall structure. I sometimes assigned different groups of students to outline and summarize parts of the secondary essays. Then the students brought together these notes in class to build up a clear overall understanding of the otherwise somewhat long and overwhelming article.

In-class discussion of the secondary and theory sources was in part based on these preparatory exercises. I focused the students' attention on their understanding of the critics' arguments and how they related to the primary texts, but also on the rhetorical strategies the authors used to deploy their arguments, pointing out very specifically what kind of strategies they could adopt for their own writing. Covering large to small scale, we discussed the overall outline of the article, paragraph structure, use of evidence with analysis, engagement with critics and other sources, words that signal argument, and the authorial voice. Thus students learned from both the content and the form of the secondary sources, and I saw a direct correlation in the growing maturity of their own writing. For theory texts, we practiced identifying important points, summarizing them in our own words, and brainstorming how these points could apply to the primary texts.

#### *Supervised term paper*

Early on in the semester the students received a detailed 'MA term paper guidelines' sheet with supervision schedule and information on what should be submitted. First was due a short proposal and annotated bibliography; then was due a 3000 word draft (out of a 4000 word final assignment). Lektor students handed in a second draft. Students received feedback on all submissions, with meetings for the drafts and meetings for proposals as needed. In particular, the annotated bibliography proved to be a very valuable exercise, as their final papers showed rigorous engagement with secondary sources and were well cited and documented. The students demonstrated that they had a strong understanding of how best to summarize a critic in their own words, and when to cite directly, and how to distinguish their own argument.

Guiding students to develop their own paper topics needs to be an important part of MA courses with supervised term papers. I emphasized throughout the class meetings that part of the point of our discussions was to uncover interesting potential topics for their papers. To this end, I sometimes had them identify topics within the different things we had discussed that day, or I myself highlighted what kinds of appropriately sized paper topics could be

pursued based on what we discussed. We practiced articulating questions that could narrow down broad topics. In general the students developed creative, insightful paper topics, showing both a solid understanding of the historical issues as well as the more literary concerns of the primary texts.

As part of this course it is also vital to give thorough training in how to go about researching, preparing, and composing a research paper, as it provides one of only two chances they will get to write their own MA paper (not home exam) before embarking on the MA thesis. Mid-way through the semester I handed out an 8-page document called 'Some recipes for a strong MA-level essay' including sections with tips on brainstorming, gathering textual evidence, gathering critical evidence, weaving it all together, thesis tips, revising a draft, final steps. In addition it had a detailed sample paper outline describing the introduction, argument development, and conclusion sections of a typical paper, to supplement the article examples we discussed in class. To conclude, the handout had a style guide and much of the Chicago style quick guide for citation.

### **Student feedback**

The end-of-semester official studentevaluating received 15 responses. In addition, I distributed a short unofficial feedback form in seminar 5, with 16 responses. Overall the feedback was very positive. In the official evaluation, a large majority responded that the progression and level of difficulty was adequate, and that the syllabus was relevant in relation to their overall studies. A majority rated the quality of supervision and feedback as excellent.

Many students commented positively on the variation in teaching methods employed in the seminars, as well as the open-ended nature of the group discussions. For example:

- "I like when we work in pairs or small groups because other students might have found elements I did not understand, or paid attention to."
- "I like the balance between group discussions and class discussion we have."
- "I like it when we discuss, and although it is a bit scary, I like it when we have to work in pairs and then present what we found."
- "I really like the structure we had had in class where we change between talking in groups, pairs, and everyone together."
- "LOVE the fact you present us with no correct answers and let us shoot in the dark."

Several students mentioned that the tasks posted on MittUiB to direct their reading and preparation for the next class was effective for them. For example:

- "I like the prep tasks you have posted for the last few sessions. It is a lot of work, but it helps me focus and read the texts and articles more closely when I have more specific guidelines."

Many students emphasized the worth of the secondary readings that were directly related to the primary texts. They mentioned that although sometimes the articles were hard, they learned a lot from them both in relation to the medieval sources and to writing criticism themselves:

- "The articles helped me learn more in the course, and made me understand the primary texts better."
- "The diversity of secondary literature and exploring how these might aid in writing a paper has been very useful."

- “The secondary literature is really helpful for contextualizing and understanding the source material.”
- “It has been very useful to work with the secondary texts, although I found some of them challenging to read, it got a lot easier when using the questions you handed out. It was a new work method for me, but I can see that it will be very useful.”
- “I liked how we worked together on the Dinshaw article, where the groups tackle smaller pieces of the text. It made the task less daunting.”
- “The secondary texts were very helpful when it came to further understand the primary texts. They provided a deeper analysis. Exchanging with other students was also beneficial.”

Some students did express a desire for more class time:

- “Perhaps more classes would help us cover more areas and ideas? I sometimes feel we are a bit short on time.”
- “A little more time would help both students and teacher, I believe.”

### **Conclusions and overall assessment**

The MA course with semester term paper – currently only one offered per semester – is one of the most important courses the students take, because of the opportunity for them to develop their own topic, pursue their own research agenda over time, and revise their writing with feedback from the instructor. To this end the students should receive heightened guidance on the different skills involved in that process, from the very beginning of the course. ENG332 provided this guidance both through the written documents mentioned above as well as through class discussion focused on developing paper topics, close reading, and thesis composition, as well as analyzing published criticism as models for argumentation, structure, and rhetoric. The process of the supervised term paper taking place *after* the condensed schedule of class meetings worked well, as it gave the students the option to write on anything from the pendum and to have the time and space to work out a good topic.

However, both the students and the instructor feel that the total 16 hours of 8 two-hour meetings is too short for a serious MA course. It severely limits the number of primary, secondary, and independent theoretical texts that can be adequately discussed in class, not to mention assigned. It also limits the time available for learning research and writing skills together as a group. In comparison, UiO graduate courses (also 10 credits) meet two hours a week for 14 weeks, almost twice as many as our 8 weeks – a total of 28 hours. In our program at UiB an increase of 2-4 sessions, from 16 hours to 20, for instance, would increase the quality of the course and likely increase the students’ overall success in the 2-year program. Conforming that to the nearly impossible demands of the lektorprogram schedule, however, would be a major hurdle.

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