

HUMS 653

The Literature of Letters: The French Epistolary Novel

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06/21/2010 - 06/25/2010

Monday-Friday 09:00 AM - 05:00 PM

Romance Languages 106

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This immersion course is designed for students who are interested in France or French literature or ideas, but who were not necessarily French or literature majors in college. The broad goal will be to provide a survey of an interesting cultural phenomenon: the French epistolary novel. The general progression of the class will evolve from a discussion of just what distinguishes the epistolary novel as a genre, to an in-depth analysis of a selection of literary texts chosen as much for their content as for their reading pleasure.

Before the 18th century, the first-person narrative was generally perceived as self-indulgent, not to mention distasteful. Eighteenth-century readers, however, became fascinated with the looking-glass of the first person: with the intimacy, immediacy, and confessional aspect of the first-person narrator. It comes as no surprise, then, that the 18th century was the golden age of the epistolary novel, the novel composed entirely of letters. In this graduate class we will read a series of fascinating epistolary novels that vary widely in both form and content: from Madame de Graffigny's critique of European society (*Letters of a Peruvian Woman*), to Laclos' biting portrait of aristocratic society (*Dangerous Liaisons*). We will also read several examples of the epistolary novel's stylistic counterpart, the *memoire*. Examples from this genre include Denis Diderot's infamous satire of convent life (*The Nun*) and Abbé Prévost's account of the beautiful, but perennially unfaithful Manon (*Manon Lescaut*).

Note: No previous knowledge of literature (or the French Enlightenment period) required. Books and discussion will be in English.

COURSEWORK

Students in this class will be expected to read all the texts before the beginning of the course. They should also read "around" each of the authors studied in class so that they will have an idea about who these authors were. In late May, students will begin participating in a communal discussion of the novels (and certain cinematographic adaptations) via a blog, which will count toward class time. One paper will be due before the class begins. A ten-page term paper will be due three weeks after the end of class.

Student will also prepare numerous class presentations, from short five-minute discussions of a given passage to broader, more thematic 15-minute talks on, for example, the relationship of the epistolary novel to the status of women in 18th-century France. Giving presentations often makes students uneasy; I will provide a useful method for preparing such presentations, which can be applied to presentations for other courses as well.

SCHEDULE

Mornings will include lecture, group work and discussion. Afternoons will include presentations, film viewings, and archival research at special collections at Wesleyan and elsewhere.

GRADING

Grades are based on the following work:

A. Written assignments (60%)

First paper: 10%
Term paper: 40%
Blog: 10%

B. Oral presentations (20%)

Each student will have multiple class presentations. This is an important aspect of this class. As I said above, I know that giving presentations often makes students uneasy; I will provide a useful method for preparing such presentations, which can be applied to presentations for other courses as well.

C. Participation (20%)

To succeed in this class, students need to come to class prepared and ready to discuss the texts we are reading. Good participation does not mean spontaneous brilliance; good participation entails good preparation for class.

BOOKS TO BE PURCHASED:

Graffigny, *Letters of a Peruvian Woman* (Oxford World's Classics) (Paperback)

http://www.amazon.com/Letters-Peruvian-Oxford-Worlds-Classics/dp/0199208174/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1271286554&sr=1-1

Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters* (Penguin Classics)

http://www.amazon.com/Persian-Classics-Charles-Louis-Secondat-Montesquieu/dp/0140442812/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1271279842&sr=1-1

Prévost, *Manon Lescault* (Oxford World's Classics)

http://www.amazon.com/Manon-Lescault-Oxford-Worlds-Classics/dp/0199554927/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1271280193&sr=1-2

Diderot, *The Nun* (Oxford World's Classics)

http://www.amazon.com/Nun-Oxford-Worlds-Classics/dp/0199555249/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1271280252&sr=1-2

Laclos, *Dangerous Liaisons* (Oxford World's Classics)

<http://www.amazon.com/Liaisons-dangereuses-Oxford-Worlds-Classics/dp/0199536481/re>