

English 771: Writing Early Modernity  
Professor Mark Netzloff  
Tuesdays 5:00-7:40  
Synchronous via Zoom (Canvas)

This course provides a survey of early modern literary texts and an introduction to historicist modes of literary and cultural criticism.

As the seminar title indicates, we will focus on *writing* in several different ways:

First, we will be exploring the material histories and social practices of literary production: histories of authorship, collaboration, censorship, reading, and annotation; the interplay of manuscript and print cultures; and the material contexts shaping the emergence of modern genres of literary writing.

In addition, we will examine several case studies and write narratives from our archive of primary materials, with sessions on the pamphlet literature on gender and the household as well as the colonial histories of Ireland and Virginia (in the latter case, focusing on the archives relating to Pocahontas along with the early history of slavery).

In our analysis of the writing of early modernity, we will be tracing the genealogy of key terms through a contextualized study of literary texts: class and capitalism (More's Utopia), gender (the poet Isabella Whitney alongside pamphlet literature), sexuality (Shakespeare's Sonnets), and race (Othello).

Finally, our course will be framed through a reflection on our own imagination of the past and the porous boundaries between imaginative and critical writing, and we will draw on the examples of two 20<sup>th</sup> century writers – Walter Benjamin and W.G. Sebald – as models for an engagement with the legacies of the early modern period. We will look at an early modern example of this project, Defoe's reimagining of an earlier pandemic in Journal of a Plague Year, and have respective sessions exploring the legacies of early modern political discussions of liberty and sovereignty (Milton and Hobbes, alongside later readings by Arendt, Habermas, Maggie Nelson, Schmitt, and Agamben, among others).

In practical terms, the course fulfills the requirement for a pre-1800 course for students in the Literature and Cultural Theory program.

Our focus on writing will extend to your work for the course. The seminar will build toward an extended piece of independent research (15-20 pages), ideally a topic relating to your own research interests and a possible area of specialization. We will be devoting a good deal of time to the stages of your final projects: initial research, abstracts, presentations to the seminar group, along with feedback from me as well as your peers.

I welcome alternative formats for your final projects: pedagogical, digital, or creative, alongside historicized critical writing on a self-designed topic. Final projects will be shared on our Canvas site.

I would encourage those interested in the course to contact me in advance with any questions ([netzloff@uwm.edu](mailto:netzloff@uwm.edu)).

Course work:

Response papers (1 pg.), posted on Canvas (7 in all, on alternating weeks) – 33.3%

Active participation – 16.7%

Final project (15-20 pp) – 50%

Texts:

Defoe, Journal of the Plague Year (Norton) [\$16.25]

Donne, Complete English Poems (Penguin) [\$21]

Hobbes, Leviathan (Oxford) [\$16.48]

Marlowe, Doctor Faustus and Other Plays (Oxford) [\$14.95]

More, Utopia (Norton) [\$19.38]

Shakespeare, Othello: Texts and Contexts, ed. Kim Hall (Bedford) [\$26.57]

---. Sonnets and Poems (Oxford) [\$14.95]

[cost = \$129.58]

Other primary materials and critical readings will be available as pdf copies posted on Canvas.