Humanities Core: Great Books, Big Ideas -- Europe, Medieval to Early Modern
HumCore 12/ DLCL 12/ French 12/ English 112a
MW 1:30-2:50 pm
Building 100, Room 101K

Course Description
This three-quarter sequence asks big questions of major texts in the European and American tradition. What is a good life? How should society be organized? Who belongs? How should honor, love, sin, and similar abstractions govern our actions? What duty do we owe to the past and future? This course, the second quarter in the sequence, focuses on the transition from the Middle Ages to Modernity as it leads students through some of the major documents of western civilization, from Dante’s Inferno to Milton's Paradise Lost, from Machiavelli’s Prince to Hobbes’ Leviathan.

How did the Middle Ages conceive of our duties to God and our fellow humans, of sin, punishment, free will, and justice? How on the one hand, did women enjoy such prestige in a courtly society, while on the other hand, this society was devoted to the ideals of chivalry that celebrated heroic deeds by men? How did a re-encounter with antiquity produce the flowering of civilization known as the Renaissance? How did the voyages of discovery change history? When did our modern sense of what it is to experience life emerge? What events gave rise to social contract theory and international law? What do we do in a society where innovation outpaces regulation? To answer any of these questions, we must return to the transition from the "Middle Ages" to "Early Modernity."

Authors include Dante, the author of The Divine Comedy, which is often said to be the most perfect expression of the Medieval "world view"; Chrétien de Troyes, a master of chivalric romance; the love poets Francesco Petrarch and Louise Labé; the neo-Platonic philosopher Pico della Mirandola, who summarized the aspirations of Renaissance humanism; the historian and political philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, who is credited with inventing realpolitik; the Aztec artists who created the Codex Mendoza; the jurists Sepulveda, Victoria, and Bartolomé de las Casas, who worried over the rights of indigenous Americans who were being displaced and enslaved by European colonists; Michel de Montaigne, who, together with Shakespeare, whom we also read, is often credited with creating our modern sense of self-hood; the philosopher Thomas Hobbes; and John Milton, the author of Paradise Lost, a Christian epic that hearkens back to Homer and the Old Testament even as it heralds the birth of the Promethean hero and the dawn of Romanticism in the late eighteenth century.
Ways of Thinking: Aesthetic and Interpretive Reasoning

Learning Goals for this Course

Students should:

- learn how poems, narratives, and essays have expressed the basic beliefs, aspirations, and anxieties—in short, the world view—of communities;

- recognize frameworks for thought and action available to authors and readers from the Middle Ages through Early Modernity, and analyze the different assumptions underpinning those frameworks;

- gain a basic understanding of major literary, philosophical, and religious developments in Europe from the Middle Ages through Early Modernity;

- understand how expressive works articulate responses to fundamental human problems and convey important value;

- identify, understand, and use multiple normative concepts and arguments, including arguments based on the assumption that humans are the creatures of God, that there is such a thing as natural law, and that social relations must be governed by an implicit social contract or by an international law of nations;

Books Ordered


Schedule

**Sin, Punishment, Salvation**

M Jan  
Dante, *Inferno* Cantos 1-9

W Jan 10  
Dante, *Inferno* Cantos 10-25

M Jan 15  
MLK Day

**Courtly Love and Chivalric Romance**

W Jan 17  
Chrétien de Troyes, *Eric and Enide*

M Jan 22  
Chrétien de Troyes, *Eric and Enide*

W Jan 24  
Petrarch, selected lyrics; Louise Labé, selected sonnets

**The Renaissance Syncretism and Subjectivity**

M Jan 29  
Pico della Mirandola, *Oration*, pp. 1-12; Montaigne, selected essays

W Jan 31  
Montaigne, selected essays

**The Shock of the Ancients**

M Feb 5  
Machiavelli, *Selected Political Writings* (“Letter” and *Discourses*, selections)

W Feb 7  
Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

M Feb 12  
Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*

**The New World**

W Feb 14  
Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, selections from *The Account; Codex Mendoza*

M Feb 19  
President's Day

W Feb 21  
Sepulveda, “Prologue to the Members of the Congregation”; Victoria, *On the American Indians* (pp. 231-51, 264-5, 271-2, 277-91); Bartolomé de las Casas, “In Defense of the Indians”; Montaigne, "On Cannibals"

**Modern State and Realpolitik**

M Feb 26  
Machiavelli, *The Prince*

W Feb 28  

**Service, Rebellion, and the Paradise Within**

W Mar 7    Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 1-4


**Requirements (3 units)**
- Regular attendance at lectures
  - A 3-5 pp. close-reading or analysis of a text
- Final exam

**Requirements (4 units)**
- Regular attendance at lectures
  - Regular attendance at, and participation in, a weekly discussion section
    - A 3-5 pp. close-reading or analysis of a text
- Final exam

**Evaluation Criteria for Fulfillment of AI Way:**

- The first 3-5 close-reading paper on a single work focuses on how authors use literary language to critically reflect on a social, historical, or moral issue, and demonstrates a fundamental understanding of genres and poetic conventions such as a courtly romance, a love sonnet, or an epic simile. The following questions raised in the lectures model this kind of aesthetic analysis: How does Dante use poetic language to expose the moral failings of individuals and social injustice? How does Chrétien de Troyes foreground contractual language as the basis of a moral society as much as chivalrous acts? How does Louise Labé deploy Petrarchan motifs of love in order to create a new feminist subjectivity?
  - The final 2 hour exam will focus primarily on broader questions raised among the works of the course. Students might compare Machiavelli’s concept of civilization and human nature to Montaigne’s; or compare works that reflect different versions of social contract and natural law, or reflect broad historical movements and ideological shifts such as the discovery of the New World.