ENGLISH 126H
PASSION, PURITY, POLITICS: FANATICISM AND BRITISH LITERATURE, 1790-1890

COURSE DESCRIPTION

A fanatic, Winston Churchill once declared, is “someone who can’t change his mind and won’t change the subject.” Unrelenting, irrational, and unwilling or unable to change, the fanatic may seem to embody everything that is wrong with politics and culture today. In this class, we will delve into the complex literary and political history of this deceptively simple figure, tracing the evolution of the fanatic in British culture from the aftermath of the French Revolution through the fin de siècle. We will consider fanaticism’s place in the contest of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces, in the Victorian “crisis of faith,” in debates over the rights of women, and in the imperialist project and its ideological justifications. Focusing on the ways novelists have used literary character to explore different aspects of fanaticism, we will explore the place of conviction, transcendence, and the will in the ordinary, everyday world of the realist novel. The course will conclude with a meditation on the relevance of the concept of the fanatic to our own “post-secular” historical moment.

LEARNING GOALS

By the end of the quarter, students should be able to:
- Understand the concept of fanaticism, its history, and the various political uses to which it has been put across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries;
- Understand how anxieties about fanaticism shape European art and literature in the long nineteenth century;
- Think critically about the relevance of fanaticism to contemporary culture and politics;
- Connect the form and content of literary texts through close reading.

READINGS

Primary texts, available at the Stanford bookstore:


[NB: Please try to get these editions, so we’re all on the same page!]

Supplementary texts, available on Canvas:

1. Edmund Burke, selections from *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)
2. Dominique Colas, selections from *Civil Society and Fanaticism: Conjoined Histories* (1997)
4. Sidney Hinde, selections from *The Fall of the Congo Arabs* (1897)
5. Eliza Lynn Linton, essays from “The Wild Women” series (1891)
7. William Carus Wilson, selections from *The Children’s Friend* (1824)

[NB: Most selections will be very short—no more than a few pages!]

FORMAT AND ASSESSMENT

This is a remote-learning class, consisting of four basic components in addition to the assigned readings:

1. **Online lectures.** Each week, I will upload a pre-recorded lecture to Canvas, for you to watch and take notes on in your own time.

2. **Zoom discussion groups.** There will then be an opportunity to discuss both the contents of these lectures and the assigned readings in a weekly Zoom meeting, which will take place on Mondays from 3:00 PM to 4:00 PM PST.

3. **Response posts.** Each week, starting in Week 2, students will write a short response to the assigned reading based on prompts from the instructor. These responses will consist of three parts:
   a. Written response to the weekly prompt (1-2 paragraphs)
   b. Key passage (1 short passage from the weekly reading that you feel is interesting to discuss in relation to your response)
   c. Discussion question (1 question about the weekly reading that you would like to discuss with your classmates)

   Responses must be posted to the “ Discussions” forum on Canvas by 5:00 PM PST on Sunday night.

4. **Virtual office hours.** Each week, I will hold office hours via Zoom, on Wednesdays from 3:00 PM to 4:30 PM PST. This time will be dedicated to one-on-one conversations with me, and will provide an opportunity for you to raise any lingering questions you have about the lectures or readings, to bounce ideas around, or simply to chat about your literary interests!

Grading for the spring quarter is on a “S/NC” basis. An “S” is equivalent to a grade of C- or better. Your grade for the course will be determined according to the following breakdown:

- Participation — 50%
- Response posts — 50%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Readings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Toscano, <em>Fanaticism</em> &amp; Colas, <em>Civil Society</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 2</td>
<td>Burke, <em>Reflections</em> &amp; Smith, <em>Desmond</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Smith, <em>Desmond</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Smith, <em>Desmond</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Brontë, <em>Jane Eyre</em> &amp; Wilson, <em>Children’s Friend</em></td>
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<td>Week 6</td>
<td>Brontë, <em>Jane Eyre</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 8</td>
<td>Gissing, <em>Odd Women</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 9</td>
<td>Hinde, <em>Fall of the Congo Arabs</em> &amp; Conrad, <em>Heart of Darkness</em></td>
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<td>Week 10</td>
<td>Conrad, <em>Heart of Darkness</em></td>
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