Historicism, Medievalism, Modernity

This course investigates how practices of historicism and periodization have shaped the interpretation of the texts and artifacts created between, say, 400 C.E. and 1500 C.E. – and, reciprocally, how the medieval period has been integral to defining modernity and conceiving historical alterity.

Historicism – an interpretive stance that insists on the prime importance of historical context to understanding texts and artifacts of all kinds – grew in prominence from the late-eighteenth century through the nineteenth and remains crucial to scholarship in the humanities. We’ll seek to understand what historicism is, what philosophies of history underlie it, how it’s been contended over, what its stakes are, what its alternatives are, and how it redounds on medieval texts and artifacts specifically.

Periodization is the interpretive process of dividing historical time into distinct intervals, contrasted to one another. Periodization involves the selection of criteria (what factors should determine the cutting of time’s continuum? or the stabilization of some span as a ‘period’?) and the arbitration between quantitative and qualitative change (when is variation sufficient to constitute a new era?). These are acts of judgment informed both by past events and their significance to later perspectives. Modernity itself is a creation of periodization, often set against the Middle Ages. We’ll examine modern characterizations of the Middle Ages, efforts to articulate distinctions between medieval and modern, and critiques of these periodizing practices. Finally, “medievalism” refers simultaneously to academic study of the Middle Ages and to practices of anachronism, amateurism, and historical imagination. The interplay of these two poles of medievalism will also be interest to the class. Thus, topics include philosophy of history, secularization, rationality, validity in historical interpretation, hermeneutics, the historicity of the aesthetic, the institutionalization of literary study, and the multiple temporalities of artifacts and experience.
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Texts
The texts for the class will be available as pdfs, either electronically through the library catalogue (designated LIB on the reading schedule) or on the course’s Canvas site, accessible to everyone enrolled at canvas.uchicago.edu.

Assignments
35% Engaged participation
15% abstract + flash presentation (due Tuesday, 1/31, in class)
15% book review (due Sunday, 2/12, by email)
35% Final paper (book review essay [c.6000 words] or conference paper [c.4000 words]) (due Sunday, March 19, by email)

If you are a Ph.D. student wishing to write a “substantial paper” for the final assignment, you’ll need EITHER to write a 20+page research paper taking up the prompt that others are addressing with conference papers, OR write a longer book-review essay [c.8000 words], which resultingly includes more of your own framing and analysis and proportionally less summary of the titles reviewed.

Engaged participation:
Unlike other advanced courses I’ve taught, the emphasis of this class falls not on close reading and literary interpretation, but rather on familiarizing ourselves with a broad and sophisticated set of methodological conversations. Accordingly, the lion’s share of work outside of class will be READING, rather than on writing. The primary scene of your accountability for this reading is class discussion.

Before a given class, I will assign each reading selection to a different person, each of whom will be “point person” for this text. This is not a big deal – you don’t need to prepare a handout or presentation – but you do need to read your text extra-thoroughly and come to class ready to facilitate discussion on it, for instance, to help the class figure out what its main ideas are or direct us to a particularly rich and important passage for analysis and discussion.

If you haven’t been assigned a text for the week, please come to every class having selected one passage from the readings that you find particularly worthy of discussion. You should be ready to frame the significance of your passage, read it aloud (so it shouldn’t be too long), and facilitate discussion about it. I’ll ask at the beginning of class who chose what texts.

Attendance and informed participation are expected for every class.

In the event that you find it unavoidable to miss a class, please complete an annotated bibliography for the day’s readings (i.e., an entry for each of the week’s required texts). An annotation should summarize the argument (or the most important parts of the argument) of the text under consideration. You may also include discussion of the evidence marshalled, how it relates to other texts, and your own evaluation of the text’s significance. Depending on the length and complexity of the text, annotations should be between three and seven sentences. Please turn in your bibliography within two weeks of the missed class.

I am committed to making our class an environment where we all feel welcome to speak, respond, and share ideas – an environment that I’ve found essential for cultivating collective practices of experimentation, risk, play, and invention. We all come from different intellectual backgrounds,
with different kinds of preparation for our class: please be ready to share your own insights and appreciate the insights of others.

Assignments

Abstract and flash presentation (due in-class on 1/31)
This assignment asks you to write a conference abstract of no more than 300 words in response to the following “call for papers”:

“Multi-temporal Objects: Medieval/Modern”
This panel seeks papers of 20 minutes that dramatize the multiple temporalities immanent to historical artifacts, particularly their participation in both the Middle Ages and modernity. How is a given text or object (or, perhaps, a given practice or idea) pluraly implicated in history? How does it itself respond to different epochs? What does this artifact’s history suggest about historical understanding? From Victorian Arthuriana to contemporary medieval reenactment, from the manuscript collections of Renaissance humanists to museum displays of Anglo-Saxon treasures, from medievalism in the Confederate South to Chaucer translations of the Global South, medieval artifacts shape their reception across time and are shaped by these contexts in turn. We look forward to proposals that explore the specific constellations of such temporalities.

The expectation is that you will do some research apart from class readings in order to alight on a topic and a preliminary sense of its historical context. I will distribute some guidelines for writing conference abstracts two weeks before the assignment is due. You will also be responsible for an in-class “flash-presentation” on January 31. You’ll speak informally for three minutes (timed) about your abstract, explaining it to the class as clearly and generatively as you can, and then for another three minutes the class will offer suggestions, ideas, provocations, quick queries, etc. You may write about this topic for your final paper if you wish.

Book review (due by email on 2/12)
You will choose one title from bibliography I distribute in Week Three. You will read the book and write a 1,500 word book review, based on models from a major journal in your field. (Please include the pdf of a model book review when you turn in your review to me.) If you wish to review a book not on the list, please check with me first. If you decide to write a book-review essay for your final project, you are welcome to include this book; however, you must also review at least three other titles.

Final paper (due by email on 3/19)
You will EITHER write a conference paper for a twenty-minute oral presentation (about 4000 words) OR a book-review essay (about 6000 words) reviewing at least three titles. The conference paper can be in response to the cfp, above, or it might respond to the central ideas of the class from another angle. It may be the outcome of your abstract but does not have to be. See note above about Ph.D. students wishing to write substantial papers. Later in the quarter I will distribute more detailed guidelines for both assignment options.

SCHEDULE

1/3

Introduction

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+ generating our preliminary historicism archive....

**Recommended**
Erich Auerbach, “Odysseus’ Scar” (3-23) and “Farinata and Cavalcante” (174-202), in *Mimesis* [1946].

1/10

**Historicism**

In *The Hermeneutics Reader*, ed. Kurt Mueller-Vollmer: selections from Wilhelm von Humboldt (98-118) and August Boeckh (132-147)


**Recommended**
Table of Contents, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vols 1 and 2

1/17

**Medieval/Modern I**

Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology* (trans. Schwab), Chapter 3 “Political Theology” (36-52) (LIB)
Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, Introduction (1-19) and Conclusion and Epilogue (191-207).
Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (trans. Wallace), Part I Chapters 1, 2, 4, 6, and 9 (1-26, 37-51, 63-75, and 103-121)

**Recommended**
1/24

**Time and Space**


1/31

**Medieval Literature in the mid-20th Century: The Case of Middle English**

Sharing abstracts followed by….


[http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic915692.files/Patterson%20Negotiating%20the%20Past.pdf](http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic915692.files/Patterson%20Negotiating%20the%20Past.pdf)


[http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic915692.files/Donaldson%20Patristic%20Exegesis%20Case%20for%20the%20Opposition.pdf](http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic915692.files/Donaldson%20Patristic%20Exegesis%20Case%20for%20the%20Opposition.pdf)

E. Talbot Donaldson, “Chaucer the Pilgrim”

[http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/canttales/gp/pilgrim.html](http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/canttales/gp/pilgrim.html)

**Recommended**


D. W. Robertson Jr., “The Subject of the *De Amore* of Andreas Capellanus,” *Modern Philology* 50 (1953): 145-161 (LIB), coupled with excerpts from *De Amore* available at [http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/authors/andreass/de_amore.html](http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/authors/andreass/de_amore.html)

2/7

**New & Newer Historicisms**

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Recommended
Lee Patterson, “Historical Criticism and the Claims of Humanism,” from Negotiating the Past (1987), 41-74.

2/14

Medieval/Modern II

Norbert Elias, selection from The Civilizing Process (1939), pp.xi-xvii and 42-67 and notes (pp.242-246).


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**Recommended**


**Queer Temporalities & Erotic Historiography**

Elizabeth Freeman, Preface and Introduction from *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (2010), ix-xxiv and 1-19 and notes (177-181).


**Recommended**

Carolyn Dinshaw, Introduction from *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (1999), 1-54 and notes (207-235).


**Mysticism I**

Caroline Walker Bynum, Introduction and Chap. 5 (“Food in the Writings of Women Mystics”) from *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Univ. of California Press, 1987), 1-9 (notes 307-311) and 150-186 (notes 366-384).


Michel de Certeau, “Mystic Speech,” in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), 80-100 (notes 244-249).


**Mysticism II**

Excerpts from *The Book of Margery Kempe* (c.1440), proem and Book I, chaps. 1-29 and 86-89 (modern English translation).
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**Final paper** is due to me by email on Sunday, March 19.**