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English 3210: British Literature to 1750

Texts:

Norton Anthology of English Literature, vols. 1A-C
ISBN 0-393-97565-7, 0-393-97566-5, 0-393-97567-3

Aims and Organization:

This course surveys the enduring themes and motifs of the early Anglo-American literary tradition along with the changes they undergo as the modern age approaches. God, monsters, villains, heroes, miracles, love, women, marriage, death, and politics never disappear, but all are transformed as we approach a more scientific and less credulous age. As we will see, these changes have many sources, but the chief watershed is produced by the Protestant Reformation and the contemporaneous age of exploration that so vastly expanded England's horizons and ambitions. The Reformation will be our main touchstone because it fundamentally reorients religion and culture just as England begins expanding into the Americas and beyond. Here as across northern Europe, the Reformation encouraged a new kind of non-chivalric or "knightly" individualism by displacing the responsibility for human salvation from institutions on to a "priesthood of all believers." In one sense this transfer was liberating, but it also intensified inner anxieties about individual identity, responsibility, and the attainment of human and divine love. Other changes were political and economic, as the nation as a whole had to deal with the breakdown of institutional privilege and the divine right theory of church and state. In their place, new and more empirical or objective theories of social and marriage contract and inalienable human rights sprang up. We will explore the general effects of this evolution by starting with several important medieval poets, including Chaucer, proceeding to Arthurian tales and then to Renaissance poets from Shakespeare and Donne through Milton, before ending with the famous 18th century poet, Alexander Pope, whose "mock" epic intriguingly inverts Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Assignments and Written Work:

Each student must come prepared with at least one question or search word based on a passage from the day's assigned reading. A formal reading quiz will also be given at the end of each week. This work will constitute 20% of the student's grade. A midterm exam and a relatively short, 4-5 page formal essay on one of the early texts will constitute another 20% each, as will the final exam and an 8-10 page term paper. In all borderline grades, the final paper will be the deciding factor along with strong class participation.

Attendance Policy: After more than 3 unexcused absences, the student will receive an automatic "F" in the course. Excused absences include documented illnesses and medical emergencies (*NOT appointments*, which should never be scheduled during class), work related trips or conferences, child care emergencies (but no more than one or two), funeral services, and all required university activities (sports, band, etc.).