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LIT 246L.01: Themes: Medieval Frame Narratives

Ashby Kinch

University of Montana - Missoula

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LIT 246L: “Tales of Best Sentence and Most Solace”: Medieval Frame Narratives

TTh 9:30-10:50; LA 308

Dr. Ashby Kinch LA 221; E-mail: ashby.kinch@umontana.edu

Office Hours: T Th 2-3; W 9-10

TA: Rachel Smith: LA 229; E-mail: rachel2.smith@umconnect.umt.edu

Office Hours: M 11-12; W 2-3

Course Description:

When humans gather together in groups, they like to tell stories, a ritual social activity no doubt as old as *Homo sapiens*, re-invented with every generation. This class will explore the late medieval vogue for frame narratives: storytelling collections with a dramatic frame that foregrounds the social interactions that form when we tell each other stories. From the *brigata* in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (10 Florentine youths escaping the plague), to the “compaignye” that forms around storytelling during a pilgrimage in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, these social groups forge bonds, but also develop disputes, in and through the stories they tell to fill the time. Christine de Pizan’s pathbreaking *Book of the City of Ladies*, meanwhile, suggests the need for women to build their own cultural edifice of stories, less for pleasure and more for self-preservation, self-fulfillment, and virtuous enterprise. Selections of these three medieval masterpieces (in modern English translations; see below) will form the core of the semester’s reading.

Students in this course will be encouraged to think about the range of interpretive responses stimulated by these storytelling collections, conducting close readings of individual stories as well as identifying thematic patterns across the stories. What is the value of the competitive instinct stimulated by storytelling competition, and what dangers does it pose to group identity? What is the proper balance between “meaning” and “pleasure” in a story, which Harry Bailey, Chaucer’s Host, describes as an ideal balance of “best sentence and most solaa”? We will think about these questions within the social and intellectual contexts embedded in the texts, reflecting on the way stories serve as vehicles for ethical debate about contentious cultural matters, ranging from debates over right conduct and ethics, to theology, sexuality, and the shifting class structure of the late medieval societies depicted (Florence, London, Paris). We will find that many of these concepts and debates are directly relevant to the way we live in 21st century America.

Required Texts (THESE SPECIFIC EDITIONS, on order at UM Bookstore):

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron* (Norton Critical Edition). Tr. Wayne Rebhorn. W.W. Norton, 2015.

Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales: A New Verse Translation*. Tr. Sheila Fisher. W.W. Norton, 2012.

de Pizan, Christine. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Tr. Rosalind Brown-Grant. Penguin, 2000.

Course Requirements (described in separate document on Moodle)

Class Participation: 20% (including attendance, discussion, reading quizzes)

Moodle Position Papers: 20% (posted online every other week)

Synthesis Paper: 15% (4-6 pp)

Critical Essay on Gender / Voice: 15% (4-6 pp)

Final Research Paper: 30% (6-8 pp)

Class Attendance

You may miss class three times with no immediate impact on your grade, and you need not provide a reason for doing so. After the third absence, however, each subsequent absence will lower your class participation grade 1 step (A to A-) *regardless of the reason*, except extremely unusual circumstances (death in the family, demonstrable physical illness, etc). So beware: if you sleep through a couple of classes, you are using up your reserve of sympathy for when you may really need to be away from class. If you are required to miss class for a University commitment, you are obliged to let me know that well enough in advance so that you can make up the work missed.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism—representing another person’s intellectual work as your own—is an affront to the fundamental values of an academic institution, indicating a lack of respect for intellectual labor and a lack of responsibility for each student’s part in sustaining academic community. Acknowledge, by citation of name, title, and page number, all work that has influenced your thinking, including all work that you cite in whole or in part. The University’s official warning on plagiarism is spelled out in the University Student Conduct Code (Academic Conduct), available on the web:

<http://www.umt.edu/vpesa/Dean%20of%20Students/default.php>

Disability Accommodation

If you are a student with a disability who will require reasonable program modifications in this course, please meet with Disability Services for Students in Lommasson 154 for assistance in developing a plan to address program modifications. If you are already working with Disability Services, please arrange to meet with me during my office hours to discuss reasonable modifications that may be necessary. For more information, visit the Disability Services website linked here:

<https://www.umt.edu/dss/Students/default.php>

Add-Drop Deadlines and Incompletes

For information on these topics, please see the Academic Policies section of the current catalog: <https://www.umt.edu/registrar/calendar.php>

TRIGGER WARNING: VIOLENT CONTENT / REPRESENTATIONS OF RAPE

As a professor with 20 years of college-level teaching experience, I am of mixed minds about the trend toward issuing trigger warnings on our syllabuses (*grammatical trigger warning*: I occasionally use the “proper” plural of Greek nouns rather than Latinized plurals like “syllabi”). I am, however, painfully aware of the impact that a personal

history of violence, sexual assault, and rape can have on an individual's life, including a lingering sense of vulnerability, self-doubt, and anxiety. These are very serious issues and our culture has a mixed history, at best, in the way it has engaged with victims. Sexual assault on university campuses is obviously a matter of grave concern, and changes in strategies of prevention (educating men, most importantly), as well as in handling cases, have been made both here at UM and in many universities.

While there's always work to do, we have made progress, and I would argue not in small part due to the opening of spaces in classrooms to discuss issues that had previously been ignored or repressed. University culture functions most powerfully when it tackles difficult issues head on, utilizing the fullest range of our intellectual tools. As a scholar of Chaucer, I have had the responsibility to teach texts like "The Reeve's Tale" and "The Wife of Bath's Tale," both of which feature rape scenes, and I take that responsibility quite seriously. I have had students who have used such discussions as ways of working through their own experiences and I have had students who preferred not to participate in such discussions. But I have also had dozens of students, both male and female, who have experienced tremendous personal growth through those discussions and I include myself in that category.

So, full disclosure: rape and sexual violence, including forcible detention without consent, feature prominently in several texts we will read this semester. While classroom discussion will not center in all cases on those incidents, some direct discussion will take place about the problem of sexual violence in medieval culture, and that will usually be indicated directly by the incident in the text. Students may on a case-by-case basis choose not to attend class, or to leave class, when the discussion makes them uncomfortable or makes them fear that they may re-experience a traumatic event. I ask only that you write me a brief note to that effect so that I am aware and can help you in the best way possible. No details are necessary, but you should feel free to speak with me in office hours about the issues we discuss in class.

SANCTITY OF THE CLASSROOM

For me, the classroom is a sanctified space, if not quite sacred.

We come together to engage in a ritual at least 2500 years old of asking each other tough and important questions, often mediated through a text that, for various reasons, has survived the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune to continue speaking to us. This ritual works—has worked historically, continues to work, and will keep working—as long as the people who carry it out believe that they have deep and important truths to seek out in intelligent conversation with one another.

This is not an online forum or chat board. We can be casual, we can be silly, but we must always remember that we are addressing one another human to human: please respect each other, and respect the sanctity of the classroom. If you are uncomfortable with the topics presented in the texts, or comments made by students, please contact me so we can work out what is at stake. Often, such discussions are the most important places where real learning can take place for all involved, including me.

Reading, Ethics, Responsibility

“And then those sweet words will be not only admirable, but also lovable, when they start to be heard and known, if only we are willing towards them. If they are not loved, they cannot be understood, and they are not loved if they are not tasted. What then? By what means have we heard the words if we do not understand; or how do we understand if we do not love? I for my part answer this: even if I do not trust my love, I do not depart from admiration. Maybe by that very admiration I will wake up to knowledge; and if I am less roused to knowledge, I shall be stimulated to love. And in the meantime that love will be my refreshment, until from it will come forth contemplation, by which may come illumination.”

--Hugh of St. Victor (12th c), *In Hierarchiam coelestem*. VI
(PL 175, col. 1036AB)

"You must read, you must persevere, you must sit up nights, you must inquire and exert the utmost power of your mind. If one way does not lead to the desired meaning, take another; until, if your strength holds out, you will find that clear which at first looked dark."

--Giovanni Boccaccio, "On Poetry"

"The custom among the ancients-
as Priscian testifies—
was to speak quite obscurely
in the books they wrote,
so that those who were to come after
and study them might gloss the letter
and supply its significance from their own wisdom.
Philosophers knew this,
They understood among themselves
That the more time they spent,
The more subtle their minds would become
And the better they would know how to keep themselves
From whatever was to be avoided.
He who would guard himself from vice
Should study and understand
And begin a weighty work
By which he might keep vice at a distance
And free himself from great sorrow."

--Marie de France, "Prologue," Lais

I wok, and othere bokes tok me to,
To rede upon, and yit I rede alwey.
I hope, ywis, to rede so som day
That I shal mete som thyng for to fare
The bet, and thus to rede I nyl nat spare."

--Chaucer, Parliament of Fowls, 693-699

Lectio transit in mores. (reading turns into action)

--Erasmus (Humanist Slogan)

Reading Schedule: subject to revision (new versions will be posted on Moodle)

PART I: Ideas of Order, Disorder, and Change

Week I (Jan 23, 25): A Tale of Three Cities (Florence, Paris, London)

T: Introductions; discussion of course themes; basic biography

Th: Boccaccio, Intro, pp. xv-xxix; Decameron, Prol, Intro; Day 1, Stories 1-3 (3-33)

Week II (Jan 30, Feb 1): Transformation, Appetite, and Nature

Group A Position Paper due on Moodle by 5 p.m.

T: Intro, pp. xxx-xxxix; Concl. to Day 1; Day II. 2, 4, 5, 7, 10 (42-89)

Th: Intro, pp. xl-xlvi; Day III. 1, 2, 8, 10 (89-116), Day IV Prologue (116-121)

Week III (Feb 6, 8): Pilgrimage, Group-Building and Social Satire

Group B Position Paper due on Moodle by 5 p.m.

T: Geoffrey Chaucer, The Canterbury Tales, “General Prologue”

Th: Geoffrey Chaucer, “Gen Prol”; “The Knight’s Tale” (Parts 1-2, 61-121)

Week IV (Feb 13, 15): The Politics of Storytelling, “Quytting”

Group A Position Paper due on Moodle by 5 p.m. [Synthetic Paper Draft]

T: Finish “The Knight’s Tale” (121-193)

Th: “The Miller’s Tale”

Week V (Feb 20, 22): The Responsive Story: The Cradle Trick

Group B Position Paper due on Moodle by 5 p.m. [Synthetic Paper Draft]

T: “The Reeve’s Tale,” “The Cook’s Tale”;

Th: *Decameron* 9.6

PART II: Gender, Voice, Authority, and Marriage

Week VI (Feb 27, Mar 1): Building a City of Ladies

Final Synthetic Essay Due on Moodle Monday by 5 p.m.

T: Intro to Christine, *Book of the City of Ladies*: xvi-xxxv, 1-35

Th: Christine, *Book of the City of Ladies*, 35-46 (Amazons), 57-69 (women of learning), 78-87 (women of judgment)

Week VII (Mar 6, 8): Rectitude and Justice: Female Models for Universal Ethics

Group A Position Paper due on Moodle by 5 p.m.

T: Excerpts from Part II (Rectitude): Christine, *City of Ladies*: 91-95 (Sibyls), 101-103 (daughters), 108-110 (marriage), 117-120 (wives of wise men), 126-34 (OT wives), 134-36 (Sabine women), 147-9 (Lucretia), 195-98 (end of Part II)

Th: Excerpts from Part III (Justice): Christine, *City of Ladies*: 201-08, 234-240

Week VIII (Mar 13, 15): Re-Reading Patriarchy: The Wife of Bath

Group B Position Paper due on Moodle by 5 p.m.

T: “Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale”

Th: “Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale”

Week IX (Mar 20, 22): Chaucer’s Marriage Debate

T: “The Clerk’s Prologue and Tale”

Th: “The Merchant’s Prologue and Tale”

Week X: SPRING BREAK: March 26-30

Week XI (Apr 3, 5): The Business of Love: Generosity, Exchange, and “Freedom”

T: “The Franklin’s Prologue and Tale”; *Decameron* 10.5 (Handout)

Group A/B: Draft of Gender Paper due as Position Paper #4 by 5

Th: “The Shipman’s Tale” (Handout); *Decameron* 8.1, 8.2, 8.10 (Handout)

Week XII (Apr 10, 12): The Business of Love: Tragedy, Comedy, and Devotion

T: *Decameron* Day 4 (Tragedy): 1, 2, 5, 9, 10 (121-142); Christine’s versions of the tragedies in *City of Ladies*: Ghuismonda (178-84), Lisbetta (184-86), Bernabo’s Wife (163-68)

Final Gender paper due on Moodle by 5 p.m.

Th: *Decameron*, Day 5 (Misfortune to Happiness): Stories 1, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10 (142-175)

PART III: Re-Writing, Re-Framing, Re-Thinking Stories

Week XIII (Apr 17, 19): Narrative Self-(Re)-Invention

Research Prospectus Due on Moodle as Position Paper #5

T: “The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale”

Th: “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale”

Week XIV (Apr 24, 26): The Cruel Logic of Generosity

T: *Decameron* Day 10: 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10 (297-345)

Th: Petrarch’s version of the Griselda story (355-58); Chaucer’s version: “The Clerk’s Tale”; Christine de Pizan’s version, Book II.50 (156-61)

Annotations on Critical Sources Due on Moodle Friday by 5

Week XV (May 1, 3): Serious Comedy

T: Quips, Cleverness and Calandrino Tales: *Decameron*, Day 6, Stories 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 10 (175-196); Day 7, Story 9 (224-230); Day 8, Stories 3 (231-238), 6 (241-236); Day 9, Stories 2, 3, 5 (275-288)

Th: Writing Workshops; Conclusions, Course Evaluations,

Final Paper Due: May 9th by 9 a.m. at Final