Course Proposal for the First-Year Seminar

Name: Joanna Drell

Department: History

Availability (Fall and/or Spring Term; one or two sections): Fall 2010, Spring 2011

Approval of Department Chair:

Title: Telling the Past: Epics, Legends and History

Description of Course Content/Theme:

What do fantastical stories of heroes and lovers, travelers and monsters tell us about Antiquity and the Middle Ages? This seminar challenges students to consider the meanings of ‘history’, ‘fact’, ‘fiction’, ‘literature’ when using such texts as Virgil's *Aeneid* (30-19 B.C.), *Beowulf* (ca. 8th c. A.D.), *The Song of Roland* (ca. 12th c.), the lays of Marie de France (ca. late 12th/early 13th c.), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 14th c), Dante’s *Inferno* (ca. early 14th c), and Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini’s *The Two Lovers* (15th c). A central question will be how historians can use narratives to understand the cultures we study.

Briefly describe how the course will seek to achieve the five goals of the First Year Experience:

1. Expand students’ understanding of the world (e.g. state how the course will challenge students either to think about important questions and issues they may not have thought about before, or think about them in ways they have not thought about them).

This course introduces students to the power of imagination to shape the past and the present, and asks them to consider how their understanding of the past has been and is being constructed. Such analysis is based in the traditions of interpretation and reasoning at the heart of the liberal arts education.

2. Enhance their ability to read and think critically (e.g. a preliminary list of books and articles for the course and exercises or pedagogical methods that will be used to improve critical reading and thinking).

This heterogeneous collection of texts compels students to excavate text for fact and meaning. Texts will include the following:

Virgil’s *Aeneid*, (books i-vi, 30-19 B.C.)

*Beowulf* (ca. 8th c.)

*The Song of Roland* (ca. 12th c.)

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 14th c)

Lays of Marie de France (selections, including 'Eliduc' and 'Les deux amanz', ca. late 12th/early 13th c.)

Dante’s *Inferno* (ca. early 14th c)
Aneneas Silvius Piccolomini’s *The Two Lovers* (15th c)
[Barbara Rosenwein, *A Short History of the Middle Ages*—students will be asked to purchase this text to provide basic historical background as needed.]

3. Enhance students’ ability to communicate effectively in writing, speech, and other appropriate forms (e.g. describe the type and number of writing assignments students will complete, the opportunities students will have to develop their writing skills, the kinds of questions they will address, the ways in which they will be asked to communicate their ideas, and the type of feedback students will receive).

Students will have three to four writing assignments during the course of the semester. One may be primarily bibliographic or descriptive, while the others will be more analytical; at least one will also incorporate library research. One assignment will also require students to present their findings in an oral presentation to the class. Students will have the opportunity to revise drafts, working with a writing consultant, and one-on-one editorial sessions with me.

4. Develop fundamentals of information fluency and library research. Make time on your syllabus for students to complete the required library workshop outside of class and at least one additional library-related assignment for the class. Indicate any additional ways in which students will make use of library resources.

Students will use library resources to identify and examine modern scholarship/secondary works that incorporate some of the assigned texts. I may also ask students to find other primary texts that complement or are similar to some of those assigned in the course. For example, students might be asked to hunt down and compare other accounts of King Arthur’s court with *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, or compare Alberti’s account of the Guelf/Ghibelline dispute with Dante’s.

5. Provide the opportunity for students to work closely with a faculty mentor (e.g. Indicate specific efforts you will make to interact with each student, learn more about each student’s interests and abilities, and provide appropriate guidance for their intellectual growth.)

This will largely be a discussion-based course with some periodic lectures to provide context as needed. In a small class, opportunities for students to work closely with a faculty mentor arise naturally. I will build in further opportunities, including a required one-on-one research meeting, opportunities to meet to discuss paper drafts, and regular office hours.

**Briefly state your background for teaching this class:**

I am a historian of medieval Europe with specialties in medieval and renaissance Italy, medieval literature and society. I teach courses on medieval history, the medieval family and women, the Crusades, medieval Italy and the Renaissance. I have authored/co-edited two books on medieval Italy that incorporate primary sources of diverse genre, including law codes, poetry, literature, sermons, narrative chronicles, charters. Most recently I was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to study the works of Dante Alighieri.