Penning the Self(ie):
Writing the Human Condition

The man-made tools, instruments, machines, organizational systems, and processes that constitute technology are also often associated with the notion of progress. Although technologies can range drastically from the horse-drawn carriage to quantum computing, reactions to technological advance remain mixed. The concept of writing as a ‘technology’ may seem far removed from our collective conscience, but it constitutes one of the most influential technological advances in recent human history. This course examines some of the key moments in writing’s history, with a focus on medieval texts in particular, and the transition from orality to literacy, in order to understand writing’s role in shaping the literary subject in the West. This question is especially urgent now as writing and information technology progresses at a rapid pace, producing anxieties about its effects on the human condition.

We will begin by tracing the shift from an oral tradition to a predominantly literary one, with particular focus on texts from the high middle ages when writing as a technology flourished in the West. We will look at writing's spread outside the realm of the Church through the birth of courtly literature and romance, which allowed subjects considered appropriate for recording to extend beyond the theological, legal, and philosophical domains into the more cultural, fictional, even fantastical. From there, we will examine two significant moments in writing’s history: the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, and the ‘rights of the author’ in the eighteenth. Finally, we will turn to the digital revolution of the present to ask the following questions: In the days of textspeak, hashtags, and tweets, when cursive is being dropped from school curricula, are we witnessing the death of writing? Or of the fixity of language? How are our faculties affected (memory, expression, communication) by it and what do we gain/lose? Is digital data the next step in our progressive quest to immortalize the word, moving yet further away from the ethereal oral tradition? How can our understanding of writing as a technology, and its role in shaping the literary subject, inform our relationship to the ever-changing technologies of the present?

Classes will be in seminar format, and active participation is encouraged. In addition to the required texts, all readings will be provided in a student coursepack, which will be available for purchase or in digital format. Students should prepare the readings listed for each week before arriving in class and should bring the readings to each meeting.

Required texts:
ASSIGNMENTS

Weekly Response Papers (20%) - Each week, students will turn in a 1-2 page response paper on a question posted to NYU Classes. Students should use the readings and class discussions to inform their responses. There will be ten response papers in all, and they will be evenly weighted.

Research Workshops (10%) - There will be two in-class research workshops where we will discuss research as a method of inquiry, how to approach a research project, and how to cite sources. During the first research workshop, students will choose one of the primary texts from the first half of the semester as the subject of a short research paper. At the end of the workshop, students will turn in a short thesis statement with a bibliography of five potential sources. At the end of the second workshop, students will turn in a revised thesis statement, at least 4 passages that they will cite to support their argument, and a revised bibliography.

Short Research Paper (10%) - At the end of the semester, each student will turn in a 5-7 page research paper on a work of her/his choice. In addition to the in-class research workshops, students are encouraged to schedule individual meetings with the professor outside of class to work on their draft and to assess their progress.

Evolution of a Hero Project (50%) - Throughout the semester, students will work in groups to tell the story of a hero/heroine of their own creation. The project will begin with recorded group performances, where students introduce their hero to the class in an interactive oral performance (3-4 minutes) that mimics the oral tradition (10%). In week 9, students will turn in individual hand-written versions of their hero’s tale (3-5 pages), inspired by the romance tradition and courtly literature (15%). In the final week, the groups will reconvene to present their hero’s personal Facebook or Tumblr page, which will situate the hero in the 21st century, giving the hero a social media presence that traces the evolution of her/his story (20%). Each student will turn in a final reflection paper (2-3 pages) that traces her/his own experience and relationship to the hero and story in its various iterations.

Participation (10%) - Students are encouraged to actively participate in the class discussions. Attendance and preparation will also factor into the participation grade.
Class Visit to the Morgan Library and Museum (optional) - Students are strongly encouraged to attend a group visit and tour of the Morgan Library to see the Medieval and Renaissance Manuscript collection. Time and date TBD.

PART I
ORALITY TO LITERACY

Week 1: Course Introduction / Origins of Writing
- Discussion of a scene from Yvain (Chrétien de Troyes); pp. 362-363 [text provided in class]
- Derrida, Jacques. Of Grammatology, pp. 10-18 [text provided in class]
- Plato. Phaedrus, pp. 79-82 [text provided in class]
- “Writing is a technology” (Ong, Walter J.: Orality and Literacy, The Technologizing of the Word); pp. 80-81 [text provided in class]

Week 2: History of Writing - Antiquity to the Middle Ages
- Stock, Brian: The Implications of Literacy pp. 12-29

Week 3: The Oral Tradition
- Beowulf pp. 1-84.

Week 4: The Oral Tradition (continued)
- Marie de France: Fresne pp. 1-14
- Martin, Henri-Jean. pp. 116-181
- Clanchy: From Memory to Written Record. “The Spoken versus the Written Word,” pp. 260-266; “Listening to the Word,” pp. 266-272
- ORAL ASSIGNMENT DUE: In-class performance and recordings of your hero’s tale, recounted in the oral tradition.

Week 5: Writing and Law
- Marie de France: Lanval pp. 1-17
- Excerpt: The Song of Roland. Pp. 61-111
- Millinger, Susan P. “Epic Values: The Song of Roland,” in *The Middle Ages in Texts and Texture: Reflections on Medieval Sources* pp. 141-152

**PART II**

**THE BIRTH OF THE LITERARY SUBJECT: WRITING'S DESTRUCTIVE AND (PRO)CREATIVE POWERS**

**Week 6: Writing in the University**
- Peter Abelard: *Historia Calamitatum* in *The Letters of Abelard and Héloïse*,
- Mann, Jill. “‘He Knew Nat Catoun’: Medieval School-Texts and Middle English Literature” in *The Text in the Community: Essays on Medieval Works, Manuscripts, Authors, and Readers*. pp. 41-74

**Week 7: Writing and Memory**
- Marie de France: *Laüstic*
- Carruthers, Mary J.: *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, pp. 274-338
- In-class Research Workshop

**Week 8: Writing the Self - Textual Procreativity**
- Chrétien de Troyes: *Philomena*
- Introduction to *Perceval*
- Dante Aligheri. *De vulgari eloquentia*, pp. 1-11

**Week 9: Writing the Self - The Childbirth Metaphor**
- Marie de France: *Fresne*
- Curtius, Ernst. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. pp. 128-144
- **WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT DUE:** Your hero’s tale, a handwritten account in the romance tradition.

**Week 10: Writing the Self - The Literary Subject**
- Guillaume de Lorris, *The Romance of the Rose*
- Selection of troubadour poems
- Kay, Sarah. *Subjectivity in Troubadour Poetry*, pp. 171-211

**PART III**

**THE RISE AND FALL OF THE WRITTEN WORD?**

**FROM PRINTING PRESS TO SOCIAL MEDIA**

Week 11: Writing for the Masses - Gutenberg’s Printing Press
- In-class Research Workshop

Week 12: Writing as Intellectual Property
- Excerpts from *Don Quixote*, Diderot, Françoise de Graffigny, Colette

Week 13: The Digital Revolution
- Anderson, M.T. *Feed*. pp. 1-150

Week 14: Virtual Texts and the Death of Writing
- Anderson, M.T. *Feed*, pp. 150-300.
- DIGITAL ASSIGNMENT DUE: Your hero’s tale, a digital social media page that tells her/his story.
- FINAL REFLECTION PAPER DUE

Final exam date: SHORT RESEARCH PAPER DUE.