Fictions of Audacity: Middle English Popular Romance

Course Description
Middle English popular romance is the most audacious and compendious testimony to the imaginary world of the middle ages. With more than 100 extant romances, in verse and prose, it is the principle genre of medieval entertainment, the primary form of secular medieval literature, the origin of the modern novel and the ancestor of almost all contemporary popular fiction. The popular romances treat of subjects like courtship and marriage, domestic violence, political authority, ethical conduct, national identity and religious faith that are germane to daily life and sometimes to the fantasies and anxieties of that life in extremis: nuns are raped, virgins stripped naked, mothers are mutilated by their sons, apes abduct small boys and knights feed with dogs, Christians eat Saracens and so on.

The purpose of this module is to challenge modern scholarship’s disregard for popular romance and to explore the genre’s potential to destabilize any simple assumptions we might have about its cultural ideologies, aesthetic codes, and historical consciousness. We will study popular romance in all of its variety with close attention to its formal properties and in particular to the way in which it constructs a fictional space that makes possible its distinctive audacity. Students will be encouraged to think in ideological terms and with the assistance of a broad range of critical theories drawn from the study of literature as well as other disciplines.

Learning Outcomes:
After successfully completing this course, students should have:
- a good knowledge of Middle English romance and its generic breadth;
- an awareness of the cultural context for the production of romance;
- a historical understanding of romance criticism and its prevailing ideologies

Teaching Programme:
Two-hour, weekly seminars will likely organized around the following broad themes: Mapping Romance; It’s a Man’s World; The Romance Body; The Politics of Eating; Comparative Discourses of Desire; The Legacy of Sir Thopas; Beastly and Filthy Desire.

Preliminary Reading:
The most important preliminary work you can do is to read as many romances as possible. Student friendly texts are online at the TEAMS Middle English Texts website (http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/tmsmenu.htm). We will read at least: Richard Coeur de Lion, Le Bone Florence of Rome, Sir Gowther, King of Tars, Sir Degrevant, Emaré, Amis and Amiloun and, for the first seminar, Octavian, Squyr of Lowe Degree, and Tournament of Tottenham.

Useful places to start for critical reading are:
A. Putter and J. Gilbert (eds), The Spirit of Middle English Popular Romance (2000)