



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

School
Of
English.



**Support Materials:
Renaissance to Revolution
(Literature Core Module)**

Renaissance to Revolution (Literature Core Module)

In your first year, all English Literature students (including Dual Honours students) take 'Renaissance to Revolution'. This module runs over both semesters, and looks at poetry, prose, and drama from circa 1530 to 1790, starting with the Henrician courtier Thomas Wyatt, and ending with Fanny Burney.

This period was a time of great innovation and cultural change. It was when various long-lasting and influential literary forms – the sonnet, the novel – came into being, and when a literary marketplace developed: that is, when books became a readily available commercial product, to be bought, sold, and advertised. Lots of the aspects of books that we now take for granted emerged during this period, not least the idea that a book will aim to appeal to potential readers by a title-page or front cover. During the module, we also explore themes such as gender, race, class, and structures of power; eloquence and education; sexuality and desire; literature and political/religious ideologies; heroism; and satire and the subversion of social norms. In other words, you'll be studying a foundational period of English literature in terms of formal developments, material practices, and the themes and issues it addresses.

A key difference between studying literature at school and university is the amount of material that we ask you to read week-by-week. For your A-Level, over two years, you probably studied about eight texts in detail: at university, you can expect to study eight texts in three or four weeks. This means that you'll be doing a lot of independent study, so – on this module – we spend time honing your close-reading skills, to ensure that you're confident about approaching previously unfamiliar texts.

Sample exercise

Read the following sonnet by William Shakespeare.

	When my love swears that she is made of truth, I do believe her, though I know she lies, That she might think me some untutored youth,	
4	Unlearned in the world's false subtleties. Thus vainly* thinking that she thinks me young, Although she knows my days are past the best, Simply* I credit° her false-speaking tongue;	* ineffectually/foolishly * foolishly ° believe
8	On both sides thus is simple truth suppressed. But wherefore* says she not she is unjust°? And wherefore say not I that I am old°? O love's best habit* is in seeming trust,	* why ° dishonest/incorrect * clothing/regular practice
12	And age* in love loves not to have years told°. Therefore I lie with her, and she with me, And in our faults by lies we flattered* be.	* old people ° counted/revealed *satisfied/deceived

You might also like to listen to two quite different ways of reading the poem: by Simon Russell Beale (<https://tinyurl.com/ulgi7v2>) and Tyron Maynard/Chicken Shop Shakespeare (<https://youtu.be/wn4qXegrHD8>).

- Look at the structure of the sonnet: three quatrains (four-line rhyming units), rhyming ABABDCDEFEF, and a rhyming couplet, GG. How does Shakespeare use the rhyming units to advance the argument of the poem? What is the effect of the rhyming couplet at the end?
- Look at the worksheet on 'Sounds of Poetry'. Are there any poetic features described there which you can spot here (e.g. different kinds of repetition)? What do they add to the poem?
- The sonnet is full of double meanings: 'vainly' can mean both 'ineffectually' and 'foolishly'; 'unjust' can mean both 'dishonest' and 'incorrect'; 'told' can mean both 'counted' and 'revealed'; 'flattered' can mean both 'satisfied' and 'deceived'. There are also a series of *double entendres*, e.g. the puns on 'made', which sounds like 'maid' (i.e. virgin); on 'lie', as in not telling the truth, and 'lie', as in have sex with; and on 'faults', as in sins – in having extramarital sex, then against the ruling of the Church – and failings or weaknesses, because the two lovers don't acknowledge the full truth about each other (that one of them is old, the other unfaithful). What is the effect of all this wordplay? How does it affect the mood of the poem and/or our response to it? (It's worth thinking about puns as a device which establishes a connection with audiences/readers: there's something flattering about being 'clever' enough to spot a pun.)

- The sonnet is a form strongly associated with love poetry. (One of the greatest influences on the development of the sonnet was the fourteenth-century Italian poet Petrarch, who wrote hundreds of sonnets about his unrequited love for the beautiful and virtuous Laura). How is Shakespeare engaging with that literary tradition here? The opening line of the poem talks about the poetic speaker's love: would you describe this as a conventional love poem?
- This sonnet was printed twice in Shakespeare's lifetime.
 - What you've got above is a modernised version of the poem that was included in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, printed in 1609. (Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century spelling and punctuation differed from what we use today; 'modernised' means that spelling and punctuation have been standardised so that they follow how we now write and spell.)
 - The other version of the poem was printed in 1599, in a pamphlet called *The Passionate Pilgrim*. This differs from the 1609 version in a number of ways (the differences are highlighted in bold below).
 - Small changes can make a great difference to the mood, meaning, and impact of a piece of writing. How do the differences below alter Shakespeare's poem?
- The existence of two texts also raises questions about which version has claims to being the more authoritative one – the sort of question raised in the worksheet 'Complicated (and Complicating) Texts'. Is it the earliest version, or the later one, which has been revised? If you were putting together a collection of Shakespeare's poems, or Renaissance sonnets, which would you choose to include in your book?

When my love swears that she is made of truth,
 I do believe her, (though I know she lies,
 That she might think me some untutored youth,
 4 **Unskillful** in the world's false **forgeries**.
 Thus vainly thinking that she thinks me young,
 Although **I know** my **years be** past the best,
I, smiling, I credit her false-speaking tongue;
 8 Outfacing* faults in love, with love's ill rest°. * denying ° the unease felt by someone in love
 But wherefore says **my love that** she is **young**?
 And wherefore say not I that I am old?
 O love's best habit is a soothing tongue. * flattering
 12 And age (in love) loves not to have years told°. * old people ° counted/revealed
 Therefore **I'll** lie with **love**, and **love** with me,
Since that our faults **in love thus smothered** be.

Further reading: other Renaissance sonnets

You might like to try some of the following (all of which we study on the module):

- Sonnets by Thomas Wyatt, who wrote the first English sonnets in the early sixteenth century (many of them adapted from Petrarch);
- Sonnets by Philip Sidney (in a sequence called *Astrophil and Stella*; 'Astrophil' is sometimes spelled 'Astrophel');
- John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*
- Mary Wroth's *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*

Examples of sonnets by all these poets can be found via <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>.

Further reading: critical material

Anthony Hecht, 'The Sonnet: Ruminations on Form, Sex, and History', *The Antioch Review* 55 (1997), 131-47; available via JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4613483>.¹

Further reading: historical background

During the module, we explore how literature is shaped by its historical and cultural contexts. The following resources are recommended, for getting a sense of the period 1500-1800, particularly if it's not one you've studied in school:

- Websites
 - British Library's 'Discover Literature': <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare> (Shakespeare & Renaissance Literature), <https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature> (Restoration & eighteenth-century literature)
- Podcasts
 - *In Our Time*: discussion-based series, exploring literature, history and culture; the back catalogue is free to access from <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qykl/episodes/downloads>
 - Neil MacGregor, *Shakespeare's Restless World*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b017gm45/episodes/downloads>
- Historical fiction/film
 - Hilary Mantel's Cromwell trilogy (*Wolf Hall*, *Bring up the Bodies*, *The Mirror and the Light*)
 - Ian Sansom's 'Shardlake' crime fiction series (sixteenth century)
 - Rose Tremain, *Restoration* (seventeenth century)
 - Andrew Miller, *Ingenious Pain* (eighteenth century)

¹ During the COVID 19 pandemic, JSTOR are making some content available open access, but you can also register for six free online articles per month. A range of access options are available here: <https://about.jstor.org/get-jstor/>

How is this module assessed?

1. A learning journal, comprising short (200-300-word) responses to tasks designed to develop a range of analytical and research skills (e.g. close-reading; using various research databases; reflecting on feedback; locating and integrating secondary reading); worth 10% of the module mark.
2. Three tasks, building on the skills developed in the learning journal (300-400 words each); worth 20% of the module mark.
3. A timed close-reading assessment (90 minutes, taken under exam conditions); worth 30% of the module mark.
4. A final 2,000-word essay, comparing two texts studied on the module; worth 40% of the module mark.

We appreciate that – just as there’s a difference between the type of essays that you are expected to write at GCSE and A-Level – during your first year, you’ll be getting to grips with university-style essays. To help you with this, essay-writing workshops are built in to this core module, and you’ll have plenty of practice at writing and structuring short pieces through the learning journal and portfolio tasks before you reach the longer essay at the end of the module.

The preparation that you do for weekly seminars, and seminar discussion, will also help develop your analytical skills, and your ability to evidence your ideas with reference to both literary texts and the opinions of other critics.

Your seminar tutors are also on-hand to give individual advice, and have twice weekly office hours set aside for this purpose.