MPhil in Eighteenth-Century and Romantic Studies

The Romantic Songbook: Poetics, Metaphysics, Politics

Lent Term, 2020

Overview

When the poetic culture of Romanticism uses ‘song’ as a cognate term for ‘poetry’, is this merely an instance of a whimsical and semantically attenuated ‘poetic diction’? This course will begin with the assumption that there might be more going on. We will attend to the shared generic origins of song and lyric poetry, and the emphasis laid on their kinship in Romantic poetics, and each participant will be encouraged to build their own toolkit of current lyric theory as well as long-eighteenth-century commentary on the significance of song within literary and cultural history. In each session reading and discussion will centre on the ontological status of song in Romanticism: what kind of thing is a song taken to be? what kind of metaphysical charge is it supposed to have? what are the essential components of its making?

The four seminars are structured around a range of different examples of songs, variously heard, notated, collected, adapted, written to be set to original compositions, or described in poetry. The seminars will trace the development, between 1760 and 1840, of accounts and practices that position song between a number of more or less incommensurable states: melody and words; orality and literacy; sound and silence; mind and body; spirit and matter; male and female; the individual and the nation; the human and the animal. We will note the recurrent trope in both late-Enlightenment speculative history and Romantic-period poetics which figures song as the residue of a pre-linguistic moment in human culture or consciousness. Participants will attempt to analyse the verbal and non-verbal effects associated with this conception of song as a negotiation with the ineffable, or with the primitive, marginalised, strange, supernatural, wild, or non-human.

There is a dedicated Moodle site for the course, where participants will be able to access some of the texts for discussion, as well as engage in exchanges of information and opinion. Seminar members will be asked to submit short (500-750 word) observations or provocations, relating to set reading, to the course chatroom in advance of each seminar; responses will then be invited within the seminar. The emphasis in seminar discussions will move between the thematic and conceptual frames identified for each session, and close reading of the poetic features – prosody, rhyme, rhythm, melodic or anti-melodic features of verbal composition – deployed by the texts in question. Those with literacy in musical analysis will be able to make a valuable contribution to discussions, but this is by no means a pre-requisite for those taking the course. Participants are warmly encouraged to share and refer to recordings of the songs under discussion.


Extracts available on Moodle from December 2019:
From *Two Glossaries by Robert Burns*. The glossaries to the Kilmarnock and Edinburgh Poems reproduced in facsimile, with an introduction by Donald A. Low (University of Stirling Bibliographical Society, 1987).


From *The Merry Muses of Caledonia* [erotic / bawdy verse collection]
From Rousseau, *Essay on the Origin of Languages* [see General Reading]
From Roland Barthes, ‘The Grain of the Voice’ [see General Reading]

Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of “Art Music” and “Folk Music”* [see General Reading list]: chapters 2 and 5.
Heather Glen, *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake’s Songs and Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge University Press, 1983)


‘Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century’, University of Glasgow Research Project website, including blog and recordings of songs: https://burnsc21.glasgow.ac.uk/

Seminar 2. Song as Matter and Spirit: Byron, Hebrew Melodies [and Anna-Laetitia Barbauld]


Anna-Laetitia Barbauld [Aikin], introduction to John Aikin, Essays on Song-Writing; with a collection of such English Songs as are most eminent for poetical merit (London: R. H. Evans, 1810).
Anna-Laetitia Barbauld, Hymns in Prose, in McCarthy and Kraft, eds., Selected Poetry and Prose (Broadview, 2001)

Extracts available on Moodle:
Immanuel Kant, Critique of Judgment, §23.245; §43.304
Alexander Pope, from PERI BATHOUS; Or, Martinus Scriblerus His Treatise of the Art of Sinking in Poetry (1728)
Thomas Warton, from History of English Poetry (1781): sections on Sternhold, Hopkins et al., The Whole Booke of Psalmes Collected into English Metre, With Apt Notes to sing them withall.


**Seminar 3. Song and other minds: John Keats and John Clare**

[Individual texts and extracts available on Moodle from December 2019]

[Numerous recordings are available on YouTube of nightingales singing, sometimes for three hours at a stretch!]


Glossary to John Clare, *The Village Minstrel* (1821) [see Google Books].

Margaret Grainger, *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare* (Oxford University Press, 1983)

Extracts from:

Thomas Nagel, ‘What is it Like to Be a Bat?’, *Philosophical Review* 83 (October 1974), 435-50.


Mark Booth, ‘Introduction’ from The Experience of Songs [see General Reading]


Mina Gorji, John Clare and the Place of Poetry (Liverpool University Press, 2009).


Geoffrey Summerfield, Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips, eds., John Clare in Context (Cambridge University Press, 1994) [especially Seamus Heaney’s ‘Bi-centennial Lecture’].

Seminar 4. National Song? Thomas Moore’s Irish Melodies [also Mrs Jordan and Sydney Owenson, Lady Morgan]

Selected Irish Melodies available on Moodle from December 2019, along with Mrs Jordan’s ‘The Blue Bell of Scotland’, and extracts from Lady Morgan’s The Wild Irish Girl and The Lay of an Irish Harp, and from Walter Scott, Waverley.

[Compulsory resource]: website of the Romantic National Song Network https://rnsn.glasgow.ac.uk/, ‘Song Stories’, recordings, and further reading.
General Reading

John Aikin, *Essays on Song-Writing: with a collection of such English Songs as are most eminent for poetical merit* (London: R. H. Evans, 1810).


[See also NUI Galway’s *Ossian Online* project for 1760s and 1770s editions of the poems.]


