RENAISSANCE LYRIC – Dr Gavin Alexander

There has been an exciting surge in writing – theoretical, critical, historical – about lyric poetry in the past decade, but lyric of the European Renaissance has been rather sidelined. Literary scholars specialising in post-Romantic literatures have debated the nature of lyric, and the impact of ideas of what lyric is on the development of literary practice, theory, and history. But they have marginalised the achievements of poets like Petrarch, Wyatt, Ronsard, Sidney, Shakespeare, Wroth, Donne, Herbert, Herrick, and Finch. And they have bypassed the impact on the long history of poetry of early modern ways of thinking about lyric poetry and literary language (a tradition, classical in origin, that can be characterised as ‘rhetorical poetics’). Popular themes in modern lyric criticism (apostrophe and address; voice; lyric’s relation to other genres and modes; deixis; materiality; (im)personality; intertextuality; musicality) begin to look different, and richer, from a perspective centred on earlier lyric. During the course of these seminars we will reassess the nature of Renaissance lyric poetry and theory, and reconsider their significance both to the long history of lyric practice, and to the difficult evolution of its theorisation. Early modern theorists and poets will be explored alongside the classical writers (including Sappho, Plato, Aristotle, and Longinus) on whom they draw. The emphasis is on writing in English, with comparative reference, in translation, to works in Greek, Latin, Italian, and French.

Preliminary bibliography of secondary sources (further reading advice to follow)


Brewster, Scott, Lyric, New Critical Idiom (Routledge, 2009)

Carson, Anne, Eras the Bittersweet (Princeton U.P., 1986)

Culler, Jonathan, ‘Why Lyric?’, PMLA 123.1 (2008), 201-6


Frencero, John, ‘The Fig Tree and the Laurel: Petrarch’s Poetics’, Diacritics 5 (1975), 34-40


Greene, Roland, ‘Sir Philip Sidney’s Psalms, the Sixteenth-Century Psalter, and the Nature of Lyric’, Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, 30 (1990), 19-40


Guerrero, Gustavo, Poétique et poésie lyrique (Paris: Seuil, 2000)


Lindley, David, Lyric, The Critical Idiom (Methuen, 1985)

Miller, Paul Allen, Lyric Texts and Lyric Consciousness: The Birth of a Genre from Archaic Greece to Augustan Rome (Routledge, 1994)


Stewart, Susan, Poetry and the Fate of the Senses (Chicago U.P., 2002)

Thain, Marion (ed.), The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations (C.U.P., 2013)


Class outlines

1 orientation: Sappho, Pindar, Horace, Petrarch, Wyatt, Sidney, Shakespeare, Wroth, Jonson, Donne, Herbert, Finch
practice into theory / theory into practice: ancient, early modern, modern
religious lyric
traditions of secular lyric (Petrarchism, various classicisms)