

Aparna Chaudhuri
Proposed Junior Tutorial
(Spring 2017)

Unreal City?
Imagining the Urban in Medieval and Modern Literature

‘The city is by nature the multitude...Even if it were possible to unify the city, it should not be done, for that would instead undo the city.’

Aristotle

What did the word ‘city’ mean to the people of the Middle Ages? For them, as for us, it meant a place to inhabit, rife with contradictory possibilities of intimacy and alienation, self-expression and self-erasure, contractual coexistence and violent feud. It also meant a way of life; it qualified key concepts, such as home, business/occupation, and religion. Additionally, it could connote an idea – indeed, an ideal – of society (*civitas*) and the person (*cives*), not realized by any existing city, but foundational to ethical and economic thought. What does the city mean to us? In the twenty-first century, many of the same, mutually contradictory things that it meant in the thirteenth or fourteenth: a rationalist utopia and a teeming, disorderly conglomerate of people and structures, a way of life, an identity, and an absence of identity or direction. Medieval and modern concepts of the urban deserve comparison for a statistical reason alone: the scale of urbanization in the Middle Ages was unequalled till the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century drew vast populations of agricultural workers to industrial centers. Although the early modern era saw the unprecedented growth of *capital* cities, such as London and Paris, the roots of our urban experience may be traced to the Middle Ages. Over the course of the semester, we will try to nuance and specify this claim, periodically revisiting the rationale for studying the medieval city in conjunction with the modern.

From a literary perspective, ‘the city’ eludes a single definition, and we will not try to unify the multitude of its possible meanings. Instead, we will examine symbolic and realist constructions of urban space and urban experience across a range of medieval and modern texts. We will construct our own phenomenologies of the city: as a physical space, an entity in time, a community, a lifestyle, an ideal and an affect. As a larger goal, we will test the possibilities and limitations of generic definition: is there such a thing as ‘city literature’ in the Middle Ages? What makes a medieval or modern text distinctively urban?

This course pairs medieval and modern texts in six distinct conceptual units in an effort to illuminate six key aspects of the literary discourse on cities. Each unit has a framing question, which we will use as a point of analytic entry into our texts, but by no means as a terminus! By the end of the semester, you will not only have encountered some of the most complex, bizarre and thought-provoking representations of urban life and space in medieval and modern literature, but be in a position to think

about the category of the urban across time. What changes? What remains constant? What are the deep roots of your own urban experience?

Weekly readings will consist of one or two primary texts and one or two critical essays. Where more than 2 secondary readings have been set, a minimum of 2 must be read. You must write 2 short (1 page) responses over the course of the semester, each on a primary text of your choice. The first response is due by week 3.

The goal of the Junior Tutorial is to prepare students to write their Junior Essay, a developed piece of critical work, 20-25 pages in length. **You must submit this essay in order to receive a grade for the course.** Additionally, a short essay of 5-6 pages will be due in Week 4 of the semester: you may write on any text studied up to that point. The writing of the final Junior Essay will proceed in stages:

- 1) A 2-page prospectus and annotated bibliography of 8-10 items, due in week 6 of the semester.
- 2) A 10-page first draft of the essay, due the week after Spring Break (i.e. week 8 of the semester.)
- 3) 20-25 page full draft, due in week 10.
- 4) Junior Essay, due in Reading Period. Submit one copy to me and one to the department.

Break-up of grades:

Attendance, preparation and active participation: 10%

Short responses: 10%

Short paper: 15%

Prospectus and annotated bibliography: 15%

Drafts (first and full): 15%

Junior Essay: 35%

Please note that the course grade depends on the submission of the Junior Essay. Failure to submit will result in a failing grade overall.

A note about texts:

A course pack containing all short texts, excerpts from longer texts and secondary readings will be made available to you. You are responsible for procuring copies of only the full-length novels on the course list. Middle English texts must be read and quoted in the original, but I will point you to modern translations to consult in case of need!

Syllabus

Unit 1: The city in theory and description

What is a city? And how is that a different question from “what is a city like?” Is thinking the urban more a matter of definition or of description?

Week 1 (antiquity)

- Selections from Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*
- Selections from Aristotle's *Politics*
- Thucydides, description of Athens in *The Peloponnesian War*, 2.41.1-2
- Theocritus, Idyll 15 (two Alexandrian wives walk through the city to attend the festival of Adonis).

Secondary:

- Martin Heidegger, section on 'polis' in *Holderlin's Hymns*.
- Peter Carl, 'Convivimus ergo sumus' in *Phenomenologies of the City: Studies in the History and Philosophy of Architecture*.

Week 2 (medieval and modern)

- William Dunbar, "London, thou art of townes a *per se*"
- Jean de Jandun, *Tractatus de Laudibus Parisius* (excerpts)
- Charles Baudelaire, "The Swan", "Epilogue"
- Walter Benjamin: Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century

Secondary:

- Richard Lehan, "The City and the Text", *The City and Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History*.

Library Visit (Introduction to Research Tools) with Odile Harter in Widener Library. This visit will be conducted outside class hours, at a time when everyone can make it.

Unit 2: The city in heaven and on earth

How do the symbolic values of the city interact with the lived experience of religion in a city?

Week 3 (medieval)

- Selections from Augustine's *De Civitate Dei*
- *St Erkenwald*

Secondary:

- "Ideology and Solidarity in the City of God," in *Augustine's City of God: a critical guide*, ed. James Wetzel.
- Cynthia Turner Camp, "Spatial Memory, Historiographic Fantasy and the Touch of the Past in *St Erkenwald*," *New Literary History* 44.3 (2013): 471-91.

First short response due.

Week 4 (modern)

- Guy Delisle's *Jerusalem: Chronicles of a Holy City*

Secondary: TBD

Short Essay (5-6 pages) due, on any text studied so far.

Unit 3: Urban spaces: the walled and the open city

How is the space of a city created – by its architecture or by the movements of its citizens' bodies? Is a city in literature always a "hypercitey", a physical space overlain by the operations of memory and the possibilities of future action, a place in which we glimpse thick layers of time?

Week 5 (medieval)

- Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, excerpts
Secondary:
- Sylvia Federico, "Late-fourteenth-century London as the New Troy," in *New Troy: Fantasies of Empire in the Late Middle Ages*.
- Barbara Nolan, "Chaucer's Poetics of Dwelling in Troilus and Criseyde," in *Chaucer and the City*, ed. Ardis Butterfield.

Week 6. (modern)

- Teju Cole, *Open City*
Secondary:
- James Wood, "The Arrival of Enigmas: Teju Cole's Prismatic Debut Novel, *Open City*" (review), *New Yorker*, Feb. 28, 2011.
- Pieter Vermeulen, "Flights of Memory: Teju Cole's *Open City* and the Limits of Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism", *Journal of Modern Literature* 37.1 (2013), 40-57.

Reading group: Optional meeting outside class hours to discuss Chapter 1 ("From the City to Urban Society") of Henri Lefebvre's *The Urban Revolution*.

2-page prospectus and annotated bibliography for Junior Essay due (email to me by 5 pm).

Unit 4: Urban experiences: dreaming in the city

How does the city as an experience interact with the city as a thought experiment?

Week 7 (medieval)

- Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame*
Secondary:

- Marion Turner, “Discursive Turbulence: Slander, the House of Fame and the Mercer’s Petition,” in *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth Century London*.
- A.C. Spearing, “The House of Fame,” in *Medieval Dream Poetry*.

Week 8 (modern)

- Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*
- Secondary:
- Kathryn Hume, *Calvino’s Fictions: Cogito and Cosmos* (selected chapters).

10-page first draft of Junior Essay due

Unit 5: Urban experiences: disease and death in the City

Does the city represent a localization of life’s contingencies, or is the city itself experienced as a contingency – as illness, madness, or death?

Week 9 (medieval)

- Thomas Hoccleve, ‘My Compleinte’
- Secondary:
- Matthew Boyd Goldie, “Psychosomatic Illness and Identity in London, 1416–1421: Hoccleve’s Complaint and Dialogue with a Friend,” *Exemplaria* 11.1 (1999): 23-52.
- Amy Appleford, ‘Self-Care and Lay Asceticism: Learn to Die’ in *Learning to Die in London, 1380-1450*.

Week 10 (modern)

- Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*
- Secondary
- Jeremy Tambling, “Repression in Mrs Dalloway’s London”, *Essays in Criticism* 39.2 (1989), 137-155.
- Tamar Katz, “Woolf’s Urban Rhythms”, *A Companion to Virginia Woolf* (ed. Jessica Berman)

Unit 6: City women; women’s cities

Should this unit exist? Why? Or why not?

Week 11 (medieval)

- Christine de Pizan, *Book of the City of Ladies*

Secondary:

- Betsy McCormick, “Building the Ideal City: Female Memorial Praxis in Christine de Pizan’s *Cité de Dames*,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 36.1 (2003)
- Stuart Kane, “Now the First Stone is Set: Christine de Pizan and the Colonial City,” *Comitatus*, 29.1 (1998).

Full Draft of Junior Essay Due

Week 12 (modern)

- Katherine Mansfield, “The Tiredness of Rosabel”
 - Hope Mirrlees, “Paris, A Poem”
 - Virginia Woolf, “Street Haunting”
- Secondary:
- Zoe Skoulding, *Contemporary Women’s Poetry and Urban Space* (selected chapters).

Reading Week: **Junior Essay due (by email).**

Members of this course commit themselves to abiding by the Harvard Honour Code, as given below. You will be required to affirm your awareness of the standards of the Code in each assignment you submit for a grade.

Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.