



COURSE DESCRIPTION

2016 Winter Session (2016-2017 Academic Year)

ENGL 514A-001 - A Pre-History of Literary Hermeneutics: Erasmus, Shakespeare and More Besides - M. Vessey

Studies in the Renaissance Term 2

Like much of the undeconstructed apparatus of literary historiography, criticism and theory, hermeneutics as we know it is essentially a creation of German Romanticism in the early nineteenth century. Until recently—and, in many quarters, still currently—the standard narrative of its invention has been the one supplied by Wilhelm Dilthey in “The Rise of Hermeneutics” (1900) and canonized in a Heideggerian key by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1960). The main casualty of such a view is the rich record of theorizing about the meaning of literary works *before* eighteenth-century Protestantism and *outside* the tradition that can be seen culminating in F.D.E. Schleiermacher (1768-1834). This course seeks to go behind the standard history and establish a basis on which to do hermeneutics in the company of English readers, writers and playgoers of the early modern period, without foreclosing any possibility for dialogue with later theorists of interpretation and of the so-called human sciences.

The initial muster-point for the course will be a work of “Renaissance” literary theory that has been almost entirely overlooked in recent literary scholarship but was catalytic for sixteenth-century thinking about the meaning of complex texts and the role of expert interpreters in society. This work appeared in its earliest version exactly five hundred years ago as an introduction to Erasmus’ controversial and epoch-making edition of the New Testament (1516). An English translation is now about to appear in the University of Toronto Press edition of the Collected Works of Erasmus and will be available to members of the seminar, to be read alongside the same author’s *Praise of Folly* (1511; revised edns. 1514, 1516) and, in the same quincentenary spirit, Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516). Our other primary texts will be Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Thomas Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveller*, considered both as recurring challenges to hermeneutics and as dramatic accounts, in their own time, of the thrills and spills of (literary) interpretation. Participants will be invited to select their own texts—from any period and milieu—as the subject of their major assignment.