

Marriage, Sex, and Power in Eighteenth-Century Ireland

Short Title: Eighteenth-Century Ireland (10 ECTS)

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Semester Taught MT/HT: HT **Year:** JS

Course Description and Learning Aims:

The navigation of heterosexual relationships and the anticipation of marriage is a recurring theme across writing from eighteenth-century Ireland. Marriage represented an important goal in the lives of most young women in eighteenth-century Europe, and the prospect of betrothal inspired a variety of writing by both men and women, from diary entries steeped in heightened feelings, to plays employing the marriage plot for farcical entertainment, to the exploration of courtship in the newly emerging novels of the period. Alongside more conservative depictions of relationships and moralistic messages embedded within the texts, many of these writings also include more transgressive representations of sex and marriage in the eighteenth century, and feature instances of cross-dressing, adultery, female agency, and reflections on intense same-sex friendship. However, the course texts repeatedly underscore the fragility of women's existence at the time, and the dangers at play in terms of both reputation and violence, as power dynamics were heavily skewed along gender lines. The importance placed on female resistance to sexual activity before marriage shaped both men and women's sexual behaviour, and eroded the value of female consent, a topic that features across the texts. The module will strive to include the voices of people from different backgrounds, privileging the writings of those who worked within Dublin's brothels, alongside analyses of portrayals of prostitutes and women's bodies by the foremost poet of the time.

Writing from eighteenth-century Ireland is particularly rich in textual diversity, with a remarkable formal fluidity across genres as writers draw from different generic forms, narrative structures, and rhetorical tropes. This module explores the generic intersections, experimentation, and innovation in evidence across the course texts, which include novels, poetry, diaries, memoirs, letters, a comedy, and a farce, as we will consider literary and cultural cross-fertilization, and examine concepts of paratext while exploring portrayals of marriage, sex, and power in Ireland during the long eighteenth century.

Module Content:

1. **Introduction**
2. **Virginity and early Irish fiction:** Anon., *Vertue Rewarded* (1693)
3. **The Marriage Market:** Extracts from Adolescent Diaries (various)
4. **Sex and subterfuge:** Poetry by Jonathan Swift (1730s)
5. **Scandalous Memoirs:** Pilkington's *Memoirs* (1748)
6. **Life Writing and Prostitution:** Mrs Leeson's *Memoirs* (1795)
7. Reading Week
8. **Epistolary Romance:** Elizabeth and Richard Griffith, *Genuine Letters* (1750s)
9. **The unhappy marriage on stage:** Frances Sheridan, *The Discovery* (1763)
10. **Farcical Courtship:** Charles Macklin, *Love à la Mode* (1759; pub. 1779)
11. **Acts of transgression:** Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (1801)
12. **Conclusions**

Learning Outcomes:

Upon successful completion of this module, students should be able to:

- Write critically about literature in Ireland in the long eighteenth century.
- Analyse critically the set texts while also relating them to each other and their social, cultural, and political contexts.
- Demonstrate an awareness of changes to, and the development of, those genres studied, and be able to recognise and discuss generic intersections.
- Achieve enhanced understanding of the Irish contribution to eighteenth-century literature.
- Identify themes and discourses relevant to the construction of gender in Ireland.
- Undertake independent research, identifying topics of interest and employing appropriate research methods.

Assessment Details:

This module will be assessed by a combination of a short written piece (1,500 words, 25%) and an essay (4,500 words, 75%). The essay topic may be of the student's own choice, reached upon consultation with the module convenor.

Please note:

- *Curricular information is subject to change.*
- **Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.**