

**Course Title: *Knowledge and Power in the French Enlightenment***  
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**Rationale:**

Addressed to students of philosophy, literature and history, this seminar will be taught in English. Students of French will read the texts in French and write their essays in French. This is a 200 level course for English students and a 300 level course for students studying French. The prerequisite for the latter is Fre 251- 252 or equivalent. This seminar will be taught in 2008-2009.

The Enlightenment is ordinarily defined as a movement of political, social and philosophical contestation calling for the reign of Reason, equality and progress. Advocating the emancipation from the superstition of religion, the Enlightenment claims to question all forms of authority. Through the study of the many discursive forms that this questioning has adopted, we will analyze this enterprise and the contestation it has itself elicited. We will thus explore and question the new secular status of the human subject delineated by the Enlightenment and its social, economical and philosophical ramifications. "Paradise is of this world" writes Voltaire in 1736. The quest for worldly happiness guides most *Philosophes*, who consider comfort and luxury as essential aspects of life. Through the study of literary and non-fictional texts, this course will also examine the evolution of science and technology in eighteenth-century France.

The first object of our study will be the Figure of the *philosophe* and status of philosophy in the Enlightenment. Descartes's *Discours de la Méthode* marks an epistemological break which will radically influence philosophers such as Pierre Beyle and the Enlightenment's thinkers. If the XVIIIth century *Philosophes* refute Descartes's inborn ideas and dichotomy between the mind and the body, they praise him for his systematic questioning of authority as the source of knowledge. After studying Descartes's journey played out in his *Discours*, we will see how Pierre Beyle's *Pensées sur la Comète* apply the Cartesian method in debunking all *préjugés*, preconceived opinions. Thus Beyle questions any form of authority, may it be that of tradition, poets, historians. Studying the genesis of opinion, Beyle questions the origins of beliefs and denounces error as the result of intellectual laziness. Religion is portrayed as ventriloquism practiced by political power to subjugate people. Praising induction, Beyle seeks to demonstrate that only Reason applied to experience will emancipate Man from superstition. Voltaire and Dumarsais follow Beyle's footsteps in their praise of Reason. "Reason, writes Dumarsais, is to the Philosophe what Grace is to the Christian". We will underline how the *Philosophe's* figure changes in the Enlightenment.

While Richelet in his 1680 dictionary describes him as a misanthrope priding himself for an all too illusory knowledge, Dumarsais in the *Encyclopédie* portrays the *Philosophe* as an essentially social being in quest of a happiness based on the mastery of passions and on intellectual lucidity. This social conscience combining individual happiness and collective good is illustrated in Diderot's *Entretien d'un philosophe avec la Maréchale de \*\*\**. Adopting the form of the dialogue, a literary genre praised by the *philosophes* who want to replace the display of authority of treatises with intellectual debates, Diderot champions Beyle's paradox of the virtuous atheist.

This questioning of the social consequences of Religion is undertaken by Voltaire in the first four of his *Lettres philosophiques*. We will analyze how Voltaire uses an ironical narrative strategy in order to denounce the Catholics' intolerance and demonstrate how enthusiasm or religious inspiration cannot be distinguished from a form of madness. To conclude this study of the figure of the *Philosophe*, we will read Diderot's *Neveu de Rameau*. While contesting the Cartesian opposition between the mind and the body, this text problematizes the social status of the Philosopher, caught between two positions, that of Phryné, the courtisan and Diogene, who flees society in order to remain true to his ethical beliefs.

The second theme of the course is that of scientific knowledge and its status. While In his *Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie*, D'Alembert follows Descartes's injunction to master nature and defends a utilitarian vision of science, Buffon questions Religion's Sacred history by writing a natural history. We will explore the ramifications of such enterprises. Similarly we will study Diderot's *De l'interprétation de la nature* and its praise of the experimental method, explore La Mettrie's vision of Man in his *L'Homme-Machine*. The vulgarization of science has marked the Enlightenment: from the Abbé Nollet's *Leçons de physique expérimentales* to Mesmer's magnetic experiments, the French Enlightenment salons were animated by an enthusiastic scientific curiosity. After reading Mesmer's *Magnétisme animal*, we will question the limits of scientific knowledge in the Enlightenment and discuss Robert Darnton's *Mesmer or the end of Enlightenment*.

Our Last theme is that of political power. We will begin with a study of Louis Marin's analysis of the utopic text as a fictitious resolution of political tensions. This analysis will be illustrated by a passage from Marivaux's *The virtuous orphan* depicting how 18<sup>th</sup> century Paris salons function according to a hierarchy based upon intellectual merit. We will then move on to the questioning of absolutism. In 1721, Montesquieu publishes his *Lettres persanes*. This epistolary novel stages the journey to France of two Persians, Usbek and Rica. They describe, analyze and criticize French society. While Usbek expresses his political and philosophical thoughts, his wives send him letters from the harem where they are sequestered. Defending a contractual conception of the monarchy, Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* also enacts a dichotomy between masculine and feminine speech based on the opposition between public and private, philosophical and quotidian, theoretical and empirical, written and spoken.

In 1747, this dichotomy is challenged by Madame de Grafigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. A Peruvian princess is abducted from her palace and after some adventures arrives in France. We will analyze how this novel is centered on a feminine subject leaving the domestic space and developing an ethnological discourse as she is exposed to French culture.

Published in 1755, Rousseau's *Second Discours* studies the origins of inequalities between men and assesses the relation between these inequalities and natural law. After situating the Enlightenment's debate on natural law, we will analyze Rousseau's vision of nature and history and the preeminence he attributes to pity over reason. While Rousseau doesn't deny the existence of physical inequality, he disputes political inequality which doesn't stem from nature but from conventions. We will investigate Rousseau's vision of society as a space of physical, psychological and political alienation. .

We will conclude our journey with *Sade's Les Malheurs de la Vertu* which demythifies any historical progress and reveals the Enlightenment's political contradictions and aporias. We will study Sade's novel in the context of the Enlightenment's jusnaturalism and show how Sade questions any form of rationalism which claims to find examples of natural norms in history.

### **Selected Bibliography:**

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Marivaux, Pierre Carlet de Chamblain de. *The virtuous orphan : or, The life of Marianne, Countess of \*\*\*\*\**. New York : Garland, 1979.

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## CALENDAR

### Week 1: Introduction

I: Introduction –The Enlightenment in France and in Europe.

II: Descartes: *Le Discours de la méthode*

### Week 2:

I: Pierre Bayle, *Pensées sur la comète*.

II: Richelet, Dumarsais, Voltaire, Articles *philosophe*.

### Week 3:

I: Diderot. Entretien d'un philosophe avec la maréchale de \*\*\*

II: Voltaire. *Lettres philosophiques*. I-V

### Week 4:

I: Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*.

II: Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*.

### Week 5:

I: D'Alembert. *Le Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie*.

II: D'Alembert. *Le Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie*.

### Week 6:

I: Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*.

II: Buffon, *Histoire naturelle*.

### Week 7:

I: Diderot, *De l'interprétation de la nature*.

II: Diderot, *De l'interprétation de la nature*.

### Week 8:

I: La Mettrie, *L'homme-machine*.

II: La Mettrie, *L'homme-machine*.

### Week 9:

I: Mesmer, *Le Magnétisme animal*. Robert Darnton, *Mesmer or the end of Enlightenment*.

II: Marivaux, *The virtuous orphan : or, The life of Marianne, Countess of \*\*\*\*\**.  
(excerpts) The salon: public and utopic space.

**Week 10:**

I: Montesquieu, *Les Lettres persanes*. pp.43-217

II: Montesquieu, *Les Lettres persanes*. pp.218-349

**Week 11:**

I: Graffigny, *Les Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. pp.249- 326

II: Graffigny, *Les Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. pp.326- 362

**Week 12:**

I: Rousseau, *Le Discours sur l'inégalité*. pp.145-221

II: Rousseau, *Le Discours sur l'inégalité*. pp.222-257

**Week 13**

I : Sade, *Les Malheurs de la vertu*.

II: Sade, *Les Malheurs de la vertu*.