

Literature and Deception (Hum/En 34)

Professor: Jocelyn Holland jholland@caltech.edu
Dabney 301a
Winter 21 / T + Th, 9-10:25
Office hour Tuesday 2 – 3 p.m.
(or any time during the week by appointment)

*I was not lying. I said things that later
on seemed to be untrue.*

Richard Nixon

email: jholland@caltech.edu (feel free to email me any time with questions about the course)

Lying: we are lied to, all the time, and we ourselves are liars. For better or for worse, it's a part of our daily life. This course takes a broad look at acts of lying and deception as they have been imagined and portrayed in literary and philosophical texts. We will be looking at our topic from many points of view: as a problem of language (what are the signs by which we detect deception in speech and writing?); as a cultural and historical phenomenon (how do techniques of deception develop in response to particular historical settings, and are there any constants to be observed?); and also as a question of moral value – what distinguishes good deceptions from bad ones from a reader's point of view, and what are the criteria according to which they are judged? We will also ask what makes the act of lying different from other kinds of deception as well as another big question that has a long history attached to it: is all literature a lie or can it have a truth value? Along the way, in addition to acquiring historical and literary knowledge, you will have the opportunity to work on your writing, reading, and general analytical skills with plenty of support and feedback from me and your classmates.

All readings will be posted on the Canvas website

[note: this is a preliminary syllabus – there might be slight changes before the beginning of the quarter, but no increase in workload]

Jan 4 **Introduction**

Two (mythological) liars + one philosopher

Jan 6 Prometheus (Hesiod's *Theogony*, excerpt)

Jan 11 Hermes (Homeric Hymn to Hermes)

Jan 13 Plato *Republic* (excerpts)

Lying as a way of life

Jan 18 Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*

Jan 20 Boccaccio, *The Decameron*



[January 21st: first short essay assignment due – extension through the weekend is ok]

Jan 25 Miguel de Cervantes, "The Deceitful Marriage"

The Evil Liar

Jan 27 William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Act 1

Feb 1 *Othello*, Acts 2 and 3

Feb 3 *Othello*, Acts 4 and 5



The Liar as Seducer

Feb 8 Molière, *Don Juan, or the Feast with the Statue*, Acts 1 and 2

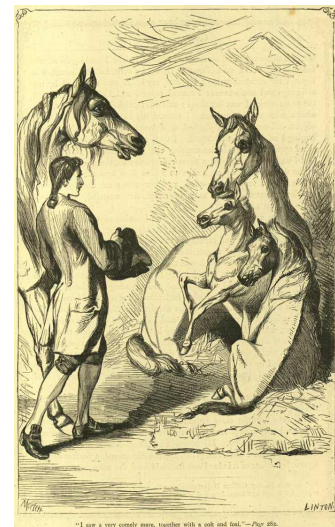
Feb 10 Molière, *Don Juan, or the Feast with the Statue*, Acts 3 and 4

February 11th: second short essay assignment due (extension through the weekend is ok)

The horses don't lie

Feb 15 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Book 4, chapters 1-6)

Feb 17 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (Book 4, chapters 7-12)



The lie of omission

Feb 22 Kleist, "The Marquess of O."

Feb 24 Kleist, "The Marquess of O."

Final thought: two extreme positions

March 1 *It is never ok to lie. Never. Not even if a murder comes to your door!* (Kant)

March 3 *Every time we open our mouths we lie, because language is itself a lie.* (Nietzsche)

Only the Truth: Your Final Paper

March 8 Workshop for the final paper

Final paper due: March 16th

Course requirements:

In-class (or Zoom) attendance: 15%

Perusall comments: 15%

Homework assignment x 2 = 40%

Final paper = 30%