The practice of gossip is as old as language itself, assuming a dominant role in our daily interactions and calling up powerful cultural embodiments from Virgil’s creaturely portrayal of the goddess Fama, covered with a multitude of eyes, ears, and tongues, to the disembodied voice-over and distilled malice of Kristen Bell’s Gossip Girl. Confronting the negative connection of gossip with women and its progressive denigration as a loose, idle, and unproductive mode of speech, feminists—and other subgroups/counterpublics—have sought to reclaim gossip as a form of subjugated and subversive discourse, resistant to and critical of majority culture. Other gossip theorists in the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and communication theory have explored how gossip functions both as an instrument of behavioral control and as a form of exchange in which information is lucratively traded for other goods in the social marketplace. We’ll be drawing on these theorizations of gossip and considering how useful they are for capturing its operations in different historical moments, across oral, scribal, printed, and digital media, and within changing legal and normative conceptions of public-private relations. Most important, we’ll be exploring gossip’s hermeneutic power as a narrative model, pressing the continuities between sites, protocols, and modes of gossip and works of literature which not only thematize its practice but reflect on their relation to its forms.

The seminar is designed to model the sort of flexible, multileveled analysis that I wish you to pursue in your Honors Essay. I do not expect to resolve the generic and methodological complexities we encounter, nor do I intend to marshal our texts into a definitive or unified narrative. It is my hope that the very heterogeneity of our reading might help to suggest the range of projects that can spring from our central theme.

**Learning Goals**

By the end of the semester you should be able to:

1. Bring local, dynamic, and form-sensitive interpretations together to pose questions, locate contradictions, and frame arguments.

2. Glean essential and experimental ideas from academic writing that may be dense, abstract, or otherwise alienating, and interplay your own ideas with them.
3. Identify genuine intellectual problems and conduct original research, attentive both to the
coventions of literary analysis and the boundaries of disciplinary thinking.

4. Find and incorporate relevant source materials into your writing, using appropriate scholarly
resources such as books, journals, indexes, online catalogues, web search engines, and libraries.
Learn correct citation methods (Chicago style, MLA), and use of the Oxford English Dictionary.

NOTE: Please remember that the grades I give you in the seminar are different from the
determination at the end of the year whether you receive honors and what level of honors
(honors, high honors, highest honors) it might be. Those distinctions are awarded by the
Honors Committee which makes its determination not on your fulfillment of the course
requirements given below, but solely on the basis of your performance on the Honors essay,
your performance on the Honors examination, your overall GPA and your GPA in English.

Course Requirements

Attendance and Participation (15%)
Regular attendance and active participation are essential. Plan to attend every class meeting and
to arrive on time, especially when we have guests visiting the class. If an absence is unavoidable,
it is your responsibility to obtain any materials, notes, and instructions that you have missed.
For a classroom to be truly collaborative, everyone must feel comfortable expressing his or her
ideas. We need to respond to each other with respect, even if we do not agree.

Open Class Blog (15%)
From the second week of the semester, you are required to produce a weekly blog post. Each
post should be the result of 15-20 minutes of concentrated thinking and writing or at least one
paragraph long (approx. 200 words). Make sure that your post is timely: that it reflects critically
on a recent or future reading, draws connections to previous discussions and readings or
comment constructively on someone else’s post. You will not receive credit if your post
recapitulates thinking that has already been done, either in class or elsewhere on the class blog.
I will read your posts and respond to them on the class blog at least once a week. I may also
refer to posts during class meetings and you should feel free to do the same.
Nancy Foasberg, the Humanities librarian who will be working with you on your Honors
Essays, will also be responding on the class blog, when appropriate. Please may sure to read her
advice and follow her instructions carefully.
You can access our class blog at http://gossip.qwriting.org/. The password is walkden.

Oral Presentation (10%)
A 10-minute oral presentation on a course “key word” followed by a short (5-minute) class Q
and A. Please consult the presentation assignment sheet for further guidelines.

Research Essay (60%)
The formal writing assignment will be a 18-25 page (typed/double spaced/12 pt. font) research
essay on a topic developed by you in consultation with me. We will be working on these essays
across the length of the semester, and the assignment will include four formal stages (as well as a variety of informal ones). These four formal stages are:

1. Draft Prospectus (10%)
2. Revised Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography (15%)
3. Preliminary Essay Draft (25%)
4. Peer Review (10%)

After winter break, for those continuing in the Honors program:
5. Revised Draft and Argument Abstract

We'll discuss each stage in more detail as the semester progresses. Due dates are indicated on the syllabus. All written assignments are to be submitted both digitally and in hard copy, unless otherwise indicated.

Conferences
I will arrange one-on-one conferences a couple of times during the semester, one to discuss your prospectus draft and one to discuss your essay draft in progress. If you must reschedule a conference, please let me know 24 hours in advance. Otherwise, I cannot guarantee that the conference can be rescheduled.

Required Texts
(all available in the QC bookstore).
Please buy these editions. If you already own a text in a different edition you may use that instead, but keep in mind that you will need to locate passages quickly so as not to hold up class discussion.

Additional readings will be given out in hard copy or be available for you to read and print out on the class blog.

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**Films (Assigned)**

*The Conversation* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)  
*The Social Network* (dir. David Fincher, 2010)

**Films (Recommended)**

*The Children’s Hour* (dir. William Wyler, 1961)  
*Notes on a Scandal* (dir. Richard Eyre, 2006)  
Tenative Reading Plan
This schedule may change according to our class needs

1. Monday August 29
   Wednesday August 31
   Introductions
   Virgil, *Aeneid*, 4, 239-265
   Hesiod, *Melampodia* 3; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.316-338 (Tiresias)

(Monday September 5 – Labor Day)

2. Wednesday September 7
   Monday September 12
   Chaucer, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue,” lines 193-256 and 525-542; “The Wife of Bath’s Tale” and “The Manciple’s Tale”
   Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 2. 537-632 (Phoebus and Coronis); 11.146-93 (Midas)

3. Wednesday September 14
   Monday September 19
   Shakespeare, *Othello*
   Kenneth Gross, “Denigration and Hallucination in *Othello*,” Chapter 4 of *Shakespeare’s Noise* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 102-130
   GUESTS: Frederick Buell, Chair of the Honors Program, and Jacek Belc, Honors Student 2010-11

4. Wednesday September 21
   Monday September 26
   Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*

(Wednesday September 28 – no class scheduled)
5. Monday October 3
   Wednesday October 5

   Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*


   (Monday, October 10 – Columbus Day)

6. Wednesday October 12
   Monday October 17

   Leonora Sansay, *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo*

   GUESTS: Duncan Faherty and Sian Silyn Roberts (Monday only)

7. Wednesday October 19
   Monday October 24

   Jane Austen, *Emma*


8. Wednesday October 26
   Monday October 31


   Casey Finch and Peter Bowen, “‘The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury’: Gossip and the Free Indirect Style in *Emma*,” *Representations* 31 (1990), 1-18 (JSTOR)

9. Wednesday November 2
    Monday November 7

    2 Samuel 11-12 (David and Bathsheba)

    Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

    **Draft Prospectus due**

10. Wednesday November 9
    Monday November 14

    Edith Wharton, *Summer*

GUEST: Karen Weingarten

Small group meetings with Nancy Foasberg

11. Wednesday November 16
Monday November 21

Lillian Hellman, *The Children’s Hour*
Esther, 1-10

John Weir, “Where Do You See Yourself?,” from *What Did I Do Wrong: A Novel*


GUEST: John Weir (Monday only)

Small group meetings with Nancy Foasberg, ctd.

(W. November 23 – class cancelled before Thanksgiving Recess; makeup class W. Dec 14)

12. Monday November 28
Wednesday November 30

Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*

Zoë Heller, *Notes on a Scandal: What Was She Thinking?*

Prospectus and Annotated Bibliography due in class

13. Monday November 5
Wednesday November 7

*The Conversation* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974)


14. Monday December 12
Wednesday December 14

*The Social Network* (dir. David Fincher, 2010)

Preliminary Essay Draft due in class (please remember to bring two copies)

Monday December 19

Peer Response due (digital submission only)
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**Important dates – Spring semester**

Wednesday February 8  **Revised Draft and Argument Abstract due**

Monday February 13  Workshop led by Nancy Foasberg – What We Do When We Cite

Wednesday February 15

Wednesday February 22  **Submission of Honors Essay**

Friday March 30  **Honors Examination**

Wednesday May 9  **Honors Conference**