

ENGL 7480/8480

Thursday 5:30–8:30 p.m.

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Vernacularity in Medieval and African American Literature

This course explores medieval and African American literature, two historically diverse areas that might initially seem too different to consider together. Yet, both areas share a deep, abiding interest in the vernacular—the language “of the people”—and in culturally informed narrative strategies that highlight the vernacular’s importance. Our focus is thus both linguistic and cultural, drawing literary works not normally studied together into conversations that this class will tease out in dynamic and interesting ways. We will transhistorically consider literary, political, and cultural implications of uses of a vernacular. We are not just studying the parallel journeys of two literary traditions, but intensively considering the ways in which relationships between those two traditions illuminate our understanding of what vernacularity means and how it impacts notions of language, culture, power, self and community. While late medieval English writers work within a tri-lingual culture comprising two rival vernaculars, African American authors strive to produce a literature that explores the complexity and culture of groups marginalized because they are not fluent in the mainstream’s language. We will consider how vernaculars can intentionally be used to unite or divide, to reinvigorate traditional forms of poetry and prose or create new forms that readily engage linguistic and cultural traditions, to critique oppression, and above all, to say what otherwise could not be said.

While the instructors’ strengths are in medieval and African American literature, this course will also highlight formal issues important to creative writers, questions of rhetoric and discourse analysis of interest to professional writers, and problems related to dialect and multilingualism that will intrigue linguists. Class assignments will include two presentations, a book review, short exercises, and two papers.

Readings will be drawn from among the following books, supplemented by other materials:

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales (original-spelling Middle English edition)*, ed. Jill Mann (Penguin, 2005) 978-0140422344

Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Vintage, 1995) 978-0679764083

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Harper Perennial, 2006) 978-0061120060

James Weldon Johnson, *God’s Trombones*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (Penguin, 2008) 978-0143105411

Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins, eds., *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: “A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman” and “A Revelation of Love”* (Penn State) 978-0271025476

ntonozake shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (Scribner, 1997) 978-0684843261

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Gathering of Old Men* (Vintage, 1992) 978-0679738909

A. C. Cawley, ed., *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays* (Everyman, 1993) 978-0460872805

August Wilson, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (Plume, 1988) 978-0452260092