

ENGL 7211/8211 Medieval Literature
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Medieval Poetics: How Do We Read the Past?

This course looks broadly at a range of writing from both the early medieval (Anglo-Saxon) period in England and the late medieval (to early fifteenth century), with a focus on the poetics of the works we read — how they are put together, how they do what they do — and our attitudes towards reading them. Works have been chosen with an eye to recent important work in medieval studies to prompt us to ponder how ideologies and contemporary conversations affect how we read and how our own myopias might influence our interpretations of the past. Topics include, for example, the current agitation over racism in medieval studies, feminist readings, queer readings, cognitive approaches, animal studies, materiality, manuscript contexts, and present-day poets' interest in Middle English and Chaucer. Late medieval works will be read in Middle English; early medieval will be read in translation with close attention to the original Old English. The readings and topics will provide something of interest for students from all concentrations and all are welcome. Work on many of the fundamental critical questions can be readily applied to other subfields of literary study. Prior knowledge of Middle English is not expected.

Course requirements include an in-class presentation, a book review, two papers or projects, and engaged participation.

Readings likely will include (n.b.: students who want to read something not on this list are encouraged to contact the professor as soon as possible with desiderata; some shifting of the reading list is still possible):

from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*: The Miller's Tale, The Man of Law's Tale, The Pardoner's Tale; and with them, selections from Caroline Bergvall's *Meddle English* and from Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* (shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Award for New Work in Poetry, 2014)

two romances:

William of Palerne, a Middle English retelling of an originally French romance centered on the issue of what it means to be noble (is this quality innate or learned? if you are born aristocratic, are you inherently noble? if you are born to a lower class, can you be inherently noble?), a topic explored widely in medieval romance. This one adds the motif of a shape-shifted (enchanted man) werewolf and raises interesting questions about bestiality and humanity. Students with an interest in narratology might be especially drawn by how this story is told.

The King of Tars, a hagiographical romance that, like The Man of Law's Tale, troubles questions of orientalism, in this case sensationalized by the conversion of a character to Christianity changing his skin from black to white.

lyric poems (though whether or not "lyric" is an appropriate descriptor is up for debate, and worth interrogating); this category includes the first poem written in English we have a record of, Caedmon's Hymn

biblical drama, probably the Wakefield *Second Shepherd's Play* and possibly *Everyman*; work over the past decade on historical records pertaining to early English drama has completely changed our understanding of how biblical plays were staged and their place within civic and ecclesiastical society

dream vision: the Anglo-Saxon *Dream of the Rood*

and the difficult to categorize Anglo-Saxon *Guthlac A*, a lyric-like saint's life that has been read through a postcolonial lens, since Guthlac "colonizes" land that has been inhabited by demons, whom he expels (and who mourn the loss of their "home"), but which also shifts ground to a cognitive or affective plane/plain