

**English 23200 MEDIEVAL LITERATURE**  
**Section 01: MWF 11:00-11:50, CNS 118**

**Michael Twomey**

**Office hours:** MWF 2-3

and by appointment

**Course web site:** [www.ithaca.edu/faculty/twomey/MedievalLiterature](http://www.ithaca.edu/faculty/twomey/MedievalLiterature)

**Office:** 329 Muller

**e-mail:** [twomey@ithaca.edu](mailto:twomey@ithaca.edu)

☎ 274-3564

**TEXTS available at bookstore (please do not use other editions of these texts):**

- *Beowulf*, trans. R. M. Liuzza (Broadview), ISBN 1-55111-189-6.
- *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, trans. Bernard Scudder (Penguin), ISBN 0-140-44743-3.
- *Silence*, ed. and trans. Sarah Roche-Mahdi (Michigan State U. Press), ISBN 0-97013-543-0.
- Dante, *Inferno*, trans. John Hollander (Anchor), ISBN 0-385-49698-8.
- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Patience, Pearl*, trans. Marie Borroff (Norton), ISBN 0-393-97658-0.
- Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, trans. Peter Beidler (Bantam), ISBN 0-553-21082-3.
- Course-pack (CP), available at English Department office (Muller 309) for \$5.

**GOALS:**

In this course we'll learn to recognize and appreciate forms and genres, literary conventions and strategies, themes, plots, and characters that make medieval literature medieval—and which modern writers continue to employ. We'll learn, too, the cultural values at work in medieval literature, as well as the terms of cultural and literary discourse used by medieval people and by modern readers of medieval literature. We'll learn to think like modern medievalists and literary critics, and also like medieval writers, about medieval literature.

*Beowulf* and *Grettir's Saga* are both set in medieval Scandinavia at a time when English and Norse cultures overlapped. Both explore tragic ideas of heroism in cultures defined by male bonding, family loyalty, and revenge; but they do so in literary forms that provide drastically different perspectives on their characters and their codes. Next, courtly love poetry challenges the gender roles and sexual morals of the Middle Ages, advancing the revolutionary new ethos of mutual love and woman-worship that was spread by the troubadour poets from France into England. From the Anglo-French author Marie de France we will encounter the Celtic Other World of the fairies as well as the legend of King Arthur, through which she critiques medieval conventions regarding love and marriage. The romance *Silence* challenges medieval stereotypes about gender, as well, while at the same time resorting to the Celtic Other World in the form of Merlin, "borrowed" from the legend of King Arthur. In the second half of the course, we follow the imaginary quest of Dante's *Inferno* through another kind of Other World—hell—in pursuit of justice on earth, and in *Pearl* we will see one English poet's elegiac rejection of Dante's strict notions about the heavenly reward. Returning to the legend of King Arthur, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* revises Dante's paradigm of the quest to one in which a solitary knight must search out his own death in the Other World of the fairies, in order to keep a promise made to an enchanted adversary. Finally, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* translate Dante's journey into the

mundane terms of a medieval pilgrimage, replacing the moral structure of Dante's hell with the social structure of 14<sup>th</sup> century London.

### MAJOR UNITS AND READINGS:

1. *Beowulf*.
2. *Grettir's Saga*.
3. The medieval experience of gender and love:
  - The poetry of courtly love (CP).
  - Marie de France, "Bisclavret," "Lanval," and "Yonec" plus several fairy tales (CP).
  - Heldris of Cornwall, *Silence*.
4. Dante, the *Gawain*-Poet, and Chaucer:
  - Dante, *Inferno*.
  - Anon., *Pearl*.
  - Anon., *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.
  - Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales* (selections).

### REQUIREMENTS AND POLICIES:

**1) Preparation and Participation:** This class will be a combination of lecture and guided discussion. Hence, its success depends on your investment as much as it does upon mine. Please do the reading for every class, and come prepared to talk seriously about it during our time together. Underlining as you read, taking notes, and jotting down comments are all good, indeed necessary strategies for preparing for class. When you write as you read, you have already begun a private dialogue with the text that will enable you to participate more comfortably and profitably in our class discussions. Bring your CP and the text we are currently reading every day. Participation doesn't require talking all the time, just contributing constructively and thoughtfully to the conversation. It also means coming to class on time, treating other students (and me) courteously, and showing an investment in the work of the class

### 2) Written Work (standards are on a separate **Guidelines for Assignments** handout):

- **Regular 1-2 page response pieces.** I consider these as part of your class participation, and I grade them via a system of check marks. They are not gut-level reactions but thoughtful statements. You may opt to skip two response pieces; or, if you do all of the response pieces, I will drop the two lowest grades. Since this is the policy, there are no make-ups for response pieces.
- **Two 5-page essays.** I hand out assignments and deadlines on a rolling basis 7-10 days before the due date for each essay. You will have several chances to choose an essay in each half of the semester. You must write one essay before the midterm exam and one essay after the midterm exam (i.e., one in each half of the semester). All essays must be submitted in hard copy—I do not accept essays sent as an e-mail or e-mail attachment. You may re-write essays under the following circumstances: (1) you must have a conference about the rewrite within a week of receiving the paper; (2) submit the revision together with the original graded paper and comments. The grade for the revision will be the average of the grades on the revision and the original essay.

- **A midterm exam** written in class on Wednesday, October 14th. Attendance at the exam is mandatory. Exceptions must be for a very good reason, negotiated at least four weeks before the exam.
- **A final exam:** Tuesday, December 15, 4:30-7:00 p.m. in the classroom. The exam will focus on (a) the literature of the second half of the semester and (b) the literary concepts learned in the course as a whole.
- Please guard against all forms of academic dishonesty. The penalty for academic dishonesty is a grade of F in the course, which I will mitigate to F on the assignment for students who sign an admission of academic dishonesty. If you have any questions about academic dishonesty, speak with me and consult Volume VII of the Ithaca College Policy Manual, sections 7.1.4 “Standards of Academic Conduct,” at [http://www.ithaca.edu/attorney/policies/vol7/Volume\\_7-70104.htm#TopofPage](http://www.ithaca.edu/attorney/policies/vol7/Volume_7-70104.htm#TopofPage)
- In compliance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, reasonable accommodation will be provided to students with documented disabilities on a case by case basis. Students must register with the Office of Academic Support Services and provide appropriate documentation to the college.

**3) Attendance:** I follow the college’s attendance policy (current *Undergraduate Catalog*, p. 290). Accordingly, absences due to a religious observance are not penalized. However, I ask that out of courtesy, students notify me a week in advance of a religious absence. Likewise, absences due to “a verifiable family or individual health emergency, or to a required appearance in a court of law” are not penalized. “The student or a family member/legal guardian may report the absence to the Office of Student Affairs and Campus Life, which will notify the student’s dean’s office...,” which will notify me. The policy about all other absences is set by the instructor. My policy is that I permit four absences for any reason—illness, team sports, field trips in another class, and so on. I do not ask for excuse notes, reasons for the absence, etc. How you use these four absences is your business. However, for absences after the fourth absence (excluding the two cases mentioned above), your grade will go down by one-third of a letter. Athletes must speak with me at the very beginning of the term and provide written evidence of all possible absences due to their sport. Please read this policy carefully, and please re-read this policy before asking me about an absence. After absences of any kind, you should ask me about what you have missed in class.

**4) Classroom decorum:** In addition to attending, please observe two basic rules: (1) arrive on time, and (2) don’t walk out in the middle of class unless for a dire physical need.

**5) E-mail:** I love e-mail, but I ration my online time, and I don’t reply to desperate, last-minute e-mails. Please remember that an e-mail to a teacher is not a text message. It must have a salutation (Dear Michael, Dear Professor Twomey), and it must use correct spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation.

**6) Final grade (total of 100%):**

- 20% for response pieces and class participation.
- 15% for the midterm exam.
- 45% for the critical essays (22.5% each).
- 20% for the final exam.