

# MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

## **Course Description**

Medieval Literature covers the literature of that time period in the Western World. Students will analyze primary texts covering the genres of poetry, drama, fiction and non-fiction, and will discuss them from different critical stances. They will demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the works by responding to questions focusing on the works, movements, authors, themes, and motifs. In addition, they will discuss the historical, social, cultural, or biographical contexts of the works' production. This course is intended for students who already possess a bachelor's and, ideally, a master's degree, and who would like to develop interdisciplinary perspectives that integrate with their prior knowledge and experience.

## **About the Professor**

Dr. Susan Smith Nash has developed numerous literature courses in the humanities, including world literature, American literature, and film. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Oklahoma, and is widely published in the areas of literature, e-learning, and discourse. In addition, she has served as editor for journals focusing on literature and literary criticism.

## **Course Contents**

### Medieval Epic Poetry

Beowulf

Song of Roland

Dante Alighieri

### Medieval Lyric Poetry

Courtly Love Lyrics of Spain and France

### Medieval Essays

Ibn Hazm

Capellanus

### Medieval Life Writing

St. Augustine

Margery Kempe

Muhammad Ibn Ishaq

Medieval Leaders

Medieval Travel Writing

### Medieval Fiction: Social Realism

Boccaccio

Chaucer

## Course Papers

### Unit 1

What is the structure of the world in each of the epic poems we have studied? What are the prevailing forces, and what kind of world is it that they describe? What are the outside threats to the world? How does the hero deal with them? What are the essential characteristics of epic poetry in terms of structure of his world, characterization, and the characters, as we have seen in the readings for this unit?

### Unit 2

How would you characterize the values and the emotions found in courtly love lyrics? How do the authors define love? What do they regard as its ideal means of expression and its end? Are there similar forms in today's world? What might they be? If you were to set courtly love lyrics in a contemporary setting, how would you do it? Describe the elements.

### Unit 3

What are some of the key themes in courtly love? What are the roles of the individuals of men and women? Do they differ? How do the essays help you to understand the themes of the lyric poems in the previous unit?

### Unit 4

Describe the kinds of life writing done during medieval times, and discuss the types of experiences the authors had, and the beliefs and values they articulated as they recounted the events that shaped them. How do they reflect the spirit of the times? What kind of insight do they give you as a reader?

### Unit 5

Compare and contrast the social norms and human nature as depicted by Chaucer and Boccaccio with the present-day social norms related to marriage and sexuality.

## Final Essay

In Horace's *Epistle on the Art of Poetry*, he says that "Poets aim at giving either profit or delight, or at combining the giving of pleasure with some useful precepts for life." Discuss the balance between these two from early to late medieval literature. Does the balance shift over the centuries? Illustrate your discussion by examples of the quality of the voice (tone, vocabulary, formal/informality of language) and elements of conscious moral/didactic instruction or pleasurable elements.

In this course you have read four works that might claim the title 'epic poetry' (*Beowulf*, *Song of Roland*, *Divine Comedy*, *The Canterbury Tales*). Clearly these works are diverse from one another, and written at different periods. If you judge by the ancient model—Homer, Virgil, etc.—which you studied in Ancient Literature, which of our four more recent works would seem to you to qualify as epic? As you explain your answer to this question, what assumption are you making about the fundamental nature of epic poetry?

It is frequently said that the essay is the product of 'the modern temper,' the personal easiness of the narrator in the work of the last couple of centuries. In view of that common opinion, what do you think of the essay form revealed in Ibn Hazm or Andreas Capellanus? Do these writers seem to be essay writers in a recognizably modern sense? How does the view of love, embedded in the essays of these two mediaeval writers, compare with the sense of love underlying the courtly lyrics of Spain and France?

Discuss themes of love in medieval literature and compare and contrast earthly vs. courtly love.

## **Beowulf**

### Introduction

*An Ancient English Epic.* With Beowulf we move to an epic which shares no cultural roots with either the Homer/Virgil tradition, or with Gilgamesh. Composed around the eighth century A.D.—the poem's time of creation, historical reference, and author are all vague—Beowulf continues to haunt us. The hero of the poem is a Dane, inheritor of ancient Germanic/Scandinavian traditions, who is called to England to defeat unsettling monsters, themselves symptoms of pollution in the society they imperil. We wander among ancient pagan as well as—at the end of the poem—Christian motifs, and become aware that the poem before us is the product of multiple authorship, oral add-ons, and a multi-leveled body of literary traditions. (The epic has always appealed to oral tradition, from Homer to our day.) If we need prompting, to find the enduring power of this epic, we might want to think back to Gilgamesh, that archaic but oddly modern Sumerian epic. The heroes of both of these poems are male strugglers, explicitly viewed both as youthful and then, later, as heavily loaded with experience. You will remember that Gilgamesh makes his debut as an all-undertaking young ruler, all swagger and genuinely effective in his concern for his city; in the end, after the struggle with Humbaba, he is tamed and wise. Beowulf is a mild Christian spirit, at the end of the epic, but a potent strongman for civilization earlier in the game. The reader is led to reflect on his/her own life course, and to experience that ultimate lesson in stylized language.

### Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Beowulf*

### Questions

*General* - Do you see the epic form as uniquely qualified to convey universal human experience? Do you find yourself identifying with the hero of Beowulf?

*Theme: Heroism* - Discuss the heroic code of Germanic warriors and kings. How do the virtues of courage, strength, loyalty play a role in the heroic code of warriors? Discuss the role of generosity, hospitality, and protection in the heroic code for the kings. Please give evidence from the book to support your observations. How do the ideas about heroism compare with others you are familiar with?

## **Song of Roland**

### Introduction

*Heroism in the Crusading Spirit.* The Chanson de Roland appears to have been composed some two centuries later than Beowulf (more or less) but unlike Beowulf this epic draws on traditional medieval lore, itself steeped in 'Christian' traditions. The Emperor Charlemagne, who depends on such proud Christian knights as Roland to support his Empire, is at the center of the time's anti-Islamic passion, which was devoted to extricating the Muslims from the sacred sites of the Holy Land. In the midst of a fervent battle, as the poem starkly recalls, Roland and his knights are cut off in an isolated Spanish pass, by the Muslims, and Roland is killed. Charlemagne does his best to rescue his heroic vassal, but it is too late. A great warrior has fallen, in the noble cause of victory.

### Readings

*-Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*  
*Song of Roland, Book 2, pp.*

### Questions

*General* - What do you feel after reading this epic? Does it tug at your heart strings, touch your sense of mortality? A superficial answer might be: for the first time in this course we are reading a great text which is openly one-sided, springing from a 'crusader' mentality. Would this be true? If it is true, is the significance of this truth easy to assess? Is there not a strangely moving dignity to Roland, as he acts and as he dies, which resounds in us as does the generosity of Achilles, returning the body of Priam?

*Theme: Heroism* - Discuss the heroic code of Song of Roland and compare it to the heroic code of Beowulf, which centers around individual exploits and honor. Discuss how Christian Warrior concept, which centers around a collective identity and sacrifice, explains any differences between Beowulf and Roland.

## Dante Alighieri

### Introduction

*The Medieval Path to Heaven.* By historical measure we come with Dante's Divine Comedy into a later Middle Ages, from which perspective The Song of Roland, and especially Beowulf, seem prehistoric. By the early fourteenth century A.D., to which Dante's work takes us, we are in era of High Gothic architecture, the maturest synthesis of Christian/Catholic thought, in Thomas Aquinas, and even the first Universities of Europe—and the Western World. You will see that Dante was able to build, into this rich progressive perspective, a wide knowledge of Greek and Roman culture, as well as of the cultural development of Mediaeval Christendom. To this very day readers marvel at the inventive device—pilgrim plus wiser guide—on which this epic turns, and the fascinating upward movement which pervades all three sections of the Divine Comedy itself. You will note with interest that Virgil, whom we know as the author of the Aeneid, and whom the Middle Ages considered a wise man/ magician, is the rational guide to the Inferno. But beyond the barriers of Hell Virgil cannot go, for he has not inherited the Christian Revelation, in whose light the upper circles of the Dantesque journey bask.

### Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Inferno, Bedford, Bk 2, pp.*

### Questions

*General* - Do you feel the momentum of Dante's journey? Does the topography of degrees of saintliness seem plausible to you? Can you see the modernity of this epic? In what exactly does its enduring power consist?

*Theme: Heroism* - Discuss the structure of Dante's inferno, and discuss the relationship between the crimes of the individuals and the punishments. How does it reflect the Medieval concept of sin, in the way the inferno is organized, and the progression from level to level? Within each level, how does the punishment fit the crime? What, according to Dante, is the definition of sin? Are the human beings free to choose to sin or are their actions predetermined? What is the role of free will and personal decision in the idea of sin? What does Dante feel when he observes the punishments in Hell? How does Dante grow and change during the journey from Hell to Heaven? You may wish to explore the parallels between the Inferno and the Aeneid. What concept of the afterlife is directly stated in these accounts?

## Medieval Lyric Poetry

### Introduction

*Courtly Love Lyrics of Spain and France.* We have read lyric poetry from Ancient Egypt and Hebrew, from Sappho, and from Catullus. Now we are reading mediaeval poetry produced by both native courtly traditions in France and Spain, and by poetry generated from the interface of Islamic and Christian poets in the Islamic occupied areas of southern France and Spain. What differences do you observe between this lyric poetry and that of the more ancient lyric work we have read?

### Reading

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Poems, Book 2*

### Questions

*General* - A hint at what some critics think is this: that in this Mediaeval courtly poetry the person of the narrator/lover inflects his passion with a fine desire to care for and even adulate the beloved? This, goes the theory, distinguishes this poetry from the more object-possessive stance of Catullus or pre-Christian poetry. Does this theory hold up, in light of the poetic materials we are reading here?

*Theme: Love*- Discuss the theme of love in the poems. Discuss the narrator's experience in terms of perceptions and emotions. Is there any similarity in imagery or topic? How do the authors define love, whether secular or spiritual? In the poems, what impact does love have on the individual? Please list specific elements of the poem to support your argument.

*General* - What are some of the key themes in courtly love? What are the roles of the individuals of men and women? Do they differ? How do the essays help you to understand the themes of the lyric poems in the previous unit?



## **Ibn Hazm**

### Introduction

*The Theory and Practice of Love.* The essay on love, which you find before you here, was created around the beginning of the second millennium A.D., and thus would have come to the attention of readers and hearers of Beowulf and The Song of Roland (to pick examples we know.) Perhaps, though, you will be surprised by the fine and realistic detail, by which Ibn Hazm analyzes the psychology and behavior of the lover.

### Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--The Dove's Necklace

### Questions

Apart from the sharp perceptions, of the agonies and joys and confusions of love, especially first love, what attitude does Ibn Hazm bring to his essay? Is he himself a Romantic, or an amused observer of the Romantic state of mind? Do you see, in the last paragraph of our text (Bedford II, p. 645) some of that awe of love that Sappho (and Catullus) express in their poems about envying 'him who stands near the beloved...'?

## Andreas Capellanus

### Introduction

*A Treatise on Love.* Andreas Capellanus, a monk, is commissioned to write a treatise on courtly love, and responds with both a Christian cautionary tale—he could hardly do otherwise—and a tract of advice on getting and giving love. You will see that the concern with successful love allies Capellanus to Ibn, who, however, is a far more subtle observer of the details of loving. You will note that Capellanus includes, in his Rules of Love (Chapter 8; p. 626, Bedford II) both down to earth insights, awed praise of the wonders of love, and surprisingly blunt proposals—knights should take their pleasure with peasant women, and get on their way.

### Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*  
--The Art of Courtly Love, *Book 2, pp. .*

### Questions

*General* - What would you say about the world of Romance as envisioned by Ibn Hazm and Andreas Capellanus? Have cultural/religious environments made them more insightful, into the values of love, than were Catullus and Sappho? Does it seem to you significant that essays at this time in the Middle Ages are being written about love? Would it not be a good idea, now, to return to those verse treatises of Ovid—like the *Amores* and the *Ars Amatoria*—which were in fact indispensable sources of the Mediaeval conception of love?

*Theme: Love* - Discuss “The Art of Courtly Love” and compare and contrast the theme of love in “Dove’s Necklace” by Ibn Hazm.

## St. Augustine

### Introduction

*The First Autobiography.* - Living in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, both in North Africa and Italy, St. Augustine occupies a time and place distant from any we have encountered in our readings. Long after the great works of Roman literature, which we have sampled, and long before the great Mediaeval epics and courtly lyrics, which we have just read, St. Augustine writes out of the tradition of the nascent and struggling Christian Church. His perspective is not literary, though he was familiar with Roman literature, but religious, and for many readers *The Confessions* seem to free a distinctive and personal human voice, for the first time in Western Culture. You might ask yourself whether this point rings true, in light of what we have read.

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### Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*The Confessions*

### Questions

*General* - Do Sappho, Catullus, and the Near Eastern poets have a 'personal voice'? One can imagine a careful yes in response to this question. But Homer? Sophocles? Ovid? As for the material of Augustine's *Confessions*, can you see the vast change in tonal register introduced by the maturing of Christianity? Have you previously encountered, in our readings, the categories of sin and repentance, humility, quest for immortality, which are central in Augustine's *Confessions*?

*Theme: Love* - Discuss the stages by which Augustine acquires a growing knowledge of himself. How does a particular experience or realization lead to self-awareness and change?

## **Margery Kempe**

### Introduction

*The Spiritual Life seen up Close.* Writing a century later than Dante, and almost a contemporary to the English tale creator, Geoffrey Chaucer, Margery Kempe is one of the first female voices to enter our readings. You will have seen that she was a middle class married lady and mother, a successful brewer by trade, but that in her midlife she gave in deeply to the presence of Jesus Christ, who had long been calling on her, and before long felt profoundly drawn to a life of chastity, pilgrimage, and prayer.

### Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*The Book of Margery Kempe*

### Questions

*General* - Can you, at just this point, begin to pick out certain traits of feeling and expression which distinguish the 'Christian' era from that 'ancient' world with which we began our readings? If you can, what would those traits be? In trying to deal with this issue include in your thinking this perspective: cultures under the sway of the Christian model, whether specifically Christian or not, are attuned to an emotive suffering/salvational climate which is present in 'ancient cultures.' What do you think of this proposition? Is it too vague to deserve consideration?

*Theme: Mysticism* - Discuss Margery Kempe's desire for union with God and the steps that she takes to achieve her wish. Describe the purpose of her description of her visions, weeping, her suffering by giving up the comforts, sexuality and financial gain from business ventures. Explain how and why she is being mistreated by society as a religious eccentric, social outcast, and even heretic. Are you familiar with other mystical female saints who sought mystical union with God?

## **Muhammad Ibn Ishaq**

### Introduction

*The Art of Biography.* The borderline between literature and religious document is often hard to discern, as in this text about Muhammad, composed a century after the Prophet's life. We find here a mixture of alleged fact, folk tale, and poetic imagination, as we find in the founding texts of many of the great religions.

### Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Life of Muhammad, Book 2, pp.*

### Questions

*General* - How would you compare the work of biography—this is the first one we have read—to that of Autobiography, like those of St. Augustine and Margery Kempe? Does the biographer disappear behind the material he/she narrates? Or does the biographer create an altogether new kind of personality?

## Medieval Travel Writing

### Introduction

In the current section of Bedford readings (pp. 130-205) you will find a fascinating assortment of biographical documents, ranging from portraits of great leaders of State—like Genghis Khan and Charlemagne—to innocent/visionary autobiographic testimonies like that of Joan of Arc. You may want to review this material in terms of the formation of the notion of the self, a subtle and slowly evolving dimension which we have been tracking as far back as Greek lyric poetry, the work of Petronius and Catullus, the self-perceptions of Margery Kempe.

### Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

-- *Book 2, pp.*

### Questions

*General-* Would it be fair to say that many of these mediaeval portraits and self-portraits are distinctive for their formality and ritual style? If so, is the issue before us the personality of the text narrator, or that of the individual written about?

*Theme: Journey-* Please describe the prophet Muhammad's visionary experience, the public reaction to the new religion. Explain how new ideas or concepts introduced by leaders meet with resistance from their community.

## **Boccaccio**

### Introduction

*The Novelist's Imagination in a Late Mediaeval Setting* - We have been reading a wide variety of texts, some literary in the traditional sense, some, like the travel writings above, 'documentary.' As we get closer to the so-called Western Renaissance, which some date from the 15th century (in the West), we get closer to narrative tales written for a democratic audience in an easy, or colloquial style. (I am trying to describe the 'progress' toward something like the 'novel' of modern times.) We are, with Boccaccio's Decameron in the early 14th century, dealing with a group of tales organized into a narrative fictive whole, an early novel form. (It should be noted, by the way, that Asian novel-like works, such as the 11th century Tale of Genji, have already moved close to the modern sense of the novel, long before their counterparts in the West.)

Boccaccio's Decameron devotes itself to one hundred tales told over a ten day period by a group of young sophisticates on the run from The Black Death. Their theme is love, and they manage to tell stories on every register, from the highly spiritual to the raw. The overarching point, for our reading, is that something like a continuous tale emerges from these partial tales.

### Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Decameron, Book 2, pp.*

### Questions

*General.* Do you feel you are reading a contemporary novel? How does the treatment of love here compare to that which you have seen, for example, in Sappho, Petronius, Capellanus?

*Theme: Realism.* What kind of behavior does Boccaccio observe during the 1348 plague in Florence? As in times of war, during plague, the codes of behavior change, and people tend to look to personal survival and gain. How does Boccaccio address the issue of mores and human behavior in a time when the social code of conduct totally collapses?

*Theme: Temptation.* In the story "Rustico and Alibech", what does the hermit Rustico experience under the temptation of a beautiful girl? How does he struggle with temptation? How do his ideas and behavior change as he yields to the temptation? Does he experience love or lust towards Alibech? Is everything,

including deception, fair in love? What do you think of the saints' experience when they lead an ascetic life, and their constant struggle with temptation?

*Theme: Awakening.* How does the development of Alibech's sexuality progress? In this story, how does the natural development of sexuality take place in the absence of society's acculturation? How does Alibech's behavior change after she experiences sexuality and pleasure? Does this change in women influence who is the initiator and aggressor in sexuality of men and women?

*Theme: Sexuality.* What are Ghismonda's ideas about her own sexuality? How does Ghismonda explain the rationale for her decision to take a lover? What does she mean that she is "flesh and blood"? How does her father try to suppress her daughter's nature? How did her parents interfere with her decisions of marital status and the choice of marriage and sexual partner and what was the result of this interference?



## Chaucer

### Introduction

*Real People on Pilgrimage* - Many of our introductory notes on Boccaccio need repeating in an introduction to Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, which were written only shortly after the work of Boccaccio. Chaucer, too, frames a series of tales, but is more interested in the tales as framed pieces than in the flow of the narrative into a pre-novel form. As in Boccaccio, a wide range of tones pervade the Chaucerian tales—from bawdy to uplifting—though Chaucer writes more comfortably inside a theme of social realism than does Boccaccio. The most striking difference between the two authors is Chaucer's language, supple epic poetry. It is usually said that the Western novel, a so dominant form of our literary taste today, springs from the growth of prose in the vernacular forms of late Mediaeval European languages. The epic, by contrast, is tightly linked to poetry.

### Readings

-*Bedford Anthology of World Literature, Book 2. Boston: Bedford-St. Martins, 2004.*

--*Canterbury Tales, Book 2, pp.*

### Questions

*General* - Does Chaucer's work seem more like epic than does Boccaccio's, and less like novel fiction?)

*Theme: Realism* - According to the Wife of Bath, what is the one thing that the women want most from their partner in marriage? To what degree is she reliable? What are the chief elements of humor in her narrative?

*Theme: Sexuality* - Please discuss the Wife of Bath' views on marriage, virginity, and sexuality. How well do her ideas correspond with the "official" Christian views of medieval times? What is the one thing that the women want most from their partner in marriage? How does she manage gain complete control over her husbands? What are the comic turns of the situation and the chief elements of humor in her narrative?