

Literary History of Britain: *Beowulf* to 1785

English 302A.001 – Fall 2022
TR 11-12:15
2206 Faner

Professor Ryan Netzley
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Course Description

This course is a survey of British literature from the first major epic, *Beowulf* (8th-10th centuries), to the Romantic period. Yes, that's almost a thousand years in fifteen weeks. Its primary aim is to give students a sense of the transformation of British literary forms from their origins in the early medieval period (or in classical antecedents) through the end of the Enlightenment. We'll approach these works through three generic sets: epic, satire, and lyric. The rationale here is that by reading medieval, Renaissance, Restoration, and eighteenth-century works in the same genre students will be better able to discern the differences between the literatures of these broad periods and identify shifts in subject, emphasis, tone, and form. This course asks you to become a critically informed respondent not just to individual literary works, but to a specifically literary history (not just a history that influences or provides the subject matter for literature). In practice that means that you'll be writing historical analyses of how literature and the literary alter as concepts (which is a slightly different prospect than writing about any given self-contained work). By the end of this course, you'll be able to produce your own tentative narrative about how literature develops over this long historical period, especially how it becomes the sort of thing one studies as a significant cultural object. You'll also be able to humiliate interlocutors who think that self-reflexivity, meta-narrative, and other avant-garde literary innovations started in 1918.

Course Objectives

The premise of this course is that broad generalizations about British literary history need to be examined and confirmed (or debunked) by each generation of scholars (that means you). You do that by writing about pivotal works and how they fit, or don't fit, these broader literary historical narratives. That's what the papers in this class ask you to do. You also do that by knowing and recognizing pivotal literary concepts (irony, epic, satire, etc.): exams in this course test that knowledge. Together, these two tasks will allow you cast to a discerning eye on English literature's development and to decimate the half-assed generalizations of charlatans.

Class Meetings: How to Prepare and What to Expect

1) Read all of the assigned text for *the first day* of discussion. "Read" does not mean skim, look at, or fondle. "Read" does mean that you've marked up your text with questions and short comments about difficult, complex, or interesting passages (obviously then, I expect you to bring the text to every class). It's for this reason that online and other digital editions are, frankly, crap. They encourage lazy reading without anything like engagement. But if you're into that sort of thing, go nuts. In general, if you have no questions or comments about a play or poem, you have not *read* it.

- 2) Write something about everything you read. This writing might just be the aforementioned questions and queries. I'm not going to grade this or ask you to turn it in (although I'll gladly comment on it if you wish), but it's the best way to collect and develop your thoughts on literature, as a prelude to or first stab at longer assignments.
- 3) Participate in class discussions. I do not plan to lecture for fifteen weeks, so have something to say (an interpretation or claim, a parallel, a thesis—e.g., something you've written in the course of your reading) or ask about the reading, the assignments, or the nature of the literary. You should also feel free to interrupt me (but not your classmates) if you have questions as I'm explaining a literary concept or historical phenomenon. Sometimes, class discussions will unfold seamlessly in response to my or your questions. On those days when it does not, you should be prepared for me to ask direct questions. Yet participation need not be entirely about talking: it also entails listening attentively to me and your classmates, taking seriously the questions that I pose, coming prepared to class, and just in general acting like an engaged student. To put it in negative terms, it means turning off your mobile phones, not text messaging during class, not disrupting class by leaving theatrically during discussion or making a big production of packing up before the class time is over—in sum, don't be a rude asshole. If you cannot at least fake interest in the course and avoid distracting your comrades who really are interested, skip class (there's no penalty for doing so) or drop immediately.
- 4) I think you should wear a mask to protect yourself and your classmates against a still prevalent airborne contagion (particularly in the poorly ventilated spaces of Faner Hall).

Assignments

- 1) **Literary History:** You will write three literary history papers, one for each major unit of the course. Each one should be approximately 1800-2100 words. You should email these to me as an MS Word document/attachment. Due dates are listed on the schedule and a fuller description of each paper is available at the end of this document.
- 2) **Exams:** You will take two short answer exams in this class. These exams will test your knowledge of literary and historical terms, significant dates, and passage recognition. For example, you will be asked to briefly define terms like “sonnet,” identify a sonnet when you see one, explain the significance of a date like 1660, and identify a passage that we discussed in class and briefly explain its significance and the rhetorical figures employed therein. Information for exams will come from class discussion and from the Norton anthology introductory material for individual works and the general historical periods under consideration. If I write a term on the board or spend ten minutes defining a concept, that means that it's likely to be on the exam. Likewise, if we spend twenty minutes explicating a passage in Donne, that too will probably appear on the exam. A sample exam is included at the end of this document.

Exams in this class are two-stage. That means that you'll take it and then submit a corrected version two weeks later: “corrected” means that you've gone through the exam, noted what you missed, checked your notes (needless to say, taking thorough notes would make this process much easier), and then provided correct responses to the exam questions. So you'll submit the original exam along with a corrected copy (the corrected copy may be either a hard copy or an email attachment, but you will need to return to me the original marked exam). The rationale for this procedure, obviously, is that exams on their own aren't especially useful pedagogical devices. They only become so when they're something more

than an evaluation of whether you've remembered something (i.e., oriented toward the past) as opposed to tools for helping you to remember something in the future.

Texts

Since we will be reading several texts in “translation” (*Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Utopia*) and a large number of excerpted works, I strongly recommend that you buy this edition of the *Norton Anthology*.

The Norton Anthology of English Literature, gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 10th ed., Vol. A: The Middle Ages, Vol. B: The Sixteenth Century and the Early Seventeenth Century, Vol. C: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century (W.W. Norton & Company, 2018).

Office Business

There is a reason that I have office hours: namely, to talk to students. Please feel free to stop by and discuss any questions that you may have about this course. Please wear a mask if you're planning to meet with me in person. I've also scheduled Zoom office hours for those of you who prefer to avoid in-person meetings in poorly ventilated spaces (i.e., Faner offices). If you are unable to make my regular office hours, please speak to me about scheduling a meeting at some other time.

Grading

If you demonstrate a baseline level of competence with the material in this course, you'll then choose your final grade. This is not because I'm a nice, compassionate person, but because grades, rewards, praise, even cash actually impede learning. Instead of offering a more elaborate rationale for this procedure, I'll point you only to Alfie Kohn's *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* (Boston: Mariner, 1993). If you'd prefer a shorter web version in different conceptual terms, see Jeff Moro's blog post, “Against Cop Shit”: <https://jeffreymoro.com/blog/2020-02-13-against-cop-shit/>. In short, grades are for meat. You're not meat.

“Baseline level of competence” means doing all of the assignments. So four things: 1) turning in all assigned papers and, pivotally, writing the actual paper assigned; 2) completing any paper revisions that I require; 3) completing both exams; 4) submitting completely corrected exams. For papers, “doing the assignment” means the following:

- 1) making and supporting an argument, an analytic or interpretive claim about literary history (i.e., not a synopsis of supporting texts, a glib evaluation of them, or the assertion of obvious analogies; these papers are not tests of whether you've done all the reading or surveys of your opinions)
- 2) responding, in some capacity, to the assignment prompt
- 3) not making rudimentary factual and reading errors

Where students most often fail to reach this baseline threshold is in not doing the actual paper assignment (e.g., sending me plot synopses when that's not what the paper asks for), so please pay careful attention to the assignments and read my comments on your papers carefully. If those comments require revisions, then you'll need to revise and resubmit the paper in order to attain this baseline level of competence.

Plagiarism

I shouldn't have to write this, but just in case: you cannot demonstrate a baseline level of competence with a plagiarized paper (finding something online or in some other book is not baseline competence).

Schedule

For all assigned texts, I strongly recommend that you read the Norton introductions. In addition, read the Norton historical introductions for all of these broad historical periods.

Epic Seriousness

T, 23 August: course introduction: What is medieval and when does it become so? Does the Renaissance exist? What is Enlightenment?

R, 25 August: John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, Book 9 Proem (lines 1-47)

T, 30 August: John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 2-4

R, 1 September: John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 2-4

T, 6 September: *Beowulf*

R, 8 September: *Beowulf*

T, 13 September: Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book 1

R, 15 September: Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, Book 1

T, 20 September: Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*

R, 23 September: Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*

Satire and the Social

T, 27 September: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, “The General Prologue” and “Chaucer’s Retraction”

R, 29 September: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, “The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale”

F, 30 September: **paper 1 due**

T, 4 October: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” and “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale”

R, 6 October: **exam 1**

T, 11 October: Ben Jonson, *Volpone*

R, 13 October: Ben Jonson, *Volpone*

T, 18 October: Thomas More, *Utopia*

R, 20 October: Thomas More, *Utopia*; **exam 1 correction due**

T, 25 October: Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, Part 4

R, 27 October: Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, Part 4

Lyric Love, Nature, and Faith

T, 1 November: Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy* and *Astrophil and Stella*

R, 3 November: Mary Wroth, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus*

F, 4 November: **paper 2 due**

T, 8 November: no class

R, 10 November: Robert Herrick, "To the Virgins to Make Much of Time"

Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress"

Thomas Carew, *Poems*

John Donne, "Elegy 16," "Elegy 19," "Sappho to Philaenis"

Swift, "The Lady's Dressing Room"

Mary Wortley Montagu "The Reason That Induced Dr. Swift to Write a Poem Called the Lady's Dressing Room"

T, 15 November: Robert Herrick, "Corinna's Going A-Maying"; "The Hock Cart"; "To Marigolds"; "His Return to London"

Aemilia Lanyer, "The Description of Cook-ham"

Ben Jonson, "To Penshurst"

Thomas Carew, "To Saxham"

Andrew Marvell, "The Garden" and the Mower poems

Margaret Cavendish, "The Hunting of the Hare"

Anne Fitch "A Nocturnal Reverie"

Thomas Gray, "Ode on the Death of a Favorite Cat"; "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

R, 17 November: **exam 2**

T, 22 November: no class

R, 24 November: no class

T, 29 November: John Donne, *Songs and Sonnets*

R, 1 December: Anne Vaughan Locke, *A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner*, Sonnet 4

John Donne, *Divine Poems*

Richard Crashaw, *Carmen Deo Nostro*

George Herbert, *The Temple*

"The Dream of the Rood"

Julian of Norwich, *The Book of Showings*

F, 2 December: **paper 3 due**

T, 6 December: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

R, 8 December: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; **exam 2 correction due**

R, 15 December: **grade choice email due (noon)**

Paper 1

How do English epics change over the course of the medieval, Renaissance, and Enlightenment periods? Put another way, why do we no longer write epics? Your paper should find and respond to a general account of the epic's literary historical development over this period (this could be the Norton anthology's own historical period introduction). Its response to this general account should use specific textual evidence and examples from the poems we've read to make its case. In that, this paper is about honing your skills in noticing literary phenomena: i.e., the sorts of textual anomalies that support or disprove literary historical claims.

Some general comments on the type of paper you're writing: a literary history paper often turns on the plausibility of your characterizations (for example, the claim that epic lacks character development). That means that you'll need precise explication of passages from the poems you're referring to so as to ground these general characterizations. Put another way, although this paper asks you to work at a fairly high level of generality, your argument will not be successful without clearly demarcated examples (that means passages and interpretive commentary on those passages).

Some things to avoid: You should not then produce mere summaries of a text or confessional statements about whether you like or dislike it: these do not really help you to answer the question posed. In addition, be wary of cliché critical concepts like "relatability" that don't explain very much (this one essentially means that you liked it, and nothing more). Your paper should also anticipate and defuse objections to its explication of a given passage as well as objections to your overall thesis. In literary studies, that's often how convincing argument proceeds: working against and debunking alternative explanations for the passage or phenomenon under consideration (the rhetorical term for this is "procatlepsis"). The bulk of class discussion of a given play or poem will revolve around teasing out precisely such alternatives and objections: i.e., the reason to discuss multiple interpretations of literary history is not to advance the dim-witted cause of pluralist subjectivism ("it's up to the reader!"), but to outline the sorts of arguments you'll need to challenge to make a convincing case for your own claims.

Logistics. I suggest an approximate length of 1800-2100 words (for format, I prefer Times New Roman, 12 point, double spaced). Email these papers to me as an MS Word attachment by the date listed on the schedule.

Paper 2

Why is early modern, medieval, or Enlightenment satire worth reading today? Or if it's not worth reading, why isn't it? This paper asks you to examine how literature's political and social impact persists (or doesn't) across time. It also asks you to explore whether satire presents itself as having real-world impact. For this paper, I'd strongly suggest tracking down a reputable definition of satire as a place to begin (you'll need to do more than Google it or turn to a dictionary). Whereas the first paper was about noticing literary phenomena, this paper is an exercise in making an evaluative argument about them.

Some general comments on the type of paper you're writing: a literary history paper often turns on the plausibility of your characterizations (for example, the claim that satire requires self-recognition on the part of its targets). That means that you'll need precise explication of passages from the poems you're referring to so as to ground these general characterizations. Put another way, although this paper asks you to work at a fairly high level of generality, your argument will not be successful without clearly demarcated examples (that means passages and interpretive commentary on those passages).

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Paper 3

What is a poem? You've read poems that seduce, describe nature, praise god, challenge god, ridicule other poets, fantasize about the end of the world, and offer mystical dream visions. Is a functional definition—keyed to what a poem does or accomplishes—the correct way to define verse? How does this definition change across the historical periods we've studied? This paper should be more than a survey of types of definitions across these various periods: functionalist, formalist, aesthetic, professional. It should use the literary history and texts you know to answer this question in some fashion, not throw up its hands and say “it depends.”

Some general comments on the type of paper you're writing: a literary history paper often turns on the plausibility of your characterizations (for example, the claim that Petrarchan sonnets seek to delight and instruct). That means that you'll need precise explication of passages from the poems you're referring to so as to ground these general characterizations. Put another way, although this paper asks you to work at a fairly high level of generality, your argument will not be successful without clearly demarcated examples (that means passages and interpretive commentary on those passages).

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Name:

English 302A
Professor Ryan Netzley

Sample Exam

Please place each work that we've read on the following timeline:

476 1066 1485 1603 1660 1785

Briefly explain the significance of the following dates. Your short answer should include the name of the event and the significance of the event:

1066:

1588:

1649:

1660:

Briefly define the following terms:

sonnet:

irony:

satire:

epic:

metaphor:

Identify the source of (author and title) and the literary or rhetorical devices at work in the following passages. Your answer should include an explanation for why this device is the one you've identified:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles today
Tomorrow will be dying.

Of Mans First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing Heav'nly Muse, that on the secret top
Of Oreb, or of Sinai, didst inspire
That Shepherd, who first taught the chosen Seed,
In the Beginning how the Heav'ns and Earth
Rose out of Chaos ...