

## ENG 260: Medieval Epic Literature



### Course Information:

Instructor: C. Fee  
Meeting Time: MWF 9:00-9:50 AM  
Meeting Place: Breidenbaugh 307  
Office: Breidenbaugh 406  
Office Hours: MWF 2:00 PM-3:00 PM, and by appointment  
Office Phone: x6762  
Home Phone: 717.528.4799 (Call before 10:00 PM)  
E-mail: cfee@gettysburg.edu  
Peer Learning Associate: Meghan Peck  
E-mail: peckme01@gettysburg.edu  
Cell Phone: 443.534.9342

### Required Texts: (ALL TEXTS ARE ON RESERVE AT THE LIBRARY)

Burgess, G., ed. *The Song of Roland*. (Penguin Classics 1990) ISBN: 0140445323

Byock, J., ed. *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. (Penguin Classics 2000) ISBN: 0140447385

Fee, C. & D. Leeming. *Gods, Heroes, & Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain*. (Oxford 2004) ISBN: 0195174038

Fee C. *Medieval Mythology*. (Praeger Forthcoming) Selections distributed in draft form.

Gantz, J. *The Mabinogion*. (Penguin Classics 1976) ISBN: 0140443223

Hamilton, R., J. Perry, & I. Michael, eds. *The Poem of The Cid*. (Penguin Classics 1985) ISBN: 0140444467

Hamilton, W. *Blind Harry's Wallace* (Luath Press 1998) ISBN: 0946487332

Hatto, A. ed. *Nibelungenlied*. (Penguin Classics 1985) ISBN: 0140441379

Heaney, S. *Beowulf : A New Verse Translation*. (Norton 2001) ISBN: 0393320979

Kinsella, T. *The Tain*. (Oxford 2002) ISBN: 0192803735

**Required Films:** (ALL FILMS ARE ON RESERVE AT THE LIBRARY)

Each student must view TWO (2) films from the following list, which is organized into FIVE (5) categories:

1) No more than ONE (1) of the following *Beowulf* adaptations:

*Beowulf* (2007)

*Beowulf & Grendel* (2005)

*Beowulf* (1999)

*The 13th Warrior* (1999)

2) No more than ONE (1) segment of the *Ring Cycle*:

*Der Ring des Nibelungen* (2005)

3) No more than ONE (1) of the following *El Cid* adaptations:

*El Cid* (2008)

*El Cid* (2004)

4) *Prince Igor, The Classic Motion Picture with The Kirov Opera* (2007)

5) *Braveheart* (2000)

**Course Description and Objectives:**

Medieval Epic Literature is replete with folkloric, legendary, and mythic elements which can be linked to an evocative material record, and these traditions are chock full of gods and goddesses, heroes and villains, monsters, magic, trickery, and treachery. This course will begin with a discussion of the natures of oral narratives and of mythic archetypes, and an introduction to theoretical concepts which will help us to understand the cultural functions of story-telling and myth-making; we then will move on to discuss the development of Medieval Epic literary traditions founded upon far earlier oral materials. We will examine how contemporary media reinterpret epic material and we will discuss whether or not these media utilize narrative methods which are analogous to those of oral story-tellers. We also will discuss how the epic imagination conceives and construes the monstrous, and we will have occasion to examine how such conceptions illuminate our own understandings of what is alien. Finally, we will create our own contemporary multimedia reinterpretations of Medieval Epic themes and materials. Thus, in addition to requiring traditional scholarly skills which are assessed through conventional exams and essays, this course is designed to develop critical thinking, creative expression, and multimedia technology skills.

### Course Evaluation:

PREPARATION & PARTICIPATION:	+/-05%
MOVIE REVIEW ONE:	+/-10%
MOVIE REVIEW TWO:	+/-10%
GROUP GAME PROJECT:	+/-15%
GROUP SAGA PROJECT:	+/-15%
MIDTERM EXAM:	+/-10%
FINAL EXAM:	+/-15%
LITERARY ESSAY:	+/-20%

**\*ALL ASPECTS of this course must be completed in order to pass the course, regardless of the overall percentage earned.\***

### Course Requirements:

The content of this course will be delivered and student learning will be assessed both through traditional reading, writing, and testing and through more recent multimedia innovations. Games and videos are examples of great contemporary vehicles for reinterpreting epic narratives; in some cases, interactive technology offers opportunities for open-ended and audience-centered story-lines that might remind one of the essence of oral formulaic theory and related concepts concerning ancient modes of story-telling. In this course students both will play interactive games and view videos in order to develop more sophisticated understandings of how such media may reflect in some measure ancient story-telling techniques; moreover, the students in this class will participate in the development of their own games and videos in order to illustrate such understanding.

#### Two Movie Reviews:

Each student is to compose TWO (2) Movie Reviews of 1000-1500 words each. For each review, the student should screen one of the films based on one of the epic texts for this course, find and read at least three relevant published reviews of that film, and discuss in detail how that film appropriates and transforms its epic content. How successful is the film in capturing the spirit and source material of the original text? How successful is the film on its own merits? Are there ways in which this film-maker employed artistic license and cinematic techniques that we might equate with the oral formulaic methods ancient story-tellers used to produce idiosyncratic versions of tales from their vast repertoires? Each Movie Review should cite at least FIVE (5) specific passages of text from the original epic, at least five (5) specific lines and/or detailed scene descriptions from the film, and at least TWO (2) relevant passages from *each* of at least TWO (2) published reviews of the film. No more than one third of each review may comprise salient plot summary; at least a third should be devoted to the student's own critical analysis of the film's appropriation of the epic source material, and roughly the same proportion should be devoted to placing the film within the context of the published reviews, the student's understanding of story-telling techniques old and new, etc.

#### Group Game Projects:

The Group Game Projects will require that the class be divided into three groups, each of which will work with one site from the *Otter's Ransom* project: Either Ruthwell, Brussels, or Vercelli. Using the existing IF games from the *Otter's Ransom* project as models, each group will devise a game which imagines how and why the relevant object was conceived and developed, and how and why that object now resides where it does. This project affords the opportunity for a great deal of creativity and poetic license, with the understanding that such a game should be well-grounded in historical and archaeological detail concerning the specific site and object in question, with special attention paid to what we have learned as a class regarding the Cult of the

Cross and how Christ was perceived as a heroic figure of epic proportions in Anglo-Saxon England. Working under the supervision and with the expertise of the Student Associate in this course, each group will devise an Interactive Fiction (IF) Project of 2000 or more words involving a creative approach to that group's project site. We will play the finished games as a class. Successful projects will be added to the relevant *Otter's Ransom* site, and the students involved will receive named credit for their contributions.

#### Group Saga Projects:

The class will be divided into three different groups in order to develop the Group Saga Project. Working in consultation with the instructor and the Student Associate, each group will recast an adventure, quest, battle, or other significant episode from one of the epics we've read; students are encouraged to incorporate music, dance, dramatic reading, reenactment, or other modes of expression as they see fit, and they certainly may update or otherwise change settings, names, and other details. Indeed, creativity and individuality are encouraged in the development of this project, with the vital understanding that each group should think carefully about the nature of epic, of archetypes, and of oral formulaic theory, that each project should demonstrate a command of this knowledge, and that each group should be able to defend the choices and rationale which led to its particular project's final form. The various movies listed on the syllabus offer a starting point for thinking about how to retell an epic episode, to be sure, but students should not feel constrained by the conventions of the films on reserve for this course. Some guiding questions each group should ask as they develop their Saga Project include: What seems eternal and most valuable about a particular epic hero and/or episode? Why has it survived as long as it has? What has it to teach us today? How can we best capture and illustrate this essence? In this polished final form, each project will comprise a 10-15 minute digital video clip that we will view as a class during the last week of the term.

#### Two Exams:

Mastery of the traditional content of this course will be assessed through the ancient rite of passage of written examination. There will be two exams in this course; each exam will be divided into three sections: Short-answer identifications; passage identifications; and essay questions concerning major themes which we have discussed in class. All assigned reading is fair game for exam questions, whether or not that reading is discussed in class; conversely, material from the discussions not raised in the reading may likewise provide fodder for a few questions. In addition, the exams most definitely will cover material that each student is expected to absorb by visiting the assigned *Otter's Ransom* project pages, reading the relevant site reports, and playing the relevant games. BE ADVISED: The *Otter's Ransom* multimedia resource is designed to supplement and complement the course reading and the class discussion so most of the information contained in that resource will NOT be covered in class, unless a student raises a specific question concerning some of this material.

#### Final Literary Essay:

In consultation with the instructor, each student will choose a topic regarding a particular epic or group of epics, quite possibly organized under a thematic rubric. A good place to begin would be by tackling the slippery nature of what "Medieval" and "epic" mean in the first place. After developing a sense of these concepts, then, each student should apply this understanding to the epic(s), hero(es), and themes at hand. Successful literary essays will cite relevant passages from the primary texts copiously, and will fully, logically, and smoothly integrate these citations within the prose of the essay; students should determine through consultation with the instructor what secondary sources may be necessary. The student will pursue this topic in a paper of 2000-2500 words.

## Course Schedule:

### Week 1:

Introduction to Medieval Epic

Introduction to the Middle Ages, to the genre of the epic, mythic archetypes, and oral formulaic story-telling.

"Introduction" in Fee (ix-xi and 3-9). Introduction to the Epic Hero.

Introducing the Lost Gods of Britain: "Gods? These Yahoos carry on like the cast of an Aussie soap opera!" "The Pantheons" and "Deity Types" in Fee (13-73 and 75-83). Introduction to *The Secret of Otter's Ransom*; use this resource to explore Andreas, a site on the Isle of Man which has much to teach us about the Norse gods. Begin *Beowulf*.

### Ancient Heroes in Medieval Epic

**(Each primary text—usually a book from the list on the syllabus—should be read in entirety unless otherwise indicated; generally, we will cover about a third of any given text on a particular class day. The readings from *Gods, Heroes and Kings* are indicated as "Fee," and should be read *in addition* to the primary texts.)**

### Week 2:

Meet (or revisit!) Beowulf, the Anglo-Saxon Epic Hero:

Introduction to Beowulf: Christian elements and Germanic traditions (Wyrd, Fate, Providence). *Beowulf* lines 1-916; why does Grendel attack the Danes? Mythic Archetypes in Beowulf: "The Norns," "The Valkyries," "The Draugar," "The Hero's Descent into the Otherworld," and "Heroic Battles with Monsters" in Fee (101-104, 107-108, 124-126, 127-130, and 132-133).

*Beowulf* (cont.): Oral Culture and Oral Formulaic Theory. *Beowulf* lines 917-2072; why does the poet include the story of Hildeburh? What other "asides" have you noticed? What function do they serve? The Beowulf poet's sense of history: "Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxon Heroic Saga as History" in Fee (166-168).

Conclude *Beowulf*: Heroic ethos, social structure, and the comitatus. Beowulf through the end; what is Wicglaf's significance? That of the Dragon? Grendel and his dam? What is the role of "ring-giving" in the poem? What about "peace-weaving"? How successful are these practices? Norse analogues to Beowulf: "The Bear's Son" and "Norse Echoes of English Heroic Sagas" in Fee (106-107 and 155-160).

### Week 3:

View and discuss Benjamin Bagby's reinterpretation of *Beowulf*; does Bagby's version illustrate vibrant story-telling techniques? Does it display or betray aspects fundamental to your notions of oral formulaic theory?

Introduction to the Viking Age and the Historical Maldon; *The Battle of Maldon* (Primary text distributed as handout); is Birhtnoth heroic or foolish? According to his standards or yours? How does this short Old English poem illustrate epic themes and concerns? How does it deviate from the epic?

Maldon (cont.) Class Reenactment of the Battle of Maldon; how seriously does the poet take the heroic code? The Viking Settlement and Kingdoms in Britain and Ireland; "Sagas of Anglo-Saxon

England” and “Anglo-Saxon Historical Sagas and Heroism” in Fee (161-166). Use *Otter’s Ransom* to explore Lindisfarne, a site on the northeast coast of Britain where the Vikings famously raided.

#### Week 4:

Meet Sigurd, the Ancient Epic Dragon-Slayer Hero of the Norse *Saga of the Volsungs*:

Begin the *Saga of the Volsungs*: What do you learn about the pagan Norse gods from this saga? Use *Otter’s Ransom* to explore Maughold, a site on the Isle of Man which is a treasure-trove of crosses covered with pagan myths.

Continue the *Saga of the Volsungs*: Compare this dragon-slaying sequence with that in *Beowulf*. “The Lineage of Sigurd” and “Sigurd the Dragon Slayer” in Fee (119-120 and 130-131).

Conclude the *Saga of the Volsungs*: Compare the feud sequences in this saga with those in *Beowulf*.

#### Week 5:

Meet Siegfried, the Epic Hero of the North Recast in the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*:

Compare several characters central to the plots of both the *Saga of the Volsungs* and the *Nibelungenlied*. Note carefully differences in the way any given character is named or described in the two texts.

Compare several episodes shared in common by the *Saga of the Volsungs* and the *Nibelungenlied*. Note carefully both similarities and differences between each pair of episodes.

Note the single most important passage from each text that does NOT occur in the other text and describe how that passage makes the *Saga of the Volsungs* a significantly different text from the *Nibelungenlied*, and vice-versa.

### **MOVIE REVIEW ONE DUE**

#### Week 6:

Meet Cuchulainn, the Epic Hero of the Irish *Tain*:

Begin the *Tain*: The events chronicled in the Tain might be dated to what period? How might we date the events in this way? What are some of the cultural elements which might allow us to date the action of the narrative in this way? “The Ulster Cycle” in Fee (170-175).

Continue the *Tain*: How might the Irish origin of this narrative complicate our cultural understanding of the likely date of the events described in the text? To what factors might you attribute the lack of a unifying narrative tone, the contradictions inherent in the text, the repetitions, the fantastic elements juxtaposed with place-name origin myths and purported historical facts?

Conclude the *Tain*: Be prepared to discuss the cultural, archaeological, and mythological elements manifested by the *Tain*. Be prepared to discuss mythic archetypes of the hero as these are manifested in the *Tain*.

#### Week 7:

Meet Pryderi, the Epic Hero of the Welsh *Mabinogion*:

Begin with the First Branch of the *Mabinogion*: How many tales in the total collection of the *Mabinogion*? How many branches of the *Mabinogion* proper? What are they? "The *Mabinogion*" in Fee (181-185).

Continue with the Second Branch of the *Mabinogion*: Be prepared to discuss mythic archetypes of the hero as these are manifested in the *Mabinogion*.

Conclude with the Third and Fourth Branches of the *Mabinogion*: What is the Mabon/Maponos? How does Pryderi relate to the concept of the Mabon, and how might this concept be said to draw a seemingly somewhat disparate selection of Branches into a more coherent *Mabinogion*?

#### Week 8:

Synthesis of Pagan Ethos and Christian Mission: Jesus Christ Recast as Epic Hero: *The Dream of the Rood* (Primary text distributed as handout)

Can you identify any Germanic/pagan elements in the *Dream of the Rood*?

The Ruthwell Cross, The Cult of the Cross, and the Germanic tradition of the Warrior Christ in the *Dream of the Rood*; "The Dying God" and "Sacred Objects and Places" in Fee (83-88 and 111-116).

Explore the Cult of the Cross objects in *The Secret of Otter's Ransom*. Discuss Group Game Project.

### **MIDTERM EXAM**

#### **Border Heroes in Medieval Epic**

#### Week 9:

Introduction to the themes of Holy War, of Border-Raiding, and of the Border Hero:

Meet Roland, the Epic Hero of Charlemagne's Crusade against the Saracens

How might the *Song of Roland* be described in the terms of Christian typology?

How might the *Song of Roland* be construed in cosmic terms as a Holy War between Good and Evil?

Be prepared to discuss the *Song of Roland* in the terms of mythic archetypes such as the Dying God, Battles with Monsters, and Place and Object myths

#### Week 10:

Meet the Cid, the Epic *Campeador* of Medieval Spain:

Be prepared to discuss the artificial dichotomy and easy opposition we are forced to interrogate in the context of the battle between Good and Evil in *The Cid*. In other words, how are we likely to see Good and Evil in black-and-white terms that the poem first seems to support, then seems to call into question?

Be prepared to discuss objects from *The Cid* which help to link together the martial and marital strife of the poem, and which help us to understand how masculine power structures can be illustrated through relationships involving women.

Be prepared to discuss *The Cid* in the terms of comparative mythology.

## **GROUP GAME PROJECT DUE**

### Week 11:

Meet Basil Digenis Akritis, the Epic “Two-Blooded Border Lord” of Byzantium (Primary text on reserve; “Holy War” Chapter from *Medieval Mythology* distributed as handout):

The Birth of Basil: The Unique Twin-Heritage of the Hero  
Basil and the Beasts: The Coming-of-Age Hunt

Basil takes a Wife: Bride-Snatching as the Ultimate Hunt  
Basil’s Proving Ground: Battles with Monsters, Brigands, and an Amazon

Basil’s Losing Battle: Lust as the Hero’s Downfall  
Basil’s Meets his End: The Death of the Hero

### Week 12:

Meet Prince Igor, the ill-fated Epic Bastion of Medieval Russia (Primary text on reserve; “Holy War” Chapter from *Medieval Mythology* distributed as handout):

Who is credited with the conversion of Russia to Christianity? In what year did this conversion take place? What is the great epic of Medieval Russian Literature? In what year was it composed? What military campaign does it chronicle? In what year did that campaign take place?

What might be termed the “Tatar Yoke?” What event might be said to have freed Russia of the Tatar Yoke? In what year did this event take place? What literary text chronicles this event, and what is the relationship between this literary text and the great epic of Medieval Russian Literature?

Be prepared to discuss the legendary, mythic, and folkloric elements of Prince Igor’s epic misadventure, and take special care to note specific similarities between the great epic of Medieval Russian Literature and *The Song of Roland*.

## **MOVIE REVIEW TWO DUE**

### Week 13:

Meet Sir William Wallace, the Epic Hero of Medieval Scotland of *Braveheart* fame:

Synthesis of National Hero and Martyred Saint: William Wallace Recast as Christ-Figure: Blind Harry’s *Wallace*

Be prepared to discuss William Wallace in the terms of mythic archetypes, in the terms of typology, and as an epic hero

How does Mel Gibson’s version compare to the original?

## **INDIVIDUAL LITERARY ESSAY DUE**

### Week 14: **GROUP SAGA PROJECT DUE**

**FINAL EXAM DURING DESIGNATED SLOT**