



English 401: The Battle for Britain Ancient Mythologies in Medieval British Literature



COURSE INFORMATION:

Instructor: C. Fee

Meeting Time: W 6:30-9:00 PM

Meeting Place: Breidenbaugh 312

Office: Breidenbaugh 406

Office Hours: MWF 10:00 AM-11:30 PM and by appointment

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COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The islands of Britain have been a crossroads of Man, Myth, and God for thousands of years. The ancient Celts and their beliefs displaced earlier indigenous peoples and their Gods, only to find themselves displaced in turn. The Romans conquered the British Celts, then abandoned them to the savage mercies of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, Germanic invaders who were themselves quite nearly overcome by an influx of their Scandinavian cousins and neighbors, the Vikings. Each of these groups brought with it legends of heroes and myths of Gods, rites of sacrifice and other religious practices, belief systems peculiar to each culture, place, and era of origin. With each succeeding wave of invasion, new mythic systems came into contact and conflict with the older systems already established in Britain. Indeed, these waves of invasion themselves sometimes generated new mythic traditions, to which the legends of Arthur certainly attest. New Gods sometimes supplanted old Gods, but often traditions merged and accommodated one another, bringing to life new, uniquely British mythic systems. This accommodation is even true of Christianity, which was, for example, transformed by Celtic culture into something quite unlike its continental counterparts. In Britain, as nowhere else in Europe, Germanic, Celtic, Classical, and Christian influences came into contact, conflict, and eventually confluence; this assemblage of ancient heroes, Gods, and practices resulted, long after "pagan" beliefs were assumed dead and gone, with a particularly rich, fertile, and volatile medieval literary tradition, a tradition through which we may yet converse with the shadowy Gods of old.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

In this course we will discuss representative samples from these various mythic traditions. It will be our object to place the myths in their historical and cultural contexts, discussing the points of contrast and confluence between the Celtic, Roman, Saxon, Norse, and Christian traditions, and examining the myths comparatively according to type. We will conclude by examining a number of well-known and popular medieval texts that illustrate how ancient mythic traditions continued to be a cultural force in Britain centuries after the conversion to Christianity. Moreover, students in this course work as my colleagues in constructing an interactive, multimedia virtual tour of Medieval Britain.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

- Blair, John. *The Anglo-Saxon Age: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. (ISBN 0192854038)
- Borroff, Marie. trans. and ed. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Patience, and Pearl: Verse Translations*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2000. (ISBN 0393976580)
- Bradley, S.A.J., ed. *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1994. (ISBN 0460875078)
- Byock, Jesse L., trans. *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*. Penguin Classics ed. New York: Penguin, 1998. (ISBN: 014043593X)
- Byock, Jesse L., trans. *The Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*. Penguin Classics ed. New York: Penguin, 2000. (ISBN: 0140447385)
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. (ISBN 052159507X)
- Cunliffe, Barry. *The Celts: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003. (ISBN 0192804189)
- Fee, Christopher with David Leeming. *Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. (ISBN: 0195174038)
- Fox, Denton and Hermann Palsson, trans. *Grettir's Saga*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1974. (ISBN: 0802061656)
- Gantz, J. *The Mabinogion*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1976. (ISBN: 0140443223)
- Gillingham, John and Ralph A. Griffiths. *Medieval Britain: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. (ISBN 019285402X)
- Green, Miranda. *Celtic Myths*. Legendary Past Series. Austin: U of Texas P, 1993. (ISBN: 0292727542)
- Kinsella, Thomas, trans. *The Tain*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. (ISBN: 0192803735)
- Lewis, Thrope, trans. *The History of the Kings of Britain*. Reprint ed. New York: Viking Penguin, 1981. (ISBN 0140441700)
- Malory, T. *Le Morte Darthur: The Winchester Manuscript*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. (ISBN: 0192824201)
- Page, R.I. *Norse Myths*. The Legendary Past Series. Austin: U of Texas P, 1991. (ISBN: 0292755465)
- Richards, Julian D. *The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005. (ISBN 0192806076)
- Salway, Peter. *Roman Britain: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. (ISBN 0192854046)

COURSE SCHEDULE:

WEEK 1:

Introduction to the Mythology of Britain

Introduction and Overview of History of Early Britain; Introduction to Comparative Mythology and Methods

WEEKS 2-3:

The Mythology of Ancient Britain

Readings:

The Celts: A Very Short Introduction

Celtic Myths

The Tain

Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain

("The Pantheons"--63-73; Celtic "Deity Types"--75-109; "Sacred Objects and Places" 114-115)

("Sagas of Ireland"--169-181)

Schedule:

Deity archetypes and rituals of the Ancient Celts

Iron Age Celtic culture and ritual in the Medieval Irish *Tain*

The Epic Irish Hero of the *Tain*

WEEK 4:

The Mythology of Roman Britain

Readings:

Roman Britain: A Very Short Introduction

Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*

Schedule:

The Romans in Britain

The Romano-British response to Hengst and Horsa: The Rise of the Myth of Arthur

WEEKS 5-7:

The Mythology of Post-Roman Britain

Reading:

The Mabinogion

Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain

("Sagas of Wales"--181-189)

(Celtic "Creation and Apocalypse"--139-145)

Schedule:

The Four Branches of *The Mabinogion*: Gods, Heroes, and Mythic Themes of Yore abound in the stories of Pwyll, Branwen, Manawydan, and Math

Three Independent Native Tales of *The Mabinogion*: History becomes Legend and is Shrouded in the trappings of Folklore and Myth in the Dream Visions of Macsen Wledig and Rhonabwy, and in the adventures of Lludd and Llefelys

Three Arthurian Romances of *The Mabinogion*: A Tapestry of Ancient Celtic Mythology woven into the Medieval Welsh Tales of Owain, Peredur, and Gereint

WEEKS 8-9:

The Mythology of Anglo-Saxon Britain

Readings:

The Anglo-Saxon Age: A Very Short Introduction

Anglo-Saxon Poetry

Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain

("The Dying God"--83-88)

("Sacred Objects and Places"--111-116)

("Saint Helen Seeks the True Cross"--123-124)

("Miles Christi"--134-135)

("Apocalypse and Armageddon"--142-145)

Schedule:

The Apocalyptic Tradition and the Cult of the Cross: Anglo-Saxon Poetry ("The Ruthwell Cross Inscription"--4-5; "The Dream of the Rood"--158-163; "Elene"--164-197; "Christ III"--228-248; "Judgment Day II"--528-535)

Saints' Lives, Types of Christ, and the Body as Window to the Soul: Anglo-Saxon Poetry ("Andreas"--110-153; "Guthlac B"--269-283; "Juliana"--301-320)

WEEKS 10-12

The Mythology of Viking Britain

Readings:

The Vikings: A Very Short Introduction

The Norse Myths

The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki

Grettir's Saga

The Saga of the Volsungs

Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain

(As outlined below)

Schedule:

Introducing the Gods of the North: *Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain* [N.B. Focus on Germanic--i.e. Norse and Anglo-Saxon--material.] ("Preface"--ix-xi; "Introduction"--3-9; "The Pantheons"--13-63; "Deity Types"--75-99; "Sacred Objects and Places"--111-116; "Heroes and Heroines"--117-124; "Creation and Apocalypse"--139-145); *Norse Myths* (Page) (7-78)

Beowulf and the Northern Imagination I--The Hero and the Troll: *Beowulf* ("Introduction" and ll. 1-836); *The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki* (vii-xxxii and 1-78); *Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain* ("Germanic Demigods and Spirits"--101-108; "Heroic Battles with Monsters"--127-130; "The Sagas"--147-148; "Norse Echoes of English Heroic Sagas"--155-158); An

Beowulf and the Northern Imagination II--The Hero and the Descent into the Water-Wife's Cave: *Beowulf* (ll. 837-2199); *Grettir's Saga* (viii-xiii and 3-187); *Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain* ("The Hero's Descent into the Otherworld"--124-127; "Norse Echoes of English Heroic Sagas"--158-161)

Beowulf and the Northern Imagination III--The Hero and the Dragon: *Beowulf* (ll. 2200-3182); *The Saga of the Volsungs* (1-109); *Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain* ("Heroic Battles with Monsters"--130-137; "Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxon Heroic Saga as History"--166-168);

WEEKS 13-14:

The Mythology of King Arthur in Medieval Britain

Readings:

Medieval Britain: A Very Short Introduction

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale

Le Morte Darthur

Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain

(As outlined below)

Schedule:

Fertility, Sacrifice, and the Celtic Heritage of The Arthurian Romance: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (in entirety); *The Mabinogion* ("Culhwch and Olwen"--80-113); *Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain* ("The Sacrificial Quest"--192-201)

Missing Persons, Magic Dances, and the Celtic Vision of the Fairy World: *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* (in entirety); *Gods, Heroes, and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain* ("The Love Quest"--201-206") and ("The Penitential Quest"--206-210); The Loathly Lady and Sovranty Themes

Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*: Fully Formed Arthurian Archetypes

Course Requirements:

Regular Weekly Assignments:

There are a number of activities, in addition to your research schedule, which you are expected to complete fully and thoughtfully each week: **1)** You are expected to have completed the reading in advance of each week's seminar. **2)** You should be prepared to participate regularly in discussion, especially when your comments and questions might be of value to the research of your peers. **3)** You must attempt to be a knowledgeable (but tactful!) critic of your peers' work. **4)** Finally, all of these requirements presuppose weekly attendance.

Final Research Project:

Each student will research one of a series of designated broad topics such as those listed below; this research will culminate in a Final Research Project of 4000-5000 words which must be submitted both as hardcopy and as an electronic document. The Final Research Project must engage scholarly sources (these should include history, archaeology, politics, religion, etc., as necessary and relevant) as well as several specific literary references relevant to that topic. The target audience for this work is an expert in the field, so the tone of the Final Research Project should be scholarly, authoritative, and as exhaustive as possible. The point is to illustrate that the student can complete a thorough and readable research project of significant substance.

Possible Research Topics:

- The Celtic Vision of the Fairy World in Medieval Literature
- The Celtic Heritage of The Arthurian Romance
- Beowulf, its Norse Analogues, and Germanic Myth
- The Evolution of the Legends of Arthur
- The Theme of Justice in the Age of Romance
- Myths of Creation and Medieval Literature
- Myths of the Flood and Medieval Literature
- Myths of Purgation and Medieval Literature
- The Mythic Foundations of Purgatory
- The Mythic Foundation of the Medieval Hell
- Mythic Traditions, Arthuriana, and the Notion of "History"
- Fertility and Sacrifice in Medieval Literature
- Head-Hunting Celts Hiding in Medieval Texts
- The Voyage of the Hero in the Medieval Saint's Life
- Christ as Germanic Heroic Warrior
- The Quest for Gold: The Mythic Archetype of Alchemy in Medieval Literature
- The Apocalyptic Tradition and the Cult of the Cross
- Saints' Lives, Types of Christ, and the Body as Window to the Soul
- The Hero's Journey to the Underworld in Medieval Literature
- The Dying God in Medieval Literature
- The Lost Gods of England
- Medieval Christian Reformulations of Pagan Gods and Practices
- Devil or Angel: The Mythic Archetypes of Minor Deities in Medieval Literature

- Classical Mythology in Medieval Literature
- Norse Mythology in Medieval Literature
- Celtic Mythology in Medieval Literature
- The Mythos of the Feminine in Medieval Literature
- The Mythos of the “Other” in Medieval Literature
- The Pagan Origins of Medieval Witchcraft
- The Pagan Origin of the Medieval Wild Hunt
- The Pagan Origin of the Medieval Fairy Dance
- The Mythic Origin of Medieval Monsters
- The Myth of the Dragon in Medieval Literature
- Halloween, Yuletide, and Easter: Medieval Renderings of a Pagan Past
- Virgin or Whore? Medieval Notions of the Goddess
- Cannibalism, Communion, and Medieval Literature

Project Site Report:

Each student will be responsible for compiling a Project Site Report of 2500 or more words on a specific Project Site; optimally, some aspects of the chosen site will have some bearing upon that student’s particular Final Research Project topic. To this end, each student is expected to make relevant mention of several specific pertinent literary episodes in the Site Report, as well as to cite a number of scholarly sources. **The existing *Otter’s Ransom* site narratives should point you in the right direction, as should your initial research consultation with the instructor.** While not an abbreviated version of the Final Research Project, it is to be hoped that the Project Site Report will be closely related to the Final Research Project, and indeed might comprise as much as a third of that Final Research Project. The target audience for this work is an informed non-specialist, so the tone of the Project Site Report should be serious, but not overly scholarly: The point is to give a visitor to that particular Project Site an overview of the most important information available regarding that site, as well as to offer direction regarding further relevant reading in both research works and the literary record. **Each student will also compose a relevant quiz to assess a visitor’s command of the key points of the Site Report; this quiz will count towards the Final Site Report Grade.**

Interactive Fiction Project:

Finally, each student will devise an Interactive Fiction (IF) Project of 2500 or more words involving a creative approach to that student’s Project Site. Each student is expected to collaborate with the other students whose Project Sites are located in proximity to one another, as well as with those students whose Project Sites might be grouped under the same or similar categories. The point is to make as many connections as possible and to develop as coherent an overall IF Project as possible. The student should feel free to be creative and to have fun. While the IF project is, by its very nature, fiction, the student should incorporate as much factual detail about the site and relevant themes as possible, and several relevant saga references are also expected. **The existing *Otter’s Ransom* IF Projects should point you in the right direction, as should your interaction with the Peer Learning Associate.** One might use Dan Brown’s “The Da Vinci Code” as a primer for a kind of engaging fiction dressed up with facts. The target audience for this work is a student in an upper-level high school or lower-level college survey course, so the tone of the IF Project should be light-hearted and fun. **Each student will also compose a “cheat-sheet” Tips and Traps Paragraph outlining a successful strategy for playing that student’s game.** The student need not fear an overly harsh editorial hand, but should be reminded that under-age high school students, ancient parents and faculty members, and potential employers will have easy and permanent access to this work. The point is to engage the interest and incite the imagination of the visitor to that site, thereby informing them of actual pertinent information about the site and its connection with other sites, themes, and sagas in as transparent and entertaining a way as possible. **If you envision your Site Report as the scholarly skeleton of your particular archaeological location or object, you might conceive of your IF Project as the fictional flesh.**

Specific Course Requirements:

1) The **Final Research Project**, while not by any means the only graded component of the course, is the single most important piece of work. The Final Research Project is due on the Wednesday (Reading Day) of Finals Week: ONE (1) Printed paper copy AND ONE (1) electronic version (sent as an email attachment) are due in the grubby paws (and crowded in-box) of the instructor NO LATER than 6:30 PM on WEDNESDAY, **December 17th, 2008.**

2) The **Project Site Report** is the main scholarly way in which the student may collaborate in the multimedia Medieval North Atlantic project, and promises to provide a permanent, public record of the student's research work in this course. **The first draft** of the Project Site Report is due during Week 7, on the Wednesday after the October Reading Days: ONE (1) Printed paper copy AND ONE (1) electronic version (sent as an email attachment) are due in the grubby paws (and crowded in-box) of the instructor NO LATER than 6:30 PM on WEDNESDAY, **October 15th, 2008.** **The final draft** of the Project Site Report is due during Week 14, on the Wednesday after Thanksgiving: ONE (1) Printed paper copy AND ONE (1) electronic version (sent as an email attachment) are due in the grubby paws (and crowded in-box) of the instructor NO LATER than 6:30 PM on WEDNESDAY, **December 3rd, 2008.**

3) The **Interactive Fiction Project** is the main creative way in which the student may collaborate in the multimedia Medieval North Atlantic project, and promises to provide a permanent, public record of the student's creative work in this course. **The first draft** of the Interactive Fiction Project is due during Week 12, on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving: ONE (1) Printed paper copy AND ONE (1) electronic version (sent as an email attachment) are due in the grubby paws (and crowded in-box) of the instructor NO LATER than 6:30 PM on WEDNESDAY, **November 19th, 2008.** **The final draft** of the Interactive Fiction Project is due during Week 15, on the last day of class: ONE (1) Printed paper copy AND ONE (1) electronic version (sent as an email attachment) are due in the grubby paws (and crowded in-box) of the instructor NO LATER than 6:30 PM on WEDNESDAY, **December 10th, 2008.**

4) There will be a **Final Exam** in this course; it will be administered during finals week and will consist of three parts:

- One (1) essay [from a selection of 2-3] on the History of Medieval Britain
- One (1) essay [from a selection of 2-3] on British Sagas and Myths
- 10-15 Short-answer identification questions [from a selection of 20-25] drawn from the project quizzes

5) All reading and homework assignments must be complete in entirety and on time, in addition to the weekly reading assignments and the individual research project.

Assignment Schedule:

Week 2-Week 4 (9/03/08-9/17/08): **Make Individual Appointment to Discuss Research Project and Site Report Topics with Instructor**

Week 4 (9/24/08): **Site(s) for Report Chosen**

Week 5 (10/01/08): **Topic for Research Project Chosen**

Week 6 (10/08/08): **Site Report Bibliography Assembled (3-5 Items)**

Week 7 (10/15/08): **First draft of Project Site Report DUE:** ONE (1) Printed paper copy AND ONE (1) electronic version (sent as an email attachment) NO LATER than 6:30 PM.

Week 8 (10/22/08): **Research Project Bibliography Assembled (10-12 Items); Site Quiz Constructed in consultation with the Peer Learning Associate, who will post this Site Quiz on the Project Pages.**

Week 9 (10/29/08): **Be prepared to discuss 3-5 specific ideas for Interactive Fiction Project and 3-5 relevant images from your site**

Week 10 (11/05/08): **Research Project Bibliography Annotated (25-50 Word Annotations)**

Week 11 (11/12/08): **Be prepared to demonstrate 3-5 aspects of Interactive Fiction Project**

Week 12 (11/19/08): **First draft of Interactive Fiction Project DUE: ONE (1) Printed paper copy AND ONE (1) electronic version (sent as an email attachment) NO LATER than 6:30 PM.**

Week 13 (11/26/08): Thanksgiving Break--NO SEMINAR

Week 14 (12/03/08): **Final draft of Project Site Report DUE: ONE (1) Printed paper copy AND ONE (1) electronic version (sent as an email attachment) NO LATER than 6:30 PM.**

Week 15 (12/10/08): **Final draft** of Interactive Fiction Project DUE: ONE (1) Printed paper copy AND ONE (1) electronic version (sent as an email attachment) NO LATER than 6:30 PM. **IF Tips and Traps Paragraph DUE via email by Friday.**

Finals Week (12/17/08): The **Final Research Project** is due on the Wednesday (Reading Day) of **Finals Week: ONE (1) Printed paper copy AND ONE (1) electronic version (sent as an email attachment) are due in the grubby paws (and crowded in-box) of the instructor NO LATER than 6:30 PM on WEDNESDAY, December 17th, 2008.**

Rough Grading Breakdown:

The **Final Research Project** will be worth approximately 35% of the final course grade.

The **Project Site Report** first draft will be worth approximately 10% of the final course grade.

The **Project Site Report** final draft will be worth approximately 15% of the final course grade.

The **Interactive Fiction Project** first draft will be worth approximately 10% of the final course grade.

The **Interactive Fiction Project** final draft will be worth approximately 10% of the final course grade.

The **Final Exam** will be worth approximately 10% of the final course grade.

Preparation, participation, and satisfactory completion of weekly reading and exercises will be worth approximately 10% of the final course grade.

Perfect attendance and prompt arrival is presupposed; failure in this regard would likely result in failure of the course.

Course Disclaimers:

While it is expected that, in general, each student will receive some form of publicly displayed recognition for any work of that student which appears in some recognizable form in the Medieval North Atlantic project, no such

recognition will be awarded on C-, D+, D, D-, or F work. The student's name will be mentioned in the general acknowledgments for C, C+, B-, or B work, while the student will receive full and due recognition in the appropriate place in the project for B+, A-, A, or A+ work. These provisos are based on the assumptions that failing work is unlikely to be used on the project at all, and thus no recognition would be due, while middling work will require substantial editing, revising, and augmenting by the instructor before it is fit for use, and thus only some acknowledgment of collaboration is due. Very good and excellent work, on the other hand, will likely pass into the project with little modification, and thus will be fully acknowledged as the student's original work.

Every student must sign a copyright waiver before submitting work for a grade.

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

Syllabus and Schedule Subject to Change