

HEROES AND SAINTS: OLD ENGLISH EPIC TRADITION

OBJECTIVES

The course will examine a range of Old English narrative poems. Starting with texts which can be broadly defined as secular, we will look at the variety of approaches and agendas which these texts represent and explore the ways in which the concept of an underlying heroic poetic tradition is constructed from the limited extant material. Religious epic will then be discussed in terms of its relation to models encountered in the secular poems. We will concentrate especially on the presentation of the protagonist and his/her spiritual progress as well as on the order of the world which the texts construct. Ultimately, the course should offer students a deeper insight into the problems which shape our study and understanding of Old English poetry in general.

MATERIAL

selections from:

The Finnsburh Fragment

The Battle of Maldon

The Battle of Brunanburh

Beowulf

Genesis A,B

Felix: Vita Sancti Guthlaci (in English)

Guthlac A

Juliana

A selection of critical reading will be posted in Moodle.

Primary texts will be provided with an interlinear gloss and grammatical apparatus as well as translation for convenience, but an elementary working knowledge of Old English (e.g. the basic paradigms), and a willingness to look beyond the translation to the original is requisite for a fair treatment and discussion of the texts.

ASSESSMENT

Students are expected to give one oral presentation of 10-15 minutes (accompanied with a handout/presentation summarizing the core points) and submit a paper of 1,000 words for a credit. As per the Dean's Decree No. 2/2024 the credit requirements have to be completed by September 2025. An essay of 5,000 words should be submitted as a graded paper; this has to be completed by the end of the year following that in which they registered for the course in keeping with the rules set for zkouška, with a special extra year allowance as per the Dean's decree No. 2/2024 (i.e. by September 2026). Active participation is of the essence.

PROCEDURE

The seminar will combine Moodle forum with class sessions.

The forum is designed to serve as a preparation for the class discussion. Students will take turns introducing the respective texts to their colleagues through a brief personalized summary – describing the interpretative problems they have encountered in reading. There will also be questions for discussion posted in the forum, which the students should consider and respond to briefly (picking one problem and commenting on it in the space of 1-2 sentences). Finally, students are encouraged to add their own questions to the forum.

The class session will expand on this initial embryonic debate, allowing all participants to interrogate, compare and combine their individual insights and conclusions.

Further details will be discussed during the first introductory session.

DETAILED PROGRAMME

1. week 2-4 Heroic narratives: searching for the “heroic poetic tradition”

The Finnsburh Fragment

The Battle of Maldon

Beowulf – selection

The Battle of Brunanburh

- Mathesius, V., from *History of English Literature I*, Prague 1910

- Davis, C.R.: “Cultural Historicity in ‘The Battle of Maldon’”, *PQ* 78 (1999)

- Niles, J.D.: selection from “The Myth of the Anglo-Saxon Oral Poet” in *Old English Heroic Poems and the Social Life of Texts*, Brepols 2007

2. week 5-6 The biblical epic: *Genesis A* and *B*

Genesis A and *B* – selection

- Cherniss, M.D., "Heroic Ideals and the Moral Climate in 'Genesis B'", *MLQ* 30:4 (1969)

3. week 7 Between English and Latin: heroic elements in the Latin *Vita of Guthlac*

Felix: Vita Sancti Guthlaci (in English);

Beowulf – selection

- Damon, J.E.: selection from ‘St Guthlac, Spiritual Warrior’ in *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors*, Ashgate 2003

- Meyr-Harding, H.: selection from ‘Saints and Heroes’ in *The Coming of Christianity to Anglo-Saxon England*, B.T.Batsford 1991

Week 8 - reading week

4. week 9-10 The hero, the hall, the wilderness: *Beowulf* and *Guthlac*

Beowulf – selection

Guthlac A – selection

- Damon, J.E.: selection from ‘Holiness and Heroism: Poetic Lives of Soldier Saints’ in *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors*, Ashgate 2003

- Roberts, J.: *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book*, OUP 1979 – selection

- Nicholas, G.E.: “Monasticism and the Social Temptation in the OE *Guthlac A*”, *The American Benedictine Review* 46:4 (1995)

5. week 11-12 Revaluing heroic imagery: Cynewulf's *Juliana*

Juliana – selection

The Life of St Juliana; in: Calder, D.G. and M. J. Allen: *Sources and Analogues of Old English: Major Latin Texts in Translation*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1976

- Damon, J.E.: selection from ‘Holiness and Heroism: Poetic Lives of Soldier Saints’ in *Soldier Saints and Holy Warriors*, Ashgate 2003

Week 13 – rector’s day