

English 405/801: Medieval Materialisms

Dr. Jes Battis (he/they)

F 2:30-5:15 / AH 309

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Office: AH 366

Office Hours: W 11:30-12:30; F 11:30-12:30

Course Description

This course will focus on materialisms in the middle ages—from the animal skins that made reading possible, to the “feel” of castles and the light streaming through stained glass. We’ll think about how tactile this period was, and how medieval minds sought to explain the mystery of the senses. We’ll discuss the sounds of battle, the power of gemstones, and the materiality of magic itself as a force that fused Christian and Pagan experiences. Finally, we’ll think about how all kinds of bodies occupied the diverse middle ages, which will lead us to discussions of race, gender diversity, sexuality, and disability.

Texts

Liuzza, ed. *Beowulf*.

Waters, ed. *The Lais of Marie de France*.

Winnie, ed. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

All non-print readings available on UR Courses.

Most texts available in library reserves under course name/#

Readings are both chronological-ish and focused on a material/force

Course Schedule

Sept 6

Course Intro; Course Conduct

Old English Charm + Riddle (“Sudden Stitch”; “Exeter Riddle 18”)

Sept 13

“Wulf and Eadwacer”; “The Ruin”

Starting *Beowulf*

Great Halls; Arms and Armor [*Beowulf* companion]

Sept 20

Beowulf continued

Legacies of Queenship

Sept 27

Finishing *Beowulf*

Monstrosity and Motherhood

“Dream of the Rood” and the Ruthwell Cross

Oct 4

Marie de France, “Lanval”; “Bisclavret”
Werewolves; Medieval Fashion

Oct 11

Marie de France, “Yonec”; “Laustic”
Medieval Animality; Excerpt from *Physiologus*
Holsinger, “Pigs and Parchment”

Oct 18

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
Castles and Courtly Textures
Gawain Companion: Castles; Armor

Oct 25

SGGK continued
Magic and the Hunt
Gawain Companion: Feasts; Hunts; Green

Nov 1

Hildegard and Mystical Materiality

Nov 8: **Fall Break (No Class)**

Nov 15

Saint’s Legends
Hrotsvit, “Letter”; “Dulcitius”
Saint Christina; Saint Marinos
Essay Proposal Due

Nov 22

Chaucer’s *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*
Medieval Personalities and Physical Descriptions
Gwerful Mechain [selected poems]

Nov 29

Medieval Mystery Play
Digby Mary Magdalene

Dec 6

Wrapping Up *Digby*; Evals
Final Essay Due

Assignments

Reader Reports: 5%

Students will submit 5 paragraph long reader-reports, each worth 1%. These reports will include a detailed paragraph discussing significant elements of the reading, as well as suggestions for further critical reading and a question for the class. **Reports should be submitted to UR Courses before/on the day in which your chosen text is discussed (you choose which texts you'll report on). Print enough copies of each report for all the students in the class—we'll then compile these into research guides for the course material.**

Final Project Proposal: 5%

This proposal will outline your final project, including your central argument, scholarship that you'll include, quoted material from your primary source, and a proposed bibliography.

Seminar Presentation: 25% [Due the week in which we discuss your chosen text]

Students will deliver a conference paper on one of the syllabus texts, paired with critical scholarship that addresses the text and/or time period. Seminars will coincide with the week(s) in which we're discussing the text, and students will sign up for a particular week in advance. Seminars will combine close reading [including quoted material] with theoretical analysis, as well as a presentation that engages the class (i.e., conference papers are written in a style to be *listened to*, rather than a standard academic essay). You will hand in your seminar materials to UR Courses, including a summary + slides or a conference paper, depending on what form your presentation ultimately takes. Your presentation should be no more than **10 minutes [hons]** or **15 minutes [grad]**. Be sure to time it.

For your short assignment you have choice:

Literature Review: 25% [Due the week AFTER we discuss your chosen text]; 6pgs

Students will select one of the course texts and review targeted criticism that addresses the text, in order to produce a review of scholarship. Well-known texts (e.g., *Beowulf*) have a *large and long-running* critical tradition, which means that you'll have to target your review around a specific topic and/or time period (most recent scholarship, or scholarship that engages with a particular theme). You will also accompany the review with a biography in which you briefly annotate the **3** most significant critical texts, and explain why you've selected them.

OR

Material Essay: 25% [Due the week AFTER we discuss your chosen text]; 6pgs

Select one (or more) of the course texts and write an essay that focuses on a material within your texts. This could be something like arms and armor, cloth, jewelry, the four elements, magic as material, or even something like space, soundscapes, or weather. Develop a discussion on what

makes that material significant within the text, as well as the medieval era in which it was written.

Final Project/"Un-Essay": 40% [Due Dec 6]; 8pgs [hons]; 12pgs [grad]

This final project represents focused research and inquiry that you have applied to one or more of the course texts. It may be a standard research essay with a specific theoretical framework, or it may be something less orthodox. Further options might include: a creative nonfiction essay that engages closely with primary and secondary material; an analysis of a particular historical event linked to your text; a discussion of a scientific innovation connected to one of the texts; other options which we can discuss. All topics must be approved.

Class Conduct and Other Matters

We'll be running this classroom as a safe space. This means that, while you may feel challenged at times, you should never feel *unsafe*—if you do, please let me know. Students are welcome (though certainly not required) to share their pronouns or other elements of their identity, and we should all work to respect people's preferred modes of address. This is a process. We'll make mistakes sometimes, and that's OK. I'll make note of any material that might be triggering.

Plagiarism is defined as the failure to properly credit ideas which are not your own, but which inform your discussion. The MLA style manual contains a thorough section on how to avoid plagiarism, which you should familiarize yourself with. It is relatively easy to detect work that has been improperly lifted from another source, and if this appears to be the case, your essay will immediately be submitted to the Dean of Students for evaluation. A charge of plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the assignment, and—if the infraction is serious enough—a failing grade for the course.

Email

I'm happy to answer email queries, but do remember that emails pile up, and I may take a few days to get back to you. If you sent me an email but haven't heard back in 2 days, feel free to send a polite reminder. Most of these conversations actually work better in-person (see the section on office hours), though I understand that accessibility concerns may keep you from campus. **I do not respond to email on Saturday or Sunday—unless it's urgent.** I also don't usually respond after 6pm on weekdays, though I will check just in case.

Office Hours

When I first started college, I was confused about how office hours worked. It felt like I was bothering my professors by stopping by to ask them questions. Precisely the opposite is true—we *want* you to stop by during these scheduled times. This is the best way for me to get to know you, chat about your work, and see how you're doing. These conversations tend to be most useful when I know that you're coming by (i.e., give me a shout beforehand and let me know approximately what time you'll stop by). If the scheduled office hours don't work, let me know and we can find a different time to meet.

Inclusive Citation

I'm more concerned with the *people* you cite in your work, rather than the precise format in which you cite them. A balanced bibliography should contain scholars of all sorts, including the work of your peers. Are you citing women? Are you citing people of color? Are you citing people who identify as LGBTQ+? Are you citing disabled folks? Are you citing adjunct/sessional scholars whose jobs are precarious? Are you citing grad students? Run through these questions as you put together your bibliography. Do some digging on the scholars that you've cited and learn about them. You may find yourself choosing more non-traditional writers, and that's ok. The most canonical and widely-cited scholars aren't always the ones doing the best work by default.

Accessibility

A classroom can be an intense space, and we'll make every effort to ensure that the physical space of the classroom is accessible. If any issues occur to you regarding the layout of the class, do let me know. There is no "correct" way to exist in a classroom. You don't need to be extensively taking notes, making eye contact, or responding to discussion at all times (though you should be engaged—and there are many ways to demonstrate that). You should do whatever you need to in order to facilitate learning. If you need to draw or use a tool or play with something, go ahead. If you need to get up and move, please do. If you feel overwhelmed by a sensory element of the classroom (i.e., lights, sounds, smells), let me know and I'll see what I can do. If you need to leave for a brief period, that's fine too—just do it quietly.

Support

I use "support" instead of "accommodation" because the latter sounds like a favour, and it's likely that what you're asking for is an equal playing field rather than an accommodation. This is handled first through the Office for Student Accessibility, and then through the Arts Accessibility Office, who will process paperwork. If you have an accessibility contract, I will receive it in the first week of class—we can go over it together, or I can simply sign it and return it to the appropriate office. If you **don't** have a contract but think you might need support, let me know and I can help you to work with Student Accessibility to get you the support that you need. The Centre for Student Accessibility is in Riddell 229; Arts Accessibility is in CL 411.

Neurodiversity

I'm on the spectrum, which means that I experience a fair bit of anxiety and environmental sensitivity—I can mask this very well (sometimes), but it's always there in the background. If you'd like to talk about strategies for dealing with anxiety/sensitivity, as well as ways to address issues of processing/executive function (i.e., scheduling tasks and following instructions), feel free to chat with me! I can recommend reading as well. One thing I ask is that you don't approach me with significant questions either *immediately* before class starts or *immediately* after it ends—instead, you can swing by my office 10 minutes before/after, which gives me a chance to respond.

Self-Care

You are more important than your degree or program. Sometimes we act like we're just mind-energy flitting about, but we have bodies, and bodies need care. Many of us have disabled bodies/minds that we push to the limit every day, and the rigors of a busy semester can often be too much to take. Here are some strategies for self-care.

1. You do **not** need to read everything on the syllabus, in its entirety. Read enough so that you're prepared to discuss the central themes of the course. Read what you're most interested in, so that you'll be able to compose good work on the subject. Read what you can, but don't push yourself to absorb all of it.
2. Bring snacks to class and stay hydrated. Don't drink too much coffee. Get as much sleep as you can. If you're experiencing food insecurity, let me know and I'll see what I can do. If you need to take a mental/physical health day, let me know in advance (if you can). If you need to leave class early, that's fine too, as long as you tell me (I don't need a reason).
3. Know when to start/stop doing research. Assembling 100 articles on your chosen text will not make the perfect discussion. Assembling 5 carefully-chosen articles that relate specifically to your topic will make for a more unified analysis. Start looking for sources as early as you can, so you aren't rushing later. Use the sources posted on UR Courses as a starting point.
4. An essay doesn't need to be **flawless**. It doesn't need to be **exhaustive** in its content. An essay just needs to contain a specific discussion that leads the reader to a point, along with curated material from your primary and secondary sources. If you're having trouble getting started, begin with a question (i.e., "Why is [weird thing] happening in this text?") and keep returning to that question. Remember that a conclusion doesn't have to tie up every facet of your discussion—it just needs to remind the reader why the discussion is important. If you're having trouble finding sources, ask me. **Use interlibrary loans**. This system is amazing—you can order virtually any book in Canada/North America. And it's **free**. You can access it through the QuickFind page on the library, or through the WorldCat database.
5. Find quiet spaces on campus to recharge. I love the Campion Library—it's quiet and soothing, with comfortable chairs. The periodical floor of the Archer Library is also quiet and people rarely frequent the space.

Safe Spaces

The UR Pride Centre for Sexuality and Gender Diversity and the Women's Centre are both located on the 2nd floor of Riddell. These are safe spaces where you can hang out (UR Pride also has an excellent library). My office (AH 366) is also a safe space—if you're feeling a bit overwhelmed and just need to chill out or talk, come by. If you need to talk to a counsellor, you can visit Counselling Services in Room 252 of Riddell.