

COL-242: The Middle Ages
Boger Hall 110 (BOGH 110)
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M/W 1:20-2:40pm

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College of Letters Sophomore Colloquium 2: The Middle Ages – Allegory and Appropriation

In our colloquium together we will collaborate on carefully reading, analyzing, and responding to influential and interconnected texts from the so-called Middle Ages by working to understand some distinctively medieval ways of communicating meaning through texts. We will unpack different ways in which writers from the Middle Ages worked to make sense of their worlds, and we will identify intertwined philosophical, literary, and historical questions through works that defy easy generic or disciplinary categories.

In adopting such a period-sensitive approach, know that we will not shy away from connecting our study to contemporary issues. The worlds created by & inflected in the texts we read are worlds with real questions and difficult answers. While insisting that we must listen carefully, sensitively, and generously in our readings of these ancient, complex, and translated texts, we will not forget the less scholarly and less scrupulous way that ideological fantasies of the “medieval” are offered in the present as a refuge or as a source of political and rhetorical power. We seek to understand; but a persistent pursuit of understanding need not imply endorsement, nor preclude critique.

There are three operative ideas to which we will return through the semester.

First, we will prepare you to interrogate the idea of an era—the fourth through fourteenth centuries—as “middle.” The idea of the Middle Era is attributed to the fourteenth-century poet Petrarch (1304-1374) who called the Latin literature that was not classical, “middle”: i.e., in between the Classical and himself. Modern historians gradually inflated Petrarch’s idea about literature to an assertion about history. This is why we now characterize the political, economic, religious, and social practices of the peoples from the Euphrates to Ireland and from North Africa to Scandinavia during this long period as “middle.” This idea supported (and still supports) the modern historical narrative of progress, an ideological construction of the age of Enlightenment. In setting its own presumed light against the darkness that preceded it, the modern age embraced a new naturalist concept of historical time, expressed in metaphors such as “rise,” “development,” “growth”, or “unfolding.” We will interrogate the inherently problematic modern conception of the medieval by working with multiple periodizations, chronologies, and historical narratives. *This approach requires work.* In our survey, entire regions, centuries, linguistic and cultural traditions are skipped entirely. We rely on you to remain constantly aware of the necessary incompleteness of our course of study.

Second, we will equip you with a habit of study attuned to the one thing that *does* unite the regions and centuries of the traditional medieval and distinguish them from earlier and later periods: the hand-copied codex. You will train yourselves and each other to begin interpretive readings aware of how—to the best of our knowledge—the texts you are reading were preserved, transmitted, received, circulated, and eventually printed and translated into contemporary English. We will try to remember, throughout the semester, that the texts and traditions we encounter come to us multiply mediated (Lat. *mediare*, ‘to be in the middle’) and that we do not make direct contact with this medieval world but rather engage with it via the labor of those scribes, scholars,

and translators located in the middle, between them and us, between then and now. In this endeavor, it will help to remember that even in our own Digital Age, we remain wedded to the technology and practices of the codex. This continuity in the technology of producing and transmitting ideas allows us to remain eerily in touch with our medieval cousins.

Finally, we will practice comparison. Historical study is inherently comparative: however carefully and rigorously we may try to inhabit medieval modes of interpretation or attend to the mediating activities and processes separating us from them, we must remember that we are ourselves historically situated interpreters. Whenever we attempt to understand history, we necessarily search for ways to make an unfamiliar trace of a past world comprehensible to ourselves in our present moment. On top of the interlingual translation that has been done to the text for us, we inevitably impose our own translation, our own strategy for transforming something irreducibly foreign into something knowable (if not necessarily familiar). We will consider strategies of that translation with each text we read. As we conclude the semester, we will think about ways to bring multiple texts into comparative consideration, encouraging you in your final essay for the course to compare our readings with contemporary uses of “The Medieval.”

Speaking (and Listening)!

This semester, we will ask you to do three kinds of in-class presentation:

- One **Textual History**: a succinct but informed 5-minute presentation in which you convey the significant textual history of one reading (i.e. the history of its transmission in manuscripts, then critical editions, then translations). Tell us:
 - a. Who would/might have read this text in the ‘medieval’ period (i.e., manuscripts)?
 - b. Who decided this text was significant, and when (i.e., crit. edition & print edition)?
 - c. Who adapted the text into the form we are studying right now (i.e., translation)?

- One **Discussion Facilitation**:
 - a. Students will be paired and assigned to lead the discussion for a particular class
 - b. Each pair will meet with the instructors to collaborate on a discussion plan before the relevant discussion (*almost always over lunch, immediately before class*). This involves:
 - i. ... carefully reading the relevant textbook chapter (if one is assigned).
 1. Kick off the discussion by highlighting for classmates essential/key concepts that should have been grasped
 2. Explain one or two particularly difficult concepts, or note a concept that you hope will come up / be examined in discussion
 - ii. ... preparing to lead discussion (bring to meeting with profs) by deciding:
 1. What is the “big takeaway” that the class should get from this text?
 2. What passages need to be addressed in discussion, either because they are particularly difficult, or are key for the “big takeaway”?
 3. The Plan: concoct two ways to get from passages to takeaway.

- One **Conference-Style Talk** (5 to 7 minutes) about your final research paper. See the Writing section below for more on this.

Writing!

This semester, we will ask you to practice three different genres of critical writing. Each of these genres comes with its own specific constraints and possibilities. The first two genres, explication (aka, “close reading”) and thematic interpretation (aka, “comparative analysis”), will help you get familiar with the two kinds of essay writing you can expect to do for your junior comprehensive exams in November. The third genre, a research paper in which you offer a historically and contextually informed critical analysis, will give you an idea about the kind of work you might want to pursue in your senior thesis.

All paper due dates are on Fridays.

Please upload your papers to Moodle by 5 pm on the dates indicated.

- Papers 1a and 1b, due February 18th and March 11th: **Explicatory Essay** (about 900 words). For this assignment, you will do a critical interpretation of one passage you chose from four possible ones. For the first paper, your professors will provide four passages from which to choose. For the second paper (1b), you as a group will select four passages you consider deserving of a close reading. The point of this assignment is to identify and explicate the significance of one specific passage – both for its own merits and for its relevance within the work as a whole.
- Paper 2, due April 8th: **Thematic Essay** (about 1800 words). For this assignment, we will provide you with four question prompts. You will write your essay in response to **one** of our prompts. These prompts will ask you to center your analysis on at least **two** texts from the Medieval Colloquium.
- Paper 3, due May 13th: **“Medievalism” Research Paper** (about 1800 words). Coined in the mid-nineteenth century (according to the OED), the term “Medievalism” refers to the creative interpretation, appropriation, imitation, or recreation of the European Middle Ages. Without the idea of the Middle Ages, there would be no Western self-conception of what it means to be modern, and modern history remains haunted by the afterlife of the Middle Ages. In the modern imagination, the Middle Ages may appear as the Dark Ages or the Bright Ages; as a time of violence and ignorance, or a time of wisdom and enchantment, or a pre-capitalist utopia of community, fluid identities and desires, and freedom from the domination of clock-time and wage labor. Examples for medievalist interpretation and recreation can be found in literature, the arts, politics, social movements, and the built environment, not only in the West, but across the globe. The Middle Ages are a rich resource of ideas, images, fantasies and myths; at the same time, they are frequently used as a screen for projecting specifically modern ideas, either to denigrate racialized others (Western imperialism likes to lament the “medievalism” of societies it oppresses and exploits, especially in Africa and the Middle East), or to create nativist, nationalist, racist origin myths about whiteness and purity. For this final assignment, you will choose one example of a medievalist interpretation and do a critical analysis, contextually informed by one or two of the texts we studied this semester. Your critical engagement with an example of medievalism will thus reflect the thinking and research you have done on the Middle Ages. Your exact research approach will depend on the medievalist text or artifact you choose. Possible examples include but are not limited to storytelling (including histories of the Middle Ages, long- and short-form stories, fan fictions, etc.), critical essays, films and television shows, and works of art (including architecture). This final assignment involves two preliminary steps:
 - First, after consultation with your instructors, you will submit a one-page research intent statement (due April 22nd) in which you outline what you seek to accomplish in your research paper.
 - Second, on May 10th at the beginning of finals week, we will gather for a final class meeting at which each of you will present the main ideas of your research papers. Your completed paper will be due three days later.
- Paragraphs at the Instructors’ Discretion: as the semester progresses, we may ask you to complete short writing assignments as pedagogical opportunities arise. Stay tuned!

Reading!

Texts to Acquire (available at R.J. Julia)

Wickham, *Medieval Europe* (Yale University Press, 2017) ISBN: 9780300228823

Ganz (trans.), *Two Lives of Charlemagne* (Penguin, 2008) ISBN: 9780140455052

Blackburn (trans.), *The Song of the Cid* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) ISBN: 9780806130224

There will be two Course Readers. Instructions for ordering will be posted to Moodle.

The College of Letters is happy to provide micro-grant scholarships for the above texts. If you do not have the budget to get all or some of the required texts, simply email us.

Schedule of Meetings, Readings, and Assignment Due Dates

M 1/31 Intro (Discussion: Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe*)

I: Allegories and Revelations

W 2/2 Allegory Packet

M 2/7 *Book of Revelation* + “Dream of Scipio” (Cicero *De Re Publica* Book 6)

W 2/9 *The Martyrdom of Saints Perpetua and Felicitas*

II: Writing Communities

M 2/14 *City of God* (Book I and Book 19, selections)

W 2/16 *Sayings of the Desert Mothers* + *Rule of Benedict* (selections)

F 2/18 Paper 1a due by 5 pm

M 2/21 *Qur’an* – Poetic Suwar

W 2/23 *Qur’an* – Historical Suwar

III: Writing Lives

M 2/28 Poems of Kassia

W 3/2 *Life of Charlemagne*: Einhard

M 3/7 *Life of Charlemagne*: Nithard

W 3/9 Dhuoda, *Handbook for William* (selections)

F 3/11 Paper 1b due by 5 pm

SPRING BREAK

IV: Appropriations and Truths

- M 3/21 Ibn Sina/Avicenna – *The Cure* (1027), *Selections*
W 3/23 Abelard – *Historia Calamitatum* (ca. 1132)
M 3/28 Abelard + Heloise Letters (post-1132)
W 3/30 Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), *Selections*
M 4/4 Aquinas (1225-1274), *Selections*
W 4/6 *Thematic Discussion & Writing / Comps Workshop*
F 4/8 Paper 2 due by 5 pm

V: Fictions and their Histories

- M 4/11 Cid (btw. 1140-1207) – All
W 4/13 Marie de France (ca. 1160-1215), *Selections* (Guigemar & ?)
M 4/18 Prose Edda (ca. 1220), *Gylfaginning*
W 4/20 Black Death (1346-1353) – Selected Documentary Texts
F 4/22 Paper 3 research intent statement due by 5 pm
M 4/25 Peasant's Revolt (1381) – Selected Documentary Texts

VI: Translations: Allegory and Appropriation

- W 4/27 Marie de France (Laüstic) + Boccaccio *Decameron* (ca. 1349-1353)
M 5/2 Boccaccio + Chaucer (ca. 1387-1400) – *Miller's Tale*
W 5/4 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (ca. 1375) / Julian Norwich (d. 1416) /
Catherina Sienna (d. 1380)
T 5/10 Medievalism presentations and discussions
F 5/13 Paper 3 due by 5 pm

Additional Policies and Information

Time Commitment

While the exact time commitment for the class will vary individually and over the course of the semester, we recommend that you budget approximately three out-of-class hours for every class hour to complete the readings. We have designed the class so that it should be feasible to satisfactorily complete the requirements with approximately twelve hours per week of time commitment. If you are spending more time than this on a regular basis we encourage you to check in with us.

Accommodation Statement

Wesleyan University is committed to ensuring that all qualified students with disabilities are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in, and benefit from, its programs and services. Since accommodations may require early planning and generally are not provided retroactively, please contact Accessibility Services as soon as possible. If you have a disability, or think that you might have a disability, please contact [Accessibility Services](#) in order to arrange an appointment to discuss your needs and the process for requesting accommodations. Accessibility Services is located in North College, rooms 021/218, or can be reached by email at accessibility@wesleyan.edu.

Religious Observances

Faculty make every effort to deal reasonably and fairly with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments, or required assignments/attendance. If this applies to you, please speak with us directly as soon as possible at the beginning of the term.

Classroom Behavior

Students and faculty each have responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to such behavioral standards may be subject to discipline. Professional courtesy and sensitivity are especially important with respect to individuals and topics dealing with differences of race, color, culture, religion, creed, politics, veteran's status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity and gender expression, age, ability, and nationality. Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name. We will gladly honor your request to address you by an alternate name or gender pronoun. Please advise us of this preference early in the semester so that we may make appropriate changes to our records. For more information, see the policies on [the student code](#).

Discrimination and Harassment

Wesleyan University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working, and living environment and does not tolerate identity-based [discriminatory harassment](#) and/or [sexual misconduct](#) against students, faculty, staff, trustees, volunteers, and employees of any university contractors/agents. For purposes of this Wesleyan policy, identity refers to one's race, color, religion, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, veteran status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, and gender expression. The Office for Equity and Inclusion serves students, faculty, administrators and develops policies and procedures regarding issues of diversity and equal opportunity/affirmative action. Individuals who believe they have been discriminated against should contact [the Office for Equity and Inclusion](#) at 860-685-4771.

Honor Code

All students of Wesleyan University are responsible for knowing and adhering to [the Honor Code](#) of this institution. Violations of this policy may include: cheating, plagiarism, aid of academic dishonesty, fabrication, lying, bribery, and threatening behavior. All incidents of academic misconduct shall be reported to the Honor Code Council – Office of Student Affairs. Students who are found to be in violation of the academic integrity policy will be subject to both academic sanctions from the faculty member and non-academic sanctions (including but not limited to university probation, suspension, or expulsion). The [Office of Student Affairs](#) has more information.