

A SURVEY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE



The Open Canon

Beginnings to The Seventeenth Century

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(Undergraduate Syllabus)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This survey of early English literature familiarizes students with the verse, drama, and prose of this extraordinary tradition, as well as the histories these texts illuminate, including life today. We focus on literature related to the three *Rs* of the period – Renaissance, Reformation, and Revolution. With the Renaissance, we talk about the rebirth of learning as England shifted from scholasticism to humanism. With the English Reformation, we talk about the rise of individual subjectivity amidst skepticism of traditional institutions of authority. And with the English Revolution, we talk about the origins of modern political subjectivity. Readings are reverse engineered from the most pressing issues of our own time: from “Build the wall” to *Beowulf*; from the Iraq war to the Crusades; from toxic masculinity to the Wife of Bath’s tale; from Occupy Wall Street to the Peasants’ Revolt; from *Game of Thrones* to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; from fan fiction to medieval mystics; from social media to the printing press; from Brexit to the English Reformation; from democratic socialism to More’s *Utopia*; from the climate crisis to Heywood’s *Play of the Weather*; from the space race to colonialization; from the election of Barack Obama to the succession of Elizabeth I; from “All the Single Ladies” to Anne Askew; from the crisis in the humanities to Sidney’s *Defense of Poesy*; from terrorism to revenge tragedy; from the Marvel Comics Universe to the English history plays; from intersectionality to *The Tempest*; from campus speech to Milton’s *Aeropagitica*; from impeachment to the English Civil Wars; from *Star Wars* to *The Blazing-World*; from structural inequality to Behn’s *Oroonoko*. The point is not to politicize the literature; it’s to enliven the tensions of these distant texts by importing our emotional investments in the issues that are their legacies.

REQUIRED TEXT

The Norton Anthology of English Literature. Edited by Stephen Greenblatt. Volumes A and B. Norton, 2018.

COURSE SCHEDULE
(Subject to Change Based on Discussions)

Week 1

Introduction
Beowulf (ca. 975-1025)

Week 2

The Dream of the Rood (7th-10th c.)
Anselm, *Proslogion* (1077-78), trans. Thomas Williams (1996): Chapter 2
“The First Crusade” in *The Middle Ages: Topics*
“Medieval Estates and Orders” in *The Middle Ages: Topics*
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (ca. 1340-1400)

Week 3

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (ca. 1380s-90s): The General Prologue and The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale
Julian of Norwich, *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich* (ca. 1373): Chapters 58-61 [Jesus as Mother]
Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (early 15th c.): Book 1.35-36 [Margery’s Marriage to and Intimacy with Christ]

Week 4

The Wakefield Second Shepherds’ Play (ca. 1500)
Everyman (after 1485)

Week 5

Exam on The Middle Ages
William Caxton: Excerpts from Prologues and Epilogues (1477-90)

Week 6

Thomas More, *Utopia* (1516): Book II
Faith in Conflict: All Readings in this Section

Week 7

John Heywood, *The Play of the Weather* (1533)
The Wider World: All Readings in this Section

Week 8

Women in Power: All Readings in this Section
Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder, “The long love that in my thought doth harbor,” “Mine own John Poins”
Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, “The soote season,” “Love, that doth reign and live within my thought,”
“Th’ Assyrians’ king, in peace with foul desire”
Anne Vaughan Locke, *A Meditation of a Penitent Sinner* (1560): “Have mercy, Lord, have mercy”
Mary Sidney, Psalm 58 (1599)

Week 9

Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy* (ca. 1580s)
Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (1590): I.i, I.vii.29-ix.20, and I.xi-xii

Week 10

Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (1582-92)
Exam on the Sixteenth Century

Week 11

William Shakespeare, *Richard III* (1592): Act I
William Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (1610): Act I
Aemilia Lanyer, from *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611)
Elizabeth Cary, from *The Tragedy of Mariam, the Faire Queene of Jewry* (1613)
John Donne, *Songs and Sonnets* (1590s-1600s): “The Good-Morrow,” “The Sunne Rising”
Mary Wroth, *Pamphilia to Amphilanthus* (1621): Sonnet 77
George Herbert, *The Temple* (1633): “The Printers to the Reader,” “The Alter,” “Easter Wings,” “Denial,”
“Anagram”
John Milton, “L’Allegro” and “Il Penseroso” (ca. 1632-33)

Week 12

Sir Francis Bacon, *Essays* (1625): “Of Truth”
John Milton, from *Areopagitica* (1644)
Crisis of Authority: All Readings in this Section
Robert Herrick, *Hesperides* (1648): “The Argument of His Book,” “The Hock-Cart, or Harvest Home,”
“To the Virgins, to make much of Time,” and “The Bad Season Makes the Poet Sad”
Richard Lovelace, *Lucasta* (1649): “To Alatheia. From Prison”
Katherine Philips, “A Married State” (1646), “Upon the Double Murder of King Charles” (1649)
Andrew Marvell, *Miscellaneous Poems* (p. 1681): “The Nymph Complaining for the Death of Her Faun”
and “Damon the Mower”

Week 13

John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (1667): 1.1-330, 2.1-628, 3.1-417, 5.572-907, and Book IX

Week 14

Margaret Cavendish, from *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing World* (1666)
Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave* (1688)

Week 15

Exam on the Seventeenth Century
Essay Writing Workshop

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

- 20% Weekly Posts and Class Discussion
- 20% Exam 1: The Middle Ages
- 20% Exam 2: The Sixteenth Century
- 20% Exam 3: The Seventeenth Century
- 20% Final Paper