English 101A: How to Read *Beowulf*

Instructor: Jeanie Abbott  
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Class meetings: M/W, 9:30-11:20am, Lathrop 290  
Office hours: TBA

How much can we really know about something written a thousand or more years ago? In this class, we will work towards answering this question as we read the most famous piece of Old English literature. Our ultimate goal will be learning to read as *medievalists*, investigating what *Beowulf*’s story, its characters, and its heroic ethos may have meant to its medieval audience—and what it means to us today. Whether you plan to research medieval topics in your undergraduate (or graduate) career, want to explore the medieval basis of modern fantasy and historical fiction, or just love a good epic tale, join us and learn to think, interpret, and research like a medievalist.

This class can be taken as an Old English language class and/or an introduction to Old English literature in translation. All levels of experience are welcome!

- **Requirements for students without Old English experience:**  
  - Attendance at two lecture/discussion classes per week  
  - Weekly readings and short responses (250-500 words)  
  - Midterm presentation reflecting on the class or a creative project  
  - Final paper of 8-10 page (may be able to substitute a creative project, pending instructor approval)

- **Requirements for students taking this as a *continuation* of Old English language (some familiarity with OE grammar and translation experience):**  
  - Attendance at two lecture/discussion classes per week PLUS an extra hour-long Old English language section (time and place TBD)  
  - Weekly readings and translations (in lieu of responses)  
  - Midterm translation take-home test  
  - Final paper of 8-10 pages OR final translation of *Beowulf* plus a 6-8-page commentary and reflection.

- If you would like to learn Old English but have no prior experience, *please let me know*. Time and interest permitting, I would be happy to offer an introductory Old English section.

**Learning Goals and Outcomes**

- Read and interpret Old English literature (in translation or in the original language) within its historical, literary, and critical contexts  
- Identify major themes in Old English literature and articulate their significance within the field of modern literary studies  
- Write about and discuss medieval literature using methods developed and practiced by professional medievalists
Materials
Required for everyone:

Required for advanced Old English readers only:

Highly encouraged for Old English readers at any level (available online through the library):

Any other readings will be available online.

Assignments and Readings
All assignments readings are due on the date they are listed on the syllabus.

Readings may be subject to change, depending on the interests and experience level of the class.

Unless otherwise noted, assignments should be emailed or turned in online before the beginning of class.

For students not in the Old English language section:
• **Weekly responses** to the previous week’s classes are due most Mondays (possible prompts are listed in the schedule below). Responses are graded primarily on completion, but, to earn full credit, they must represent your own original thoughts. Feel free to comment on topics and discussions brought up in class, but make sure your response adds something new.
• For the midterm presentation, you’re encouraged to delve deeper into one of the topics discussed in your responses or in class. Presentation length will depend on how many students are in the class, but they will be no longer than 15 minutes. You can treat this as a research presentation or as a creative assignment; however there are two restrictions: (1) a research presentation is required if you plan to do a creative assignment for the final project, and (2) all topics must be approved in advance by the instructor.
• The final project (8-10 pages) should be either a research paper on a topic related to this class or a substantial creative project of roughly equivalent length and effort (for instance, an adaptation of an excerpt from *Beowulf* along with a critical reflection). Again, all topics must be approved in advance.

For students taking the Old English language section:
• **Weekly Old English translations** are due in class during the translation section. In general, this will consist of at least 5-10 closely translated lines to be turned in for grading, along with ~20-50 more loosely translated lines to discuss during class.
• The midterm will be either a longer translation assignment or a take-home test (no presentation required).
• The final project should be either a research paper on a topic related to this class (8-10 pages) OR a translation project (at least 20-30 lines + notes) and critical commentary (6-8 pages).
• Introductory Old English students would have similar assignments, modified for experience level.

Attendance and Class Participation
You can miss two class sessions with no penalty but plan these absences carefully. Once you use your two free skips, further absences will be excused only for emergencies (and must be documented). In most cases, missing more than two classes will result in a lower grade.

Students with Documented Disabilities
Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae).

Honor Code
The Honor Code is the University's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work:

The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:
1. that they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading.
2. that they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.
3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.
4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.
Affordability of Course Materials
Stanford University and its instructors are committed to ensuring that all courses are financially accessible to all students. If you are an undergraduate who needs assistance with the cost of course textbooks, supplies, materials and/or fees, you are welcome to ask the Diversity & First-Gen Office for assistance by completing their questionnaire on course textbooks & supplies: http://tinyurl.com/jpqbarn or by contacting Joseph Brown, the Associate Director of the Diversity and First-Gen Office (jlbrown@stanford.edu; Old Union Room 207). Dr. Brown is available to connect you with resources and support while ensuring your privacy.
Schedule of Readings and Assignments

**Week 1: Reading in Translation**
Apr 2: Who wrote *Beowulf*? (When? Why? How?)
- No assignment

Apr 4: What happens in *Beowulf*?
- Read as much of *Beowulf* as you can. (*Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney, in Norton)

**Week 2: Reading in Manuscript**
Apr 9: Manuscript Workshop
- Week 1 response: Describe a character or event that particularly surprised, challenged, or confused you.
- Finish *Beowulf*

Apr 11: Texts of the *Beowulf* Manuscript
- Read another text from the *Beowulf* manuscript (choose from *The Wonders of the East*, *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, or *Judith*)

**Week 3: Reading Historically**
Apr 16: Historical events within the poem, role of history and time in the poem
- Week 2 response: Turn in alphabet sheet and transcription. What was your favorite letter and why?
- Read Roberta Frank, “The *Beowulf* Poet’s Sense of History” (in Norton)
- Read selected sources on the (few and scattered) historically-attested events and characters in *Beowulf* Gregory of Tours (in Norton and online)

Apr 18: Historical contexts of the poem
- Read selected Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entries
- Read *The Battle of Maldon* in translation

**Week 4: Reading Comparatively (1) — Old English Literature**
Apr 23: Religious comparisons
- Week 3 response: Write your own version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
- Read a piece of Old English religious poetry (e.g., *Andreas*, *Christ and Satan*, *Guthlac A/B*)

Apr 25: Secular comparisons
- Read a piece of Old English secular poetry (e.g., the Exeter Riddles, Widsith, Solomon and Saturn, *The Wanderer*, *The Wife’s Lament*)

**Week 5: Reading Comparatively (2) — British and Old Norse-Icelandic Literature**
Apr 30: Germanic sources and analogues
- Week 4 response: Compare your chosen text to someone else’s
- Read *Volsunga Saga*
May 2: British sources and analogues
  ➢ Read excerpts from Táin Bó Cúailnge
  ➢ Read Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed

**Week 6: Reading Theoretically (1) — Oral/Formulaic Theory**
  ➢ Midterm projects due this week

May 7: Oral vs. Written workshop
  ➢ Week 5 response: What source or analogue do you think is the closest? Which did you think was the most far-fetched? Why?

May 9: Oral-formulaic theory; comparisons with Homer and modern singers of tales

**Week 7: Reading Theoretically (2) — Critical Theory and Identity**
May 14: Monsters
  ➢ Week 6 response: In your own experience, what has been your personal closest analogue to oral-formulaic composition or even an oral storytelling tradition?
  ➢ Read J. R. R. Tolkien, “The Monsters and the Critics”
  ➢ Read excerpts from Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Monster Theory: Reading Culture

May 16: Race
  ➢ Reading TBA

**Week 8: Reading Theoretically (3) — Modern Theorists and Medieval Literature**
May 21: Authors and authorship
  ➢ Week 7 response
  ➢ Read Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?”
  ➢ Read excerpts from Carol Braun Pasternak, The Textuality of Old English Poetry

May 23: Class’s choice (possibilities include linguistics and semiotics, thing theory, network theory, aesthetics)
  ➢ Reading TBA

**Week 9: Reading (very) Closely**
May 28: Close reading in Modern English
  ➢ Reading TBA

May 30: Close reading in Old English (issues of translation and interpretation)
  ➢ Reading TBA

**Week 10: Re-Reading**
Jun 4: Researching as a medievalist

Jun 6: Researching as a medievalist / Last questions / Wrap-up

FINAL PROJECTS DUE: Wednesday, June 13th (via email or in my mailbox)