

SHAPING HEROES, PAST AND PRESENT

COURSE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES:

This course will focus on adventure narratives of the medieval period and the more recent past. The verb in the course title, “to shape,” comes from the Old English words *scieppan* (to make, fashion, or create) and *scop*, a poet or singer of stories. In the course, we will explore the ways in which writers, in crafting their texts and characters, make or shape heroism through storytelling. Conversely, as twenty-first century readers, we will explore the ways in which we ourselves craft heroism through our own reading and discussion of heroic texts of the past. Questions we pursue may include: to what extent do these stories of heroism depend on idealized visions of the past? How do these narratives negotiate questions of chivalric or heroic identity, gender ambiguity, and racial difference? How do modern writers use heroisms of the past to address concerns and problems within their own cultures and communities, such as the restraint of violence, new technologies of warfare, expansionism, totalitarianism, and imperialism? How does contemporary popular culture rework traditional notions of heroism? Through our study of heroic narratives of various genres, you will gain an historical sense of heroism as a persistent concern in Western culture from the early Middle Ages to the present, a way of imagining perfection, service, sanctity, virtue, and even monstrosity through which writers speak to one another through the ages.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: To accomplish the goals described above, you will be required to:

1. Attend all classes and read the work assigned carefully and thoroughly;
2. Write very short (one-page) response papers when assigned;
3. Complete three hour exams and a two-hour final exam.

REQUIRED TEXTS (AVAILABLE AT THE COLLEGE BOOKSTORE):

Beowulf: A New Verse Translation, by Seamus Heaney (bilingual edition)

The Romance of Arthur, revised ed., ed. James Wilhelm

Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit; The Fellowship of the Ring; The Two Towers; and The Return of the King*

Heldris de Cornwall, *Le Roman de Silence* (ERES: password “engl140”)

At the beginning of each class, I will send around a sign-in sheet. You are responsible for putting your name on it by the end of class; if your name is missing, you will not receive attendance credit for the day. Response papers must be submitted in class; no late papers will be accepted. Response papers must be one page—not half a page, not two-thirds of a page, not two pages—and should be typed and double-spaced, in a font other than Courier, using parenthetical citations to refer to the course texts. The papers should be very concise and focused, demonstrating that you completed the reading, understood it, and have something significant to say about it. You should always read actively, keeping the papers in mind and taking notes as you go; use a pen, a computer, a tape recorder, or whatever is easiest for you. You should use the papers as an opportunity to synthesize the material you have read and to distill key ideas, images, issues, or problems from the assigned text. If you invest your time and effort in the papers, you will find that studying for exams will be much easier, since you can use the papers as study guides for review. These papers are also very useful for me, helping me to gauge your progress in the reading and to determine topics to address in class. Each paper will receive a grade of √ (demonstrates a strong understanding of the text and key issues); √+ (demonstrates both strong understanding and an insightful interpretation of the reading); or √- (demonstrates incomplete reading or understanding of the text or insufficient effort in completing the paper). See me with any

questions about these papers. You should also come to see me, in office hours or by appointment, with any questions you have concerning the readings, exams, the presentation, or any other matter relating to the course. With so many students in the course, it will be difficult for me to get to know all of you during class time. I'll be keeping six scheduled office hours per week; never hesitate to make use of them. If you come to office hours, the course will be more rewarding and enjoyable for everyone.

GRADING: Grades will be distributed as follows:	Attendance:	10%
	Response Papers:	25%
	Group Presentation:	10%
	Exams:	55%

GROUP PRESENTATIONS: Toward the end of the semester, you will be dividing into small groups (between four and six people each) to assemble and deliver a fifteen-minute presentation on a special topic relating to heroism. You may address heroism in film, television, comic books, video games, children's literature, military culture, or another topic of your choice. After the midterm, I'll consult the class on topics of interest, make a list of topics, and ask you to sign up for a particular topic area. The presentation is an opportunity for you to be creative, to work cooperatively with your peers, and to integrate the course material with your group's mutual interest in *Buffy*, *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or whatever you choose. Obviously I will expect you to work assiduously and reliably in your small groups, organizing your schedules and planning carefully; your fellow group members will be depending on you to do your best.

PLAGIARISM: All work submitted for this class is governed by the Oberlin College Honor Code.

OTHER INFORMATION: Always bring the relevant books to class in case we need to refer to a particular passage. Please turn off all pagers and cell-phones before you enter class or a conference.

DAILY SCHEDULE:

T Feb 10: Introduction to course, syllabus, and course texts; introduction to heroism (handout)

Th Feb 12: Heaney, *Beowulf*; introduction to Anglo-Saxon culture

T Feb 17: Heaney, *Beowulf*; one-page response paper on *Beowulf* due

Th Feb 19: Heaney, *Beowulf*

T Feb 24: *The Romance of Arthur*: Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, or *The Knight of the Cart*; response paper on *Lancelot* due

Th Feb 26: *The Romance of Arthur*: Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*, or *The Knight of the Cart*

T Mar 2: Exam #1

Th Mar 4: *The Romance of Arthur*: Marie de France, *The Lay of Chievrefueil*; begin *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

T Mar 9: *The Romance of Arthur*: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; response paper on *SGGK* due

Th Mar 11: *The Romance of Arthur*: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

T Mar 16: *Roman de Silence*

Th Mar 18: *Roman de Silence*; response paper on *Roman de Silence* due

T Mar 23: *Roman de Silence*

Th Mar 25: Exam #2

T Mar 30: SPRING
 Th Apr 1: BREAK

T Apr 6: Review heroism in medieval literature; introduction to Twain
 Th Apr 8: Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

T Apr 13: Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*; response paper on *CYKAC* due
 Th Apr 15: Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*

T Apr 20: Tolkien, *The Hobbit*; introduction to *The Lord of the Rings*
 Th Apr 22: Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

T Apr 27: Tolkien, *The Two Towers*
 Th Apr 29: Tolkien, *The Return of the King*; response paper on Tolkien due

T May 4: Presentations (no more than fifteen minutes each)
 Th May 6: Exam #3 (CMH out of town)

T May 11: Presentations
 Th May 13: Presentations; review for final exam

Th May 20, 2:00 PM Final Exam