Part One: Course Description and Goals

In Anglo-Saxon England theft was a capital crime while murder was not. Why might this be? In the 12th century there was a lively debate on whether it was appropriate to love one’s spouse. Who would debate this and why? This class will consider questions like this as we read from a broad selection of early medieval literature. To frame the medieval literature, we will read several modern works that consider how and why objects circulate as gifts, how gifts gain meaning, and how gift-giving works as a form of symbolic communication to say things that often can’t be said outright. We will focus on several over-arching questions: What social functions and meanings does the gift have and how can these meanings be manipulated? Which is better (and why, and to whom): the gift that expects reciprocation, or the gift freely given with no expectation of return? How can we tell when a giver’s intentions in gift-giving are pure (and why does this matter)? In what ways is a gift a test, what does it test, and can it ever be a trap? As the opening questions show, pursuing this topic will lead us in some surprising directions through a variety of medieval genres, such as heroic epic, sermons, and romance. While gift-giving was much more central to pre-modern societies than it is today, thinking about early practices of gift-giving can help us see ourselves more clearly and imagine alternative ways of organizing society and exchanging things.

Grading Breakdown:

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<tr>
<td>Research Project</td>
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<td>Essay Proposal</td>
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<td>Annotated Bibliography</td>
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<td>Research Essay Draft</td>
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Required Texts: Do not buy e-books.


Additional readings on Blackboard. These must be printed out full-sized and brought to class.

Optional:


Recommended:

Hacker, Diana. *Rules for Writers,* 6th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010. (If you already own a stylebook, you may use the one you have. If you do not currently own a style book, you should buy this. Earlier editions won’t have the latest word on citing electronic sources, but they’ll do for most things.)
Part Two: Syllabus

In lieu of coursepacket, all course readings besides Beowulf and Njal’s Saga will be posted on Blackboard. These must be printed out and brought to class.

UNIT I: RECIPROCITY

Week 1
Mauss, Marcel. The Gift, chapters 1 and 2.
Tacitus, Germania, selections.

Week 2
Beowulf.

Week 3
Ine’s Law Code

Week 4

PROPOSAL DUE in hard copy any time before Friday.

Week 5
Njal’s Saga, chs. 1-78 (126pp).

Week 6
Njal’s Saga, finish (178pp).
UNIT 2: PURITY

Week 7

Week 8
Clark, Stephanie. “Room for Grace: The Free Gift in Ælfric’s *Catholic Homilies I.29* and 31.”

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE in hard copy any time before Friday.

Week 9

DRAFT WORKSHOP (out of class; this can be done through email). Complete before Friday.

Week 10

RESEARCH ESSAY DUE in class.

Personal Essay Due by Friday, March 21 at noon.