Winter 2015

English 620: Gift Theory and Medieval Literature
M 2-5pm in 253 PLC

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Part I: Course Description and Goals

This course will use scholarly analysis of gift exchange from several disciplines (anthropology, philosophy, economics, medieval studies) to frame and illuminate exchange in a variety of early medieval texts. While gift theory is a sprawling field, the course will be divided into two units. The first focuses on theories of exchange formed in anthropology and economics and builds on insights from Marcel Mauss’s seminal essay *The Gift* to examine how reciprocity functions in works like *Beowulf* and *Njal’s saga*. We will consider sub-topics such as the gift and social order, the gift and violence, and the inter-identity of people and things. The second unit shifts to questions of the gift from philosophy and theology. We will read part of Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of Mauss in *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money* in order to consider more explicitly the function of the non-reciprocal free gift in both modern ideology and medieval social structures. This focus will allow us to study how both modern and medieval societies value the other-oriented nature of the gift above self-interested action while teasing out the different senses of the social embeddedness of the individual within particular texts. Thus, in this unit we will read several medieval saints’ lives in which the gift features prominently as well as examining how the principles of gift-theory can be applied to a text that ostensibly has little to do with gift-giving, either Chrétien’s *Knight of the Cart*, or Chaucer’s Clerk’s Tale.

Gift theory challenges some of the basic assumptions naturalized in modern market capitalism, allowing more nuanced understandings of texts produced in other types of economies and societies. While gift theory grew out of anthropology and sociology, early medieval culture has been called the most straight-forward example of reciprocal gift giving. As this course will show, there is nothing straightforward about the gift.

Required Texts

*Beowulf*. Trans. Roy Liuzza. Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2000. Any of the following editions will do:


All other readings should be printed from Dropbox, or (if you prefer), you can get a hardcopy from me to photocopy. In many cases, the books from which these readings are excerpted are on reserve in the library.
UNIT 1: RECIPROCITY

Week 1, January 5
Tacitus, *Germania,* selections.

Week 2, January 12
*Beowulf*

Each of you should choose one of the following articles to present to the class. Skim the rest of the articles (i.e., familiarize yourself with the basic argument and the evidence on which it is based, but don’t read the whole thing).


Week 3, January 19: No Class. MLK Jr. Day
Please read ahead for next week. Our particular focus will be on the relationships between God and Satan, Satan and his followers, and God and Adam and Eve, and we’ll be considering whether each telling of the story (there are five accounts of Satan’s fall – Genesis contains two texts, A and B, spliced together) uses the same exchange structures. My advice: read the primary literature one week, the secondary literature the next, in whichever order seems good to you.

Week 4, January 26
Ælfric, “De Initio Creaturae.” *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: The First Part Containing the Sermones Catholici, or Homilies of Ælfric.* Ed. and trans. Benjamin Thorpe. London: The Ælfric Society, 1844. 9-19 (this is just the first part of the sermon).

*Genesis A and B will be the base text for our discussion; Christ and Satan also pictures the relationship between Satan and God as a lord/thegn relationship. Ælfric’s homily gives a non-heroic perspective on the same story, and Augustine’s *City of God* shows one traditional (and authoritative) way of understanding the fall of Lucifer that is interesting by way of contrast to the Anglo-Saxon versions.*


**Week 5, February 2**


Bourdieu, Pierre. “Selections from *The Logic of Practice*” and “Marginalia.” *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*. Ed. Alan D. Schrift. New York: Routledge, 1997. 190-241. *Pay particular attention to Bourdieu’s use of economic and market language in the way he relates the various forms of “capital” to one another. “Marginalia” was intended to clarify points in the original work that he felt his critics failed to understand.*


**Week 6, February 9**

*Njal’s Saga*, chs. 1-78 (126pp).

Week 7, February 16
*Njal’s Saga*, finish (178pp).

UNIT 2: PURITY

Week 8, February 23

Week 9, March 2

Week 10, March 9
Discussion of research projects.
OR Chaucer’s “Clerk’s Tale.”