

English 620  
Monday 2:00-4:50  
mjbayles@uoregon.edu  
Office phone: 541-346-3930

Martha Bayless  
Office: PLC 344  
Office hours: M 11-12, W 10-12

ENG 620:  
Medieval Popular Narratives

This class will look at the cultural and literary significance of tales normally overlooked by modern scholarship: the legends, rumors, and scandals of medieval England and Wales. These are the medieval equivalents of the National Inquirer, TV tabloid journalism, or internet conspiracy theories, sensationalist and wildly popular. We will examine their relation to cultural anxieties, “effort after meaning,” and the love of a good story. Primary texts include odd tales harbored in chronicles and medieval biography, as well as stories of adventure and the supernatural, against the backdrop of more canonical works. Secondary literature will include scholarship on folklore, oral tradition, the sociology of rumor, the science of memory, and the reliability of trial witnesses.

Two books are available at the Bookstore, although they are also cheaper when acquired used from sites like Half.com or Amazon. Other sources will be made available in class or on Canvas.

Available at the UO Bookstore:

Joshua Foer, *Moonwalking With Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything* (2011)

David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Traditions: The Cognitive Psychology of Epic, Ballads, and Counting-Out Rhymes* (1995)

Grading:

Keeping up with the reading; alertness and contributions in class: 10%

Seminar paper and abstract: 85%

Own-field mini-project: 5%

Note that in the unthinkable event of plagiarism, you will automatically fail the course. Remember to document all quotations!

About Incompletes: In the hectic busyness that is academia, it is easy to fall behind and natural to wish for more time to complete a seminar paper. However, the reason I no longer give Incompletes is that in twenty-five years of teaching, despite good intentions on every student’s part, I have never had a single student, ever, manage to make up an Incomplete. For this reason, it’s better just to get the work over with and not prolong the agony! Remember, “Perfect is the enemy of good.” It is also the enemy of Done!

If, of course, you find yourself in the hospital, have broken a leg, or suffered some other disaster, I will be happy to grant an Incomplete and to help you figure out how to solve the problem of course completion.

## Schedule

### **Week 1 (September 28) Introduction**

Outline and basic principles

Primary text: The traitor Ælfric, from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

### **Week 2 (October 5): Oral Traditions**

Primary texts: Excerpts from Walter Map's *De nugis curialia (Courtiers' Trifles)*

Secondary reading:

- Ronald Hutton, "How Myths are Made," in *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London and New York, 2003), pp. 1-37
- Alaric Hall, "The Orality of a Silent Age: The Place of Orality in Medieval Studies," from *Methods and the Medievalist: Current Approaches in Medieval Studies*, ed. Marko Lamberg et al. (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 2008), pp. 270-90 (online at <http://www.alarichall.org.uk/bibliog2.php#ORALITY>)

### **Week 3 (October 12): Memory I**

Primary texts: The murder of Edward the Martyr, from a variety of texts

The murder of Edmund Ironside

Secondary reading:

- Axel Olrik, "Epic Laws of Folk Narrative" from *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes
- Bruce A. Rosenberg, "Olrik's Laws: A Judicial Review," *Folklore Forum* 11 (1978), 152-62
- David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Tradition*, ch. 2 ("The Representation of Themes in Memory"), ch. 3 ("Imagery"), ch. 6 ("The Transmission of Oral Traditions")

### **Week 4 (October 19): Memory II**

Primary texts: *The Life and Miracles of St. Kenelm*

Secondary Reading:

- Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980-81), 5-27
- Joshua Foer, *Moonwalking With Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything* (entire book!)

### **Week 5 (October 26): Narrative as Causal Ontology**

Primary texts: *The Battle of Maldon* and later accounts:

- 1) *The Battle of Maldon*
- 2) *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*
- 3) Byrhtferth's *Vita Oswaldi*
- 4) *The Chronicle of Ramsey Abbey*
- 5) *The Liber Eliensis*

Secondary reading:

- Monika Otter, “Functions of Fiction in Historical Writing,” in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. Nancy Partner (Hodder Arnold, 2005), pp. 109-
- John D. Niles, “Poetry as Social Praxis,” ch. 3 of *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature*
- Bruce Rosenberg, *The Code of the West*, pp. 101-102
- Alan Kennedy, “Byrhtnoth’s Obits and Twelfth-Century Accounts of the Battle of Maldon,” in *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, ed. Donald Scragg (Oxford, 1991), pp. 59-78

**Week 6 (November 2): Gossip**Primary texts: Stories of Cweonthryth/Cynethryth/Quendrida

(from *The Lives of the Two Offas: Vitae Offarum Duorum*, introduced, trans. and ed. Michael Swanton)

Other lives of Quendrida

The story of Eadburh, from Asser’s *Life of Alfred*

Secondary reading:

- Chris Wickham, “Gossip and Resistance Among the Medieval Peasantry,” *Past and Present* 160 (1998), 3-24
- Sally E. Merry, “Rethinking Gossip and Scandal,” in *Towards a General Theory of Social Control*, vol. I, ed. Donald Black (New York, 1984), pp. 271–302

**This is the week in which you need to e-mail me a short paper proposal by the time of the class meeting (see assignment sheet).**

**Week 7 (November 9): Scholarly roundtable**

This week each member of the class will present a ten-minute exposition of their topic (which, since this is only week 7, will necessarily be in a preliminary form). The class will brainstorm on each topic and provide support and suggestions to each class member.

We will also discuss issues of publishing, professionalism, jobs, and careers.

There is no assigned reading for this week.

**Week 8 (November 16): Narratives of entertainers (on handout)**Primary texts:

- 1) The story of Cædmon, from Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*
- 2) King Alfred as a bard and spy, from William of Malmesbury
- 3) Athelstan as a bard and spy, from William of Malmesbury
- 4) Baldulf as a bard and spy, from Geoffrey of Monmouth
- 5) Taillefer at the Battle of Hastings, from the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelingu*
- 6) Taillefer from William of Malmesbury
- 7) Taillefer from Henry of Huntingdon
- 8) Taillefer from Wace
- 9) Taillefer from Geoffrei Gaimar
- 10) Three minstrels from Scandinavian sagas
- 11) The Old English *Widsith* (read at <http://www.southampton.ac.uk/~enm/widsith.htm>)

Secondary reading:

- Geoffrey A. Lester, “The Caedmon Story and its Analogues,” *Neophilologus* 58 (1974), 225-36.
- John D. Niles, “Bede’s Cædmon, ‘The Man Who Had No Story’ (Irish Tale-Type 2412B), *Folklore* 117 (2006), 141-55.

**Week 9 (Scheduled for November 23 — will be rescheduled): Compressed sagas**

Primary texts: Cynewulf and Cyneheard, from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

Secondary reading

- R. W. McTurk, “‘Cynewulf and Cyneheard’ and the Icelandic Sagas,” *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 12 (1981), 81-127

**First drafts of papers and abstracts are due this week** (first 4-6 pages only)

**Week 10 (November 30): Modern applications**

Hand in and be prepared to present your “Assignment for Wider Fields.”