

English 620
Monday 2:00-4:50
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ENG 620:
Rumor and Scandal in Medieval Culture

It has often been said that an inspiring fiction is usually preferred to a dull fact; the point might be pushed further to suggest that once a fiction is crafted cleverly enough to provide an entertaining story, it has the capacity to overpower virtually *any* facts given sufficient time.
— Ronald Hutton, “How Myths are Made,” p. 12.

A lie can travel halfway around the world before the truth can get its boots on.
— old saying

This class will turn the techniques of literary study to the analysis of a kind of narrative that is usually not considered “literary”: the legends, rumor, and scandal that circulate in culture and purport to be true. In particular, we will look at the cultural and literary significance of tales normally overlooked by modern scholarship: the legends, rumors, and scandals of medieval Britain. These informal stories are the medieval equivalents of internet memes and conspiracy theories, TV tabloid journalism, and “fake news,” and indeed they have significant parallels with modern rumor and scandal. We will examine their relation to cultural anxieties, to “effort after meaning,” and to the love of sensation. 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, and the neuroscience of memory.

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 (including full marks for meeting deadlines): 80%

Assignment from wider fields (due week 10): 10%

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 24) Introduction

Outline and basic principles

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

Week 2 (October 1): History and Story

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

Secondary reading:

- Ronald Hutton, "How Myths are Made," in *Witches, Druids and King Arthur* (London and New York, 2003), pp. 1-37
- Monika Otter, "Functions of Fiction in Historical Writing," in *Writing Medieval History*, ed. Nancy Partner (Hodder Arnold, 2005), pp. 109-30
- Bernard Guerin and Yoshihiko Miyazaki, "Analyzing Rumors, Gossip, and Urban Legends through their Conversational Properties," *Psychological Record* 56 (2006), 23-34

Week 3 (October 8): Memory I

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

Secondary reading:

- Daniel Schachter, "Memory Distortion: History and Current Status," in *Memory Distortion: How Minds, Brains, and Societies Reconstruct the Past* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), pp. 1-43.
- Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman, *The Psychology of Rumor* (New York, 1947), ch. 8, "The Basic Pattern of Distortion," pp. 134-58.
- David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Tradition*, ch. 2 ("The Representation of Themes in Memory")

Week 4 (October 15): Memory II

Primary text: The story of Eadburh, from Asser's *Life of Alfred*

Secondary Reading:

- Joshua Foer, *Moonwalking With Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything* (the entire book! it goes fast!)
- Axel Olrik, “Epic Laws of Folk Narrative” from *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes
- Hayden White, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980-81), 5-27

Week 5 (October 22): Narrative as Exploration, Explanation, and Excuse

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*
- (Nos. 2-5 are in the Kennedy article listed below)

Secondary reading:

- John D. Niles, “Poetry as Social Praxis,” ch. 3 of *Homo Narrans: The Poetics and Anthropology of Oral Literature* (Philadelphia, 1999), pp. 66-88, also as “Reconceiving Beowulf: Poetry as Social Praxis,” in *College English* 61 (1998), 143-66 (these are the same article)
- Bruce Rosenberg on myths of General Custer, from *The Code of the West*.
- 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
- David C. Rubin, *Memory in Oral Tradition*, ch. 3 (“Imagery”) and ch. 6 (“The Transmission of Oral Traditions”)

Week 6 (October 29): Gossip, or: Narrative Forms of Knowledge

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 Life and Miracles of St. Kenelm

Secondary reading:

- Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, “Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story,” in *Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story*, ed. R. S. Wyer (Hillsdale, NJ, 1995), pp. 1-85, available via online via Canvas or directly online at: http://cogprints.org/636/1/KnowledgeMemory_SchankAbelson_d.html#fn0
- 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

Week 7 (November 5): Publishing information session, plus The Humiliated King

Primary texts:

- 1) Alfred & the cakes, from the *Vita I St. Neoti*

- 2) Alfred & the cakes, from the *Homily on St. Neot*
- 3) Alfred & the cakes, from the *Annals of St. Neot*
- 4) Alfred & the cakes, from the *Chronicle of John of Wallingford*

No secondary reading

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 8 (November 12): Narratives of entertainers

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 Proelinguo*
- 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*

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 (November 19): 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+ pages only)

Week 10 (November 26): Modern applications

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