

English 9171/4311E Tolkien and Old English

When he was sixteen, Ronald Tolkien acquired an Anglo-Saxon primer from a master at King Edward's School in Birmingham, which he devoured with enthusiasm before turning to the reading of *Beowulf*, then Middle English, then Old Norse, and then Germanic philology in general. After that, he turned to inventing languages. In this course, we will study Old English as Tolkien did, beginning with introductory short prose texts, then some of the shorter poems, and then *Beowulf*, making links with Tolkien's life and work along the way. When we get to *Beowulf*, we will read his landmark Gollancz Lecture from 1936, which arguably turned the study of the poem away from the quarrying philologists and archaeologists and towards scholars of literature and culture. We will also consider the other poems which Tolkien addressed in his scholarly role as Rawlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Oxford, and the changes he brought to the curriculum of the Faculty of English Language and Literature along with his friend C.S. Lewis. We will also engage with the works that Tolkien wrote himself, inspired by the medieval texts he studied professionally, reading *The Lord of the Rings*, and some of his other works. If time and energy permit, we will also delve into Tolkien's own compositions in Old English, and his other engagements with issues of early medieval English culture.

The course is set up so that individual students can learn Old English in detail, or can choose to focus more on Tolkien and his engagement with the medieval as a principal feature of the interdisciplinary subject of medievalism. We will start in the first six weeks with a full examination of Tolkien's engagement with *Battle of Maldon*, an important poem from around the first millennium both for its changes to Old English metre and style and for its information about a critical battle between the battle-leader of Essex and an invading force of Danes and other Vikings in 991. We will look at Tolkien's poem deriving from the Old English poem and proposing further conclusions about the behaviour of Byrhtnoth, the battle-leader, and at Tolkien's own engagement with war during his life.

Next, in late October and in November we will turn to the Old English elegies and read them with some sections of *Lord of the Rings*. In January we will turn more specifically to Tolkien's work on language, both his scholarly work and his work for the Oxford English Dictionary, and read some Old English riddles against Tolkien's lifelong interest in riddles and their interpretation. Finally, we will look at *Beowulf* in February and March. Over the first term we will also look at some short stories and theoretical articles by Tolkien which orbit around *Lord of the Rings*, which we will read more carefully in the second term.

Required Texts:

Jonathan Evans, *An Introduction to Old English*. New York: MLA Publications, 2018.

R.D. Fulk, ed. and trans., *The Beowulf Manuscript*. Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library. Harvard UP, 2010.

J.R.R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*. 3-vol. set. New York: HarperCollins, 2007. \$26.55

J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary together with Sellic Spell*. London: HarperCollins, 2015.

Other course materials will be posted to the class website, or available through the library.

Optional Texts:

Fr. Klaeber, ed. *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*. 1945. Andesite Press, August 2017.

Course Evaluation:

Participation	10%
Online written assignments	6 @ 5% = 30%
<i>Battle of Maldon</i> assignment, October	10%
Essay in class, November	10%
Presentations 1 @ 10%, 1 @ 20% (with writeup)	30%
Essay in class, February	10%

Participation: Participation marks will be given for attendance to the full class, for engagement (that is, having read the materials in advance, prepared the homework, and generally faced up to the exigencies of the course), for the quality of questions and answers, and for helpfulness with colleagues. Feedback on participation will occur at least once during the course so that you know where you stand.

Online Written Assignments: Submitted on OWL, these will be engagements in 500-750 words with one of the texts or ideas treated in the previous week. Students generally want more specific comments about what is expected here. You can do research, and it is a good idea to take something we discuss briefly in class and dig into it more deeply. At the same time it is possible to write an excellent short paper that uses only the materials we are reading and studying in the

course. You can choose to write about the Old English material, or the Tolkien material, or the connections between the two: this is your choice. I am happy to discuss your paper briefly, and I will mark it fairly quickly so as to give you feedback for the next paper. The idea here is for you to solidify your learning several times each term, so that you really know the course materials and can develop your ideas. Students sometimes pick a theme they will carry through all their papers, or an approach, or a theory to apply, or they focus on a particular character or ideal. Some simply work each week to figure out something they can apply from a previous course or from their own knowledge. Three papers must be submitted by the last due date in December, and three more by the last due date in April.

Short Presentations: My basic principles for marking in-class presentations are: content as appropriate for the rest of the class, clarity of delivery, time-keeping, quality of ancillary materials. In short, these presentations are opportunities to engage with your colleagues, and that will be the focus in the grading. That is, feel free to impress me if you want, but I will be grading you on how much you convey to your colleagues and how they respond to your presentation. For the second of these, you will submit a written version of the paper at the end of the session.

***Battle of Maldon* assignment:** We will discuss this in class, but this assignment can be a paper on an aspect of the poem or Tolkien's reaction to it, or more generally to the discussions of war and tactics we will be having in class, or a creative response to the poem or Tolkien's poem. The work should be not more than a thousand words.

Essay assignments in class: This will be pretty much what it sounds like, a chance to write a formal essay about some aspect of the material studied that day and in the previous couple of weeks, using your textbooks and notes and other written materials as needed.