

UNIVERSITY OF WALES, LAMPER

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Anglo-Saxon Heroic Literature

20 Credits, Level 7, MA

Tutor: Dr William Marx

INTRODUCTION

Module aims

The aims of this module are:

- To explore a central issue of Anglo-Saxon cultural history, namely how in their literature the Anglo-Saxons accommodated the heroic with Christianity
- To encourage independent study of a range of primary texts from the Anglo-Saxon period
- To develop the skills to read critically and to formulate judgements about literary and historical writing, and to use the results of the critical investigation of the primary materials to produce substantial arguments and interpretations of a range of Anglo-Saxon texts.

Module objectives

'Anglo-Saxon' is the name given to the historical period extending from the fifth to the eleventh century, although these boundaries must be regarded as flexible. At the beginning of the period the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were essentially pagan but there is evidence of some contact with and knowledge of Christianity. The systematic conversion of the Anglo-Saxons began at the end of the sixth century through the work of Augustine of Canterbury. This module aims to explore how the literature of the Anglo-Saxons reflects their conversion to Christianity, and how there developed a distinctive literary idiom that combined aspects of Christian doctrine with the heroic ideals of the Anglo-Saxons.

The 'heroic' is a central theme in the literature of Anglo-Saxon England. It is used in the literature of warfare such as *The Battle of Maldon*, but also has an important place in religious and meditative writing where the heroic ethic is debated and redefined in a Christian context. The text in which the heroic comes under most scrutiny is *Beowulf*, which is used as a focal point for the course. The text offers a subtle and perceptive

synthesis of Christian ideals and heroic values which the course aims to draw out. All the literary texts studied were written in the vernacular of Anglo-Saxon England, known to modern scholars as 'Old English', and the module aims to give you some experience of the language through the use of parallel texts, where the original is closely translated in Modern English.

Learning outcomes

You will be expected to work independently, and the assessment for the module is intended to encourage the investigation of literary and historical texts, and the formulation of judgements and critical points of view. Your written work will be expected to show evidence of critical analysis of the material and the ability to develop an argument or series of arguments covering a number of the texts studied for the module.

Module structure

This module is divided into nine units. The notes to each unit provide an introduction to the topic and the texts under discussion, and give some guidance to the questions and issues that surround each unit of material. There are bibliographies and reading lists for each unit.

- 1 Anglo-Saxon History and Society: Who were the Anglo-Saxons?
- 2 Anglo-Saxon History and Society: The Introduction of Christianity, Literacy, and the Bonds of Society
- 3 King Oswald of Northumbria
- 4 The Heroic and Battle Literature
- 5 The Dream of the Rood
- 6 The Wanderer
- 7 Beowulf I: Introduction; Grendel and Beowulf
- 8 Beowulf II: 'The Fight at Finnsburh' and 'The Finnsburh Fragment'
- 9 Beowulf III: The Dragon Episode

Texts

For each unit the module reader contains primary texts, all of which are in Modern English translations. The translations from Anglo-Saxon are my own. I have provided in parallel the Anglo-Saxon or 'Old English' texts for those who may wish to investigate the original formulations. For *Beowulf* the set edition is by Michael Swanton which contains the 'Old English' text and a parallel translation. This is the best edition for students coming to *Beowulf* for the first time.

Introductory reading

The reading list that accompanies Unit 1 contains titles of general interest. Bruce Mitchell's *An Invitation to Old English and Anglo-Saxon England* contains much useful background on the literature and the period itself presented in a succinct form. Martin Welch's *Anglo-Saxon England*, written for English Heritage, is a sound introduction to some of the general themes of Anglo-Saxon history and culture, as are Dorothy Whitelock's *The Beginnings of English Society* and David Wilson's *The Anglo-Saxons*. The latter two titles are now quite old, but still valuable and worth reading. Nicholas Higham's *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons* is dense but useful for its contribution to current debates on the nature of Anglo-Saxon identity.

Essay topics

You must submit one copy of an essay of **between 6000 and 7000** words on one of the topics listed below, or an alternative topic agreed with the tutor for this module. Draft essays may be submitted to the tutor for this module for informal advice and comment prior to formal submission.

Essays are to be submitted to the Administrator of the Department of English. They will be assessed along with other work submitted to the Department of English and will be considered at the MA examination board which meets once each year with the external examiner. In special circumstances, the Department can arrange for work to be assessed internally and by the external examiner apart from the MA examination board, although the results will need to be ratified by the board at its annual meeting.

For the essay you are advised to show a range of reading from the primary texts; however, you may concentrate on TWO of the literary texts. *Beowulf* is the exception and the essay may concentrate on this text alone where appropriate.

1. 'Although it is the produce of a thoroughly Christian culture, there is in Anglo-Saxon literature a tension between Christianity and pre-Christian heroic culture.' Discuss
2. In what ways would it appear that Anglo-Saxon literature adapted and modified heroic culture to its own ends? Is it possible to refer to the emergence of a 'new (Christian) heroism'?
3. In Anglo-Saxon literature, does Christianity have the effect of compromising ideas about the heroic?
4. Battle is the traditional site for heroic action. Discuss some of the ways in which Anglo-Saxon literature uses ideas of battle.
5. In the light of the texts you have read for this module, what, for the Anglo-Saxons, constitutes a heroic figure?

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6. In what ways, if at all, is it possible to think of *Beowulf* as a narrative with a Christian design and purpose?
7. '*Beowulf* functions as a critique of the heroic.' Discuss.

Contact details

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