

English 4311E
English 9171

Tolkien and Old English

M.J. Toswell

Tuesdays 12:30-3:30
University College Room 4401

In 1908, a master at a public school in Birmingham gave his most promising student a recently-published primer of Old English, which he devoured with enthusiasm before turning to read Beowulf in Old English, then Middle English, Old Norse, and Germanic philology more generally. He was fascinated by medieval languages, and the next year invented a language based on the Finnish in the Kalevala. At Oxford, that student started in Classics but shifted to the English school partway through his degree, after which he served in the Great War on the front lines. He was already a poet and storyteller, and on his return became a lexicographer and then a medievalist. In 1930, while marking student papers for the UK government, he famously found a blank page and wrote “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit.” In this course we will learn Old English, starting with the basics and practising a lot, while reading J.R.R.

Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* in the first term, looking also at some short passages, easy prose, and one or two poems. In the second term we will look at some Old English riddles and elegies, consider some of Tolkien’s scholarship and other works, read *The Hobbit*, and focus in the final six weeks on the Old English poem Beowulf which was at the centre of Tolkien’s intellectual and imaginative world.

Required Textbooks:

J.R.R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings*. 3 vols. (London: HarperCollins, 2007).

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit* (London: HarperCollins, 2011).

J.R.R. Tolkien, *Tree and Leaf* (London: HarperCollins, 1978).

Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, *A Guide to Old English*. Eighth Edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

R.D. Fulk, tr. *The Beowulf Manuscript*. (Boston: Harvard UP, 2010).

Suggested Textbook:

R.D. Fulk, Robert Bjork, and John D. Niles, ed. *Klaeber’s Beowulf*. 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

A Note on Textbook costs and editions:

The Bookstore has ordered the required textbooks, and generally has copies of Tolkien's principal works for other courses which it recycles for this course, so you should be able to get used copies from them for about \$30 in total. The Dumbarton Oaks edition of *Beowulf* with facing translation by Rob Fulk is already priced to be available to a general audience, and also has some availability on the used market. The Mitchell and Robinson is one of the two classic texts of the twenty-first century for learning Old English; my advice would be to buy it new as otherwise you'll wind up with a pretty raggedy copy, but do buy this first and spend some time with it as Old English goes by quickly—and some years the Bookstore does not get this book in quickly or effectively. You should be able to get both the Fulk and the Mitchell/Robinson for less than a hundred dollars, possibly much less if the bookstore got some past copies on its buy-back options. You might also run into Peter S. Baker's *Introduction to Old English*, which would be a superb book to have in your library for this course. I've listed the standard modern edition of *Beowulf* for those of you really interested in Old English, because its glossary and introductory material are unsurpassed (although the introduction is in ridiculously small print). Please do try to use the campus bookstore for some purchases as if we do not use bookstores we're going to lose them.

My contact information:

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Office Hours: Tuesdays 3:30-5:30 p.m. in person or on zoom

I use email as my principal mode of contact, so use that to check in with me, please. Bear in mind the following points, though: the answer to your query might be in the course outline, the course outline is the final authority, you should use your UWO email as I do not want to know that you have an email address called "fluffypajamas," you should start an email with a proper salutation, I answer quickly if an answer is needed, and you probably only get one email answered so all your points and issues should be in that email.

Most years I schedule meetings with students in the class at least once a term just to check in and see how you are doing. If you do not wish to attend one of these, just do not sign up for a time when I send the info round. Also, write down the time of your booking or record it in your phone.

I am in the office at other times so do feel free to drop by, **but** avoid my office in the hour before I am teaching. That is prep and panic time. I do tend to have a lot of meetings on campus, and a lot of zoom meetings as well, so I am around a lot. If I'm available, the door tends to be open.

Pattern of the course:

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.

The first two months or so we will be learning Old English each week, and also gradually reading the *Lord of the Rings*. We'll be doing basic analysis, but also thinking about Tolkien's engagement with Old English in the background of the novel.

In late November we will take some time specifically with *The Battle of Maldon* and Tolkien's poetic response to it, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth." This battle was a major feature of early medieval history in England (or possibly not), and we know it took place near Maldon in 991, with the *ealdorman* of Essex fighting with his personal troops and the great *fyrð* of Essex against a mixed group of Viking invaders or raiders. We'll look at the historical and social background, and more particularly at the style of the Old English poem and of Tolkien's response.

Next, in January we will turn to the Old English elegies and riddles and read them in connection to Tolkien's interest in lament poems and riddling. More specifically, we will look at Tolkien's work on language, both his scholarly work and his work for the *Oxford English Dictionary*. We will also take a couple of weeks for your presentations on some of Tolkien's other works; these will be short introductions to these texts highlighting their connections to his scholarly life, where possible.

Finally, starting in February we will read *Beowulf*. We will also read *The Hobbit* as our last Tolkienian text, and the second set of short presentations will concern these texts.

Both in the last class in December and in the last class in April we will hold a mini-conference with short papers (these can be more formal versions of work previously done in the course). For students who present their papers at both mini-conferences, the higher grade will count.

Course Evaluation:

Participation	10%
Online written assignments	5 @ 8% = 40%
Essays in class, October, February, March	2 @ 10% = 20%
Presentations 2 @ 10%	20%
Mini-conference 1 @ 10%	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 Brightspace, these will be engagements in 500-800 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 two more by the last due date in April. If you are smart enough to submit extra papers, the best five will count for your grade.

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. I will be grading you on how much you convey to your colleagues and how they respond to your presentation. The length of these presentations will depend on class size; we'll figure this out in the first meeting.

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. We will discuss in advance and you will be able to prepare your thoughts, but the essays will be written in class on paper, and your laptops and phones and other devices will be off.

Mini-conferences: It's always fun to end the term with a kind of roundup of our thinking to date, and these mini-conferences allow you an opportunity to hear what others have been thinking about and pondering over the term. These will be short formal papers (again, length to depend on class size) with time for questions afterwards, arranged into sets of three or four so that we can mimic the format of an academic conference. We'll finish with some food and drink. You'll want to come with a printed copy of your paper for me to have when I'm writing your feedback, though you can certainly read from a screen. Grading will be on the quality of the paper and of the delivery and ability to handle tech (if used) and answer questions.

Course Syllabus:

- Sept 9 Introduction, Introduction to Old English
Preliminary discussion of Tolkien's scholarship and creative work
16 OE pronunciation, letters, sentences
Fellowship Book 1
23 OE nouns, adjectives
Fellowship Book 2
- Oct 7 OE pronouns, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions
OE verbs, some sentences
Two Towers Book 3
14 OE short passages, more verbs
Two Towers Book 4
21 OE prose, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle
Tolkien's life
28 In-class essay
OE prose, Tolkien's life
- Nov 11 OE prose, saint's life
Return of the King Book 5
18 *Battle of Maldon*
Return of the King Book 6
25 *Battle of Maldon*
"Homecoming of Beorhtnoth"
- Dec 2 Mini-conference
- Jan 6 Riddles in OE and in Tolkien
13 "The Wanderer"
Tolkien's other works
20 "Dream of the Rood"
Tolkien's other works
27 "Wife's Lament," "Wulf and Eadwacer"
Tolkien's other works
- Feb 3 Introduction to *Beowulf*
In-class essay
10 *Beowulf* 1-200
The Hobbit chapters 1-6
24 *Beowulf* 200-700
The Hobbit chapters 7-11
- Mar 3 *Beowulf* 700-1100
The Hobbit chapters 12-19
10 *Beowulf* 1100-1700
Presentations
17 *Beowulf* 1700-2200
Presentations
24 *Beowulf* 2200-2800

In-class essay
Presentations
31 *Beowulf* 2800-3182
Presentations
April 7 Mini-conference

Concluding note on this course:

This course has a lot of small assignments, individually perhaps not too significant, but together they add up quickly. Doing well in the course will require very smart organization, thoughtful engagement that allows you to produce short assignments without undue delay or reconsideration and to build the course so it answers to your own strengths, and a plan for learning Old English or learning Tolkien or both (both is preferred, obviously). If you leave behind half-written short assignments because you did not quite trust yourself to finish or could not finish by the deadline, pick them back up later on and see if the ideas can work, or think about what additional research on Tolkien you did and how that could help you in the presentations or if the piece you did not finish could be completed for one of the mini-conferences. Being an academic is about being an entrepreneur and figuring out how to plan your own career; this course gives you an opportunity to find out if this kind of independent thinking is for you. It's also smart to start on it early: the opportunity to sign up for specific texts or presentation topics opens in late August, and you can always read the Tolkien texts at your leisure over the summer and re-engage with them over the winter.

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