

EN 398 — Medieval Alterities

ESSAY QUESTIONS, FEBRUARY 2019

You can either chose one of the topics below, or devise your own essay questions, in consultation with the module convenor (see details below).

A. Essay Topics – please remember to devise a title for your essay.

NB: where more than one poem is analysed, you may chose to focus your analysis primarily on one text, using others as terms of comparison)

1. How do Middle English texts use space and place (geographic; topographic, symbolic etc.) in order to map and construct notions of identity (religious; national; cultural; etc.)? Discuss at least three different primary texts studied from this module.
2. '[M]edieval constructions of race included the knowledge that a "biological" truth of the body is produced (and sustained) through repetitive acts of representation'. Discuss in relation to at least two primary texts from the course syllabus.
> Citation from J.J. Cohen, 'On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in late Medieval France and England', in *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31.1 (2001), 113–146.
3. Analyse how late medieval texts represent Christian violence against 'others' not only as acceptable, but as a cultural and political 'necessity'. You may discuss — for instance — the socially and psychologically stabilising role of violence; its purgative and therapeutic effects on individuals and communities; and its role in the definition of identity more broadly; and the limits of the positive effects of violence. Discuss at least two different primary texts studied from this module.
4. In her essay, Rachel Trubowitz repeatedly uses the concept of 'boundary panic' to refer to recurrent anxieties in pre-modern Jewish-Christian relations. Discuss the usefulness of Trubowitz's concept for understanding at least three texts studied on the course (these need not necessarily be concerned with Jewish-Christian relations, but with Self-Other relations more broadly...).
5. Female characters often play an important and dynamic role in shaping the relationship between the Christian self (individual and/or corporate) and its 'other' in medieval romance, often allowing this relationship to evolve beyond the state of simple binary opposition. Discuss at least two texts from the module.
6. Discuss some of the methodological challenges involved in analysing 'popular' literary fiction from the later Middle Ages from the perspective of 'cultural history'. (You may want to discuss one of the following topics for instance: problems of authorship and intention; textual instability/variation; lack of internal consistency in texts; the problem of defining a clear and firm 'cultural context' for individual texts; the relationship of historical reality, historiography, and literary fiction; etc.). Please exemplify your observations with reference to two or three primary texts from the module.
7. Much of the literature we have read this term is suspended between fascination for the exoticism of Eastern culture, and a defensive sense of hostility towards it. Discuss this tension in at least two texts.
8. Many of the texts we have read can be broadly understood as 'crusading literature'. But how is the crusading ideal itself employed, interpreted, and/or modified by each of these different texts? And what does this suggest about the more specific ideological agenda of particular texts? (You may consider, for instance: whether texts aim at remembering, reviving, celebrating,

critiquing, or modifying established ideas of crusading; whether literary texts pursue clearly defined political, religious, and ideological aims; or whether texts use crusading narratives to indulge in radical forms of cultural/political 'fantasy', wishful thinking, self-delusion, etc)

B. Devise your own essay question.

If you would prefer to devise your own essay question, please send the module convenor a prospective title, short abstract, and initial bibliography (1-2 pages), **by 6 PM on Friday of week 9 (8 March 2019)**. This will give us time to discuss any possible changes during week 10 before the end of term.