English 2100: Response Essay One: Medieval Literature and Culture

You may present any ideas in this 3-5 page essay, but your paper must address one or more of the texts on the syllabus from “Caedmon’s Hymn” to Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Your text should be double-spaced, with one-inch margins all around the page. Your discussion should proceed logically from an arguable statement of purpose that is conspicuous early on in the essay. Be ruthless in narrowing the scope of your paper. The more focused, the better. Be sure to quote from the texts you’re discussing. Note that you are forbidden from doing any research for this essay. If I find that you’ve used an outside source for this essay without permission, you will receive no credit for the assignment. Also, this paper must be the product of your work alone—no outside help. I am interested in your grasp on the text, your engagement with it, and your ability to use it to support and expand your thoughts. No less important is your grasp on language and writing, your ability to persuade through style and control. The essay is due on March 19th; I would be happy to conference with you about your paper, but not on the day before it’s due. I will not read or edit an entire draft, but I will look at a paragraph or two and answer any questions that you may have. Start early, think deeply, and enjoy writing the essay. Use MLA style. Respond to one of the prompts below:

(1) Pick a major figure or a group of lesser figures (like the “churls” in “The Battle of Maldon”) from an Anglo-Saxon heroic poem and consider their actions and behavior. Discuss your character(s) as an example of the “warrior ethos.” Do you see similar attitudes or groups today? What place do they have in our culture now, what place then?

(2) Consider the many digressions in Beowulf and choose either a long one (like the “Finn Digression” or an episode from the Swedish-Geatish wars, like the one in which Wulf and Eofor slay Ongentheow) or two shorter ones—or be brave and focus on a juicy shorter one, like the story of Modthryth; discuss the function of the digression and its relation to the “main” narrative.

(3) Write an essay on medieval notions of monsters and the fabulous. You may, for instance, choose one of the monsters from Beowulf and discuss it as a dark-side manifestation of the Anglo-Saxon warrior class, or choose a faerie or witch from a medieval Romance and discuss its function vis-à-vis the dominant courtly culture.

(4) Consider one of the two Canterbury Tales we covered in class, and discuss the relationship between the tale itself and teller of the tale. How is the tale appropriate or inappropriate for the teller? What details can you find in the tale that have direct bearing on such aspects of the teller as class, profession, gender, and so on? What motivates the teller to tell his or her particular tale?
(5) What portrait of King Arthur and his court emerges in the medieval works we’ve read this semester? How does the Arthur in these tales compare to the notions you may have held about this legendary figure before reading these works? Where did you learn about Arthur before this class, and how have your perceptions shifted, if at all?

(6) Describe the society in which particular characters live, and comment upon how the social culture affects character.

(7) Explain the ways studying the literary roles of characters that are somehow like you has led you to self-revelations that may be important to readers like you: for example, has examining the roles of women in medieval texts helped you to formulate a way of avoiding pitfalls and succeeding as a woman?

(8) Compare the way(s) that a text suggests that humans are bound in a community (sympathy, economy, coincidence, tradition, in God…) to a way that you believe contemporary Americans are bound in community and comment upon the advantages/disadvantages of each.

(9) Describe the role of humor in life and art and comment upon its uses or abuses.