Medieval Monstrosity

Why does this course matter?

Like the aliens of today’s fantasy and horror stories, the monster is a central figure in much medieval literature, from England to Africa, India, and China. The monsters and fantastic beings that populate the pages of medieval texts provide the roots of issues with which we still struggle today, locally and globally, from racism to sexism. But what constitutes a monster? What are the consequences of their presence? What purposes did they serve? As we read medieval literary texts, we will examine the role of the monstrous in medieval imaginations and discuss what monstrosity reveals about cultures of the global Middle Ages and about ourselves today.

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How will this course help you succeed?

Familiarizing ourselves with medieval monstrosity and learning how to analyze its literary and cultural roles will help us learn about a historical culture that influenced—and continues to influence—our own. In addition, this course will help you acquire or further develop skills that you can apply to analyzing and writing about literary and other texts, medieval and modern. By the end of this course, in discussions and a variety of written projects, you will be able to:

1) Analyze what makes a monster monstrous, including intersections of monstrosity with gender, sexuality, religion, race, and physical ability

2) Analyze how monstrosity affects perceptions of human identity and what different cultures find (un)acceptable

3) Evaluate connections between monstrosity in the global Middle Ages and in the U.S. today

4) Improve your critical thinking skills and apply them to textual analysis, academic writing, and research

How does this course relate to global learning?

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

1) Demonstrate knowledge of both the interrelatedness and diversity of local, national, and global uses of monstrosity

2) Analyze distinct and shared global, transhistorical, and intercultural perspectives on monstrosity

3) Evaluate connections between the local, global, international, and intercultural problems monstrosity raises, and explore solutions to those problems

What texts do you have to buy?

Beowulf, translated by Seamus Heany
W. W. Norton
ISBN: 9780393320978

Sunjata: A West African Epic, translated by David Conrad
Hackett Publishing
ISBN: 9781624664946
How will you succeed in this course?

Communicate: Medieval literature may be unlike other literature you've studied in the past. Your success is important to me, so let me know as soon as possible if there are aspects of this course that prevent you from learning or exclude you. Together we'll develop strategies to both meet your needs and the course requirements.

Engage: I hope you actively engage in this course because I have found it is the best way to enhance your learning. Engage professionally by preparing for class with the reading and your own notes, contributing to class discussions, and participating in group work. Since you and your peers have different experiences with literature and culture, your peers are also valuable resources for learning. Your comments, questions, and responses help make us all better scholars of literature.

Take risks: I don't expect you to be a polished and perfected scholar of medieval literature. I encourage you to experiment. The more you try, the more you learn, and the more you will grow as a critic, writer, and scholar. If you're not clear or are unsure about something, ask about it. There is a lot we don't know about the Middle Ages; don't be scared to seek out ways to learn more!

Have fun: Although this is a class on monstrosity—it is a class on monstrosity! Monsters are, by design, supposed to thrill and excite us. Even though we'll work hard to analyze literature and monster theory, don't hesitate to take some time just to enjoy the stories and language of our readings.
How will you and I evaluate your progress?

I have designed this class to offer you flexible pathways by which to earn your final grade. The assignments for this course are designed around my four objectives for the course, in which you:

- learn theories of monstrosity
- apply that knowledge to literary and media interpretation
- analyze how texts that engage with monstrosity reflect different cultural values and critique the boundaries of human identity
- evaluate how literature shapes and is shaped by society, historically, locally, and globally

The class is designed to give you opportunities to practice these individually, in small groups, and in writing and public discussion. The grading categories below target different ways for practicing these critical thinking and learning skills. If you aspire to improve and improve your abilities in critical thinking, you can aim for higher grades, which will require increased proficiency with these skills.

Grades are based on the following:

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<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>0-1</td>
<td>200+ points</td>
<td>Complete 8</td>
<td>Complete 2</td>
<td>Complete 3</td>
<td>Complete</td>
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<td>A-</td>
<td>0-1</td>
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<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>190+ points</td>
<td>Complete 7</td>
<td>Complete 1</td>
<td>Complete 2</td>
<td>Complete</td>
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<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>0-2</td>
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<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>0-2</td>
<td>170+ points</td>
<td>Complete 6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Complete 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>0-3</td>
<td>160+ points</td>
<td>Complete 6</td>
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You can keep tabs on your passes and engagement points via Canvas, which I will update every other week.
Exercise and Assignment Details

All assignments are graded complete/incomplete. Specifications, if reviewed before you start an assignment and after you finish, will enable you to submit work knowing in advance that it is complete.

Professional Engagement (15 points max per week): Our class centers the role of class discussion and group projects as key elements of active, engaged learning in order to explore our texts and the controversial cultural, ethical, and societal problems they raise. We will work together to analyze the concerns and cultural perspectives represented by monsters.

Professional behavior in a class like this is a must. Earn or lose engagement points by bringing all necessary readings to class, preparing with reading notes or prep exercises, contributing to class discussions, and participating actively in group work. More details are available on Canvas.

CT (Critical Thinking) Exercises: To help practice your analysis and evaluation skills, along with your writing skills, and to prepare for more in-depth in-person discussion, these exercises will be due periodically throughout the semester; specifications are on Canvas.

Short Essays: These short essays ask you to apply an aspect of monster theory to works that engage with different modern perspectives on or problems involving monstrosity. Specifications are on Canvas.

Final project prep assignments: These assignments comprise different aspects that help you develop an interesting final project, due dates below; details on Canvas.

Final project: There are two options for this. One is a rather traditional paper (8-10p), and the other is a creative project. More details will be forthcoming on Canvas.

For Global Learning Credit, you must complete 4 assignments marked with an asterisk (*) below. In addition, you must attend and write a reflection on at least one co-curricular activity (for which you’ll also earn a token).

Tokens: to account for issues that may arise during the semester and provide you with more flexibility, you also start the semester with three tokens that you can use to replace or modify certain assignments. Tokens can be used to:

- Revise and resubmit an assignment that did not pass (multiple uses allowed)
- Turn in an assignment up to 1 week late (multiple uses allowed)
- Add 15 points to professional engagement (one use only)
- Erase either 1 absence or 2 late arrivals (one use only)
- Complete an optional reflection exercise (on syllabus below)

Additional tokens may be earned throughout the semester by:

- attending co-curricular events and writing a reflection on them (qualifying events and reflection specifications will be posted on Canvas)
- by submitting work early, if it is complete
- by submitted more completed work than required for a grade

To use a token: simply note it (handwriting is okay) on the assignment you apply it to.
Why are assignments complete/incomplete? I grade on a complete/incomplete basis to encourage you to develop the skills and knowledge I have designed this course to teach, while also trying to diminish a points-oriented focus on class and anxiety over getting a specific letter grade. That is, I want to emphasize not a grade, but what you learn. Each assignment develops different skills at different levels, from the minor (like adhering to disciplinary formatting conventions or proper citation) to the major (like being able to write an arguable thesis): completing an assignment means you accomplish all of them targeted in that assignment. Tokens can be used for no-penalty revision and late submission.

How should you prepare for class? Completing the readings and assignments is only the first step.

- prepare at least one comment or question about the day’s reading for each class meeting.
- write your questions down and come prepared to raise your ideas in discussion.
- when you talk, address your comments to the whole class, not just to me.
- identify suggestions for things you’d like to discuss (e.g., confusing passages, key terms).
- make connections between readings: how do issues appear and reappear in the class? How do they change across their reoccurrences?
- feel free to ask questions if something is unclear.

What if I miss class? Attending class and being on time is important, because much of the critical learning of the course will take place in the classroom. See the chart above for the acceptable number of absences for each grade. Two arrivals after I have taken attendance, or departures before the end of class, equal one absence. Because sometimes life is unpredictable, however, you can exchange a one-use token to erase attendance conflicts. If you arrive late or miss class, check with a classmate or two for notes and to learn about missed work, class discussions, and announcements.

What if I miss a deadline? All work is due at the beginning of class on the due date. You can exchange a token to gain one deadline extension. If something traumatic occurs, follow up with me and document it within 24 hours to revisit a deadline without using a token.

Academic Integrity: A course like this is designed to encourage you to develop your own ideas while in conversation with the thinking of other students, writers, and critics. I encourage you to, when you read and research, note the source of whatever contributes to or inspires your own thinking, so that you can share the source with your classmates in discussion and properly credit it in your own writing. An important element of academic integrity is fully and correctly acknowledging when you’ve relied on the ideas and work of other people. Feel free to consult with me if you have concerns about the correct way to reference others’ work. More generally, consult the FIU student handbook. Plagiarized work may earn failure of the course and be reported to administration.
Anti-Racism Commitment: White supremacists in the last couple years (and long before) have relied on ahistorical representations of the Middle Ages to promote racist ideology. Racism is a system of privilege, inequality, and oppression based on perceived categorical differences, value assigned to those differences, and a system that rewards some and punishes others based on those assigned differences. It can occur with and without malicious intent, often as a result of unconscious bias. We will be exploring its global manifestations in the Middle Ages, while also considering ways to critique and resist. I am committed to helping you all achieve a more robust and more nuanced understanding of the Middle Ages that doesn’t leave you susceptible to misrepresentations of the Middle Ages.

I am, furthermore, dedicated bringing FIU’s values into the classroom, as expressed in the university diversity statement: “We commit ourselves to building an academic community whose members represent and embrace diverse cultures, backgrounds and life experiences that reflect the multicultural nature of South Florida and the Global Society. Our goal is to build an intellectually vibrant climate that sustains the inclusiveness and engagement of our diverse community.” Not only do I aim to foster an environment that emphasizes respect for and interest in multiple world views, values, and cultures, and affirms each of our equal places in the world, but I hope to show that engaging with and respecting such perspectives plays a foundational role in developing critical thinking skills. Feel welcome to come talk to me about these issues at any time.

Pet Peeves: Until you’re self-employed and are your own boss, anyone to whom you’re responsible will have their own preferences for how you do your work. I’m no different. Some things I require of you, and through which you demonstrate your responsibility and professionalism, involve:

- referring to me by my professional title (either Dr. Blatt or Professor Blatt is fine), never by a gendered marital title (like Mrs. or Ms.), as the latter is irrelevant to our relationship at FIU.

- hand in your work in a specific format (and I’ll identify this on all assignments), both because it’s a convention of the literary discipline, and because it reflects professional polish and care.

- submitting all work in multiple hard-copy pages to come to me stapled. I deal with a lot of papers, and don’t appreciate when paperclips and dog-eared corners make things more complicated and messy than necessary.

Overlooking the title will immediately irritate me. Overlooking the formatting and staple is like showing up on a date with your shirt on backwards and your shoes untied. Help me pay positive attention to your ideas by making your work tidy and professional first. Be mindful of these, and we’ll start off on good footing!
Additional assistance: FIU has some great resources for enhancing your performance in this and other classes:

**Center for Excellence in Writing**, writingcenter.fiu.edu, GL 120
Open Monday-Thursday 9:00-8:00 and Friday 9:00-5:00
- The CEW can help you **brainstorm, draft, revise, or polish** your written work.

**Center for Academic Success**, undergrad.fiu.edu/cas/learning-center, GL 120
Open Monday-Thursday 8-8 and Friday 8-5. Tutoring assistance begins at 9:00 each day on both campuses.
- CAS can assist you with **reading, study techniques, and grammar**.

**Disability Resource Center**, studentaffairs.fiu.edu/student-success/disability-resource-center. Open Monday-Thursday 8-6 and Friday 8-5, GC 190
- If you need accommodations, you have a right to have these met, so it’s best to visit the DRC and notify instructors as soon as possible.

**Counseling and Psychological Services**, SHC 270 http://studentaffairs.fiu.edu/wellness/counseling-and-psychological-services/
Open Monday-Tues 8-6:30 and Weds-Fri 8-5pm; Same-day consultations Mon-Thurs 10-3 and Friday 11-3.
If you are experiencing stress, depression, grief, or trauma, please take advantage of the counseling assistance at FIU.

**Student Food Pantry**, DM 166 (second location at BBC; see website) http://studentaffairs.fiu.edu/get-support/student-food-pantry
Open Monday 12-3pm; Tues. 2-5:30pm; Weds. & Thurs. 2-5pm
Schedule of Readings and assignments

(CP) Reading in Course Packet (*) A Global Learning Certificate Assignment

All readings should be completed prior to class on the date scheduled.

### Introducing Monstrosity

**Week 1 (August 20-26): Meeting Monsters**
- Tuesday (T): Introduction
- Thursday (R): *Beowulf*: lines 1-1069

**Week 2 (August 27-September 2): Monster Theory**
- M: Add-drop deadline
- T: Jeffery Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture, Seven Theses” (CP)
  Submit Cohen worksheet (available on Canvas)
- R: *Beowulf*, lines 1070-2199
  CT 1* (Close reading) due

**Week 3 (September 3-9): Monstrous Futures**
- T: Strickland, “The Future is Necessarily Monstrous” (CP)
  CT 2* (Assumption evaluation) due
- R: *Beowulf*, lines 2200-end
  Friday 11pm: Optional reflection #1 due
  Sunday 11pm: Short Essay #1 due

### Monstrosity and Women

**Week 4 (September 10-16): Making Women Monstrous**
- T: “Albina” (CP) (original Middle English text on Canvas)
- R: Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine” (CP)
  CT 3 (Argument appraisal) due

**Week 5 (September 17-23): Monstrous Women and Hybridity**
Week 6 (September 24-30): Intersections of Gender and Religion
T: *Sunjata: A West African Epic of the Mande Peoples*, pp. 51-128
R: Alaimo, “Discomforting Creatures” (CP)
CT 5* (Close Reading) due

Friday 11pm: Optional reflection #2 due

Monstrosity and Religious, Racial, and Bodily Alterity

Week 7 (October 1-7): Monstrous Intersections of Religion and Race
T: *The Travels of John de Mandeville*, Prologue – Chapter 8
R: *The Travels of John de Mandeville*, Chapters 9-12
CT 6* (Repetition analysis) due

Week 8 (October 8-14): Bodies and Monstrosity
T: *The Travels of John de Mandeville*, Chapters 13-17
R: Heng, “The Invention of Race in the Middle Ages” (CP)
CT 8* (Research) due

Week 9: (October 15-21): Disability and Punishment
T: *The Travels of John de Mandeville*, Chapters 18-end
CT 9* (Comparison) due
R: Marie de France, “Bisclavret” (CP)

Week 10 (October 22-28):
T: Excerpts from the *Tārīkh Al-Mustabṣir* by Ibn Al-Mujāwir (CP)
CT 10* (Your choice) due (depending on your choice of previous exercise to repeat, can be eligible for the Global Learning certificate)
R: *Reel Bad Arabs* (documentary; link on Canvas) – includes prep exercise (instructions on Canvas)
Sunday 11pm: Short Essay #2* due
Week 11 (October 29-November 4): Ghouls and Demons
T: Excerpt from the *Arabian Nights* (CP)
CT 11* (Your choice) due (depending on your choice of previous exercise to repeat, can be eligible for the Global Learning certificate)
R: *Quelling the Demons’ Revolt: A Novel From Ming China*, ch. 1-3

Week 12 (November 5-11): Even More Demons!
T: *Quelling the Demons’ Revolt: A Novel From Ming China*, ch. 4-10
Final Project Prep assignment 1 due
R: *Quelling the Demons’ Revolt: A Novel From Ming China*, ch. 11-20
Final Project Prep 2 due

Week 13 part 1 (November 12-18): Ghouls and Killer Unicorns!
T: Persian folktale, “A Lost Shoe of Gold” (CP), anonymous Middle English unicorn allegory (CP)

Can Monsters Recover?

Week 13 part 2: Monstrous Regret
R: Excerpt from the Ming Chinese novel *A Journey to the West* (CP)
Final Project Prep 3 due
Friday 11pm: Optional reflection #3 due

Week 14 (November 19-25, Thanksgiving week):
T: Ng, “The Monster as Ethical Mirror” (CP)
Final Project Prep 4 due at start of class

Monstrosity Today

Week 15 (November 26-December 2): Monstrosity and Race; Monstrosity and Place
T: Darryl Wilson’s testimony on the Michael Brown shooting (CP and C) + prep
R: Miami and Monstrosity + prep exercise

Final Project Due: Between Monday, December 4 and Thursday, December 8 at 3pm