

Medieval Craft: Literature and Technology, 800–1500

Department: English and Related Literature

Module Co-Ordinator: Dr George Younge

Credit Level: M

Academic Year of Delivery: 2019–20

Module Summary

What sets humans apart from the other animals? For some scholars, the answer to this question lies in their intellect (*homo sapiens*), ability to speak (*homo loquens*), capacity for worship (*homo adorans*), or even fondness for play (*homo ludens*). This module takes as its starting point Hannah Arendt's claim that men and women are primarily craftsmen or makers (*homo faber*), manipulating the world around them through the use of tools and technology. Over the course of the term, we will read a diverse range of literary texts that explore, represent, and interrogate concepts relating to craft.

While the module focuses mainly on the Middle Ages, it will also look backwards to classical and biblical precedents (the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, Arabic science), and forwards to the Arts and Crafts movement; the first week will focus on pre-medieval texts and the last on the nineteenth century. Each seminar centres on a particular theme—God as craftsman, sustainability, apprenticeships, gendered work, automata, etc.—examining this in relation to relevant primary sources. As the module progresses, you will ask broader questions about the role of craft and technology in the Middle Ages and now. How did medieval people conceive of the aesthetic pleasure of the crafted object? Why is craft such an enduring metaphor for literary authors? At what point does technology become dangerous and threatening? Why do medieval writers prize certain forms of originality less highly than we do today? And when did a schism open up between craft and what we now call art?

Module Aims

The aim of this module is to offer you an advanced introduction to issues relating to craft, technology and literature in the Middle Ages. The course will refine your ability to think broadly across literary genres, languages, and time.

Module Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of this module, you should be able to:

1. Demonstrate an advanced understanding of and engagement with the way medieval writers (and their modern interpreters) interrogate and represent crafts and technologies.

2. Demonstrate an advanced understanding of and engagement with a wide range of literary works in translation and form a sense of the transformation of ideas over time.
3. Critically appraise modern theories about craft in relation to medieval texts
4. Produce independent arguments and ideas which demonstrate an advanced proficiency in critical thinking, research, and writing skills

Assessment

4,500 word essay

Indicative Primary Reading

Calcidius, *On Plato's Timaeus*; the Vulgate Bible; excerpts from translations attributed to King Alfred the Great; Old English allusions to women's work; Hugh of St Victor, *Didascalion* and Bonaventure's, *On the Reduction of Arts to Theology*; Alan of Lille, *Anticlaudianus*; Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria nova*; Theophilus, *On Diverse Arts*; the York Mystery Plays; the Gawain-poet, *Pearl*; John Ruskin; William and May Morris.

Background Reading

Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*, 2nd edn (University of Chicago Press, 1998)

Cavell, Megan, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: The Poetics of Human Experience* (Toronto, 2016)

Chenu, Marie-Dominique, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Toronto University Press, 1997)

Carruthers, Mary, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

Cooper, Lisa, *Artisans and Narrative Craft in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Gies, Frances, and Gies, Joseph, *Cathedral Forge and Waterwheel: Technology and Invention in the Middle Ages* (Harper Collins, 1994)

Korn, Peter, *Why We Make Things and Why it Matters* (Vintage, 2015)

Pye, David, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship* (Herbert Press, 2007)

Rosser, Gervase, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England, 1250–1550* (Oxford University Press, 2017)

Sennett, Richard, *The Craftsman* (Yale University Press, 2008)

Ellie Truitt, *Medieval Robots: Mechanism, Magic, Nature, and Art* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015)

White Jr, Lynn, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford University Press, 1962)

Hi - this looks fascinating. I think what you need to convey is a sense of why literary texts are a great way to approach the question of craft. And also - why is the Middle Ages a great place to think about these things? Answering the latter could be a way into explaining why the module works between the classical, the medieval and the 19th-century: with the Middle Ages fascinated by Antiquity and 19c by the Middle Ages (you work across chronology here in attractive ways that you don't really articulate). These would be my major comments.

Smaller (much!) comments - the clause 'while the module...Middle Ages' is a bit down beat and in any case a more active sense of the relationship between antiquity, MA and 19c would be great. And perhaps 'texts' or 'texts and objects' is better than 'primary source'?

I hope this is useful!

E

<https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/people/Marcus.Waithe/>

Vince Thorby - Tunwell Court.

Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*; Morris, 'On the Nature of Gothic'.