

English 166: The Age of Crisis

Instructor: Spencer Strub
spencer.strub@berkeley.edu
Office hours: Tu 3:30-5pm & by appointment

Reader: Max Kaisler
max_kaisler@berkeley.edu
Office hours by appointment



Queen and duchess in Guyot Marchant's Miroer Salitaire, 1486.

Course Description

There was a recurring plague, a changing climate, a never-ending war, a failed revolution and a cruel reaction, paranoia and persecution, political strife and inept leadership and a widespread sense that everything had gone wrong and could never be fixed again: fourteenth-century England might have been a mess, but it's our kind of mess. The silver lining? During this period of crisis, a public eager to read English literature emerged. The literary corpus that spoke to this public—poems dedicated to protest, mourning, and joyous invention—is as inventive and resilient as any in the language.

This class will explore how late medieval poets engaged with the tumultuous world around them. We will study the forms that represented contemporary events openly or in code, while examining the assumptions about gender, race, nature, and religious belief that distinguished their age of crisis from our own. Our goal is to understand the fourteenth century on its own terms. But the class will not shy away from anachronism: we might learn some lessons in surviving tough times.

At the heart of this class is a sustained engagement with a classic of medieval English literature: the alliterative poem *Piers Plowman*, a challenging visionary poem that has inspired later writers from Edmund Spenser and John Bunyan to Marilynne Robinson and Teju Cole. Throughout the class, you will read other sources in the original Middle English, as well as works translated from French, Catalan, Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew; no previous experience with Middle English is assumed.

Required Text

William Langland, *Piers Plowman* B, ed. Robertson & Shepherd (Norton), 9780393975598, available via [Norton](#), [Powell's](#), [Amazon](#). All other readings are freely available online or on bCourses.

Assignments for the Course

- **Problem sets – 10% each** Three short exercises in research and analysis.
- **Essay 1 – 20%** A short (3 pp.) critical essay.
- **Final essay – 30%** A longer (5-7 pp.) literary-critical essay.
- **Discussion posts – 15% total** Very short reading and/or lecture responses, due every week by midnight on Wednesday.
- **Participation and attendance – 5%**

Prompts and rubrics for written assignments will be posted well in advance. All work should be submitted via bCourses. Late work will lose a third of a letter grade each calendar day. I am profligate with extensions; email me *before the deadline* to ask for an extension if you need it.

Course Format

This class will be conducted via bCourses and Zoom. There are two components to our class:

- **Asynchronous lecture:** At the start of each week, I will post a lecture on the week's reading and relevant context to our bCourses site. Watch that lecture before we meet for discussion.
- **Synchronous discussion:** There will be **two** weekly opportunities for synchronous (i.e., we're all on Zoom together at the same time) discussion:
 1. A fixed weekly discussion/class meeting, to be held Thursday, 3:30-5pm Pacific.
 2. An alternate discussion session, time TBD in consultation with the class.

You should attend one discussion meeting a week. If possible, turn your video on. Participation and attendance contribute to your grade, but you will not be needlessly penalized for necessary absences.

Availability

- Don't hesitate to email me. I will do my best to answer promptly: within 24 hours during the week, 48 during weekends and holidays. Please check your own email often.
- Office hours will be held via Zoom. Sign up for an appointment on bCourses or, if you can't make the available times, email me to find another time. Don't be shy! I want to talk to you!
- Finally: this semester will be trial and error for all of us. Tell me if something isn't working and I'll try to fix it.

Academic Integrity

All papers, problem sets, quizzes and tests you submit in this class should be your own original work. All outside research should be properly attributed. **Academic dishonesty could result in a failing grade in the course.** If you *ever* have any questions about attribution, citation, or plagiarism, please don't hesitate to ask me! I am always happy to answer those questions.

Accessibility

This class is intended to be as welcoming and inclusive as possible. If you have a disability or think you may have a disability, contact the Disabled Students' Program (<http://dsp.berkeley.edu>) to request an official accommodation if you have not already done so. If there are other concerns you need to share, please inform me as soon as they arise and I will do my best to accommodate them.

Schedule of Readings

Please complete each week's reading by the time we meet in discussion.
Schedule and readings are subject to change!

Aug. 27 *Lecture & discussion:* Introduction to the course

Unit 1. The Plague

1. Famine, Plague, and Global Crisis: The Historical Background

Reading: - Abu-Lughod, "The World System in the 13th Century"
 - Benedictow, "[The Black Death: The Greatest Catastrophe Ever](#)"
 - Green, "Putting Africa on the Black Death Map" [Intro](#) and [III. B-D](#)
 - *Optional:* Jordan, "Great Famine Revisited"; Mann, "Medieval Climate Optimum"

Aug. 31 **Start-of-class survey due**

Sept. 1 *Lecture:* Some Crises of the Fourteenth Century

Sept. 3 *Discussion:* Comparisons and anachronisms

2. Narratives of the Great Mortality

Reading: - Ibn al-Wardī, *Risālah al-naba' 'an al-waba'*;
 - "The Plague in Continental Europe" 1-2, 4-5, 6b, 8-9, in Horrox, *The Black Death*

Sept. 8 *Lecture:* Plague Narratives

Sept. 10 *Discussion:* Writing a pandemic

Sept. 11 **Problem set 1 due**

3. The Plague Treatise

Reading: - Jacme d'Agramont, *Regiment*
 - Ibn Khatima, "Description and Remedy"
 - Lydgate, "Doctrine of Pestilence" and "Dietary"

Sept. 15 *Lecture:* The Plague and Premodern Medicine

Sept. 17 *Discussion:* Epidemics and epistemi

4. Moralization, Persecution, and Making Meaning

Reading: - "Human Agency" from *The Black Death*
 - *Mayse Nissim* 10
 - "[The Black Death and the Jews](#)"
 - Petrarch, *Seniles* III.1 pp. 79-89
 - Lydgate, *Stella Celi Extirpavit*

Sept. 22 *Lecture:* Disease in a Persecuting Society

Sept. 24 *Discussion:* Making meaning and assigning blame

Unit 2. The Middle English Literature of Crisis

5. The Plague in England

- Reading:
- “The Plague in the British Isles” from *The Black Death*
 - Wiltshire Assize roll
 - Statute of Laborers, 1351 ([here](#) or in *Piers Plowman*, pp. 428-30)
 - “Ecce dolet Anglia”
- Sept. 29 *Lecture:* England in 1348
Oct. 1 *Discussion:* English plague literature; Middle English exercises

6. Death Culture

- Reading:
- “[Earth upon Earth](#)”
 - [Pety Job](#)
 - Lydgate, [Dance of Death](#) B version
- Oct. 6 *Lecture:* Arts of Dying, 1300-1500
Oct. 8 *Discussion:* Plague, war, class, and death; more Middle English practice
Oct. 9 **Problem set 2 due**

7. Satire and Social Change

- Reading:
- [The Simonie](#);
 - [Song of the Husbandman](#)
- Oct. 13 *Lecture:* Complaint as Poetic Genre
Oct. 15 *Discussion:* Reading Allegory and Alliterative Verse

8. The Peasants’ Revolt

- Reading:
- John Ball’s Letter ([Royal](#) and [Stow](#))
 - [Addresses of the Commons](#)
 - [John Ball’s sermon theme](#)
 - “[Man Be Ware and Be No Fool](#)”
 - “The Earthquake Poem”
 - Gower, *Vox Clamantis* Book I
- Oct. 20 *Lecture:* The Peasants’ Revolt and its Literature
Oct. 22 *Discussion:* Hidden transcripts, archival power
Oct. 23 **Essay 1 prospectus due**

9. Heresy and Religious Controversy

- Reading:
- [Twelve Conclusions of the Lollards](#)
 - Cambridge Tract XII
 - Margery Baxter’s testimony
 - [Book of Margery Kempe](#) 1.13-14
 - [De haeretico comburendo](#)

Oct. 27 *Lecture:* Devotion and Conflict
Oct. 29 *Discussion:* How should we read medieval religion?
Oct. 30 **Essay 1 due**

Unit 3: *Piers Plowman*: The Magnum Opus of Crisis

10. Dreams and Satire

Reading: - *Piers* Prol. to passus 4
Nov. 3 *Lecture:* Introduction to *Piers Plowman*
Nov. 5 *Discussion:* What is this thing we're reading?

11. Pageant and Pilgrimage

Reading: - *Piers* passūs 5-12
Nov. 10 *Lecture:* Will and the World
Nov. 12 *Discussion:* Pageant, pilgrimage, plowing, psychological allegory
Nov. 13 **Problem set 3 due**

12. Sin and Redemption

Reading: - *Piers* passūs 13-17
Nov. 17 *Lecture:* How Allegory Works
Nov. 19 *Discussion:* Imagery and dialogue

13. Apocalypse and Renewal

Reading: - *Piers* passūs 18-20
Nov. 24 *Lecture:* Everything Falls Apart
Nov. 26 **No class: Thanksgiving Holiday**

Coda: Medievalism and Modern Memory

14. Conclusions and Retrospection

Reading: - Wrap up *Piers*
 - Watch *Book of Days*
 - "[Bring Out Your Dead](#)"
Dec. 1 *Lecture:* What Comes from Crisis?
 Final essay prospectus due
Dec. 3 *Discussion:* End of *Piers*; what can we learn from past crises?

Dec. 11 **Final essay due**