The Gawain-poet: Sophister Option Description 2016-17

Option Name: The Gawain-Poet

Option Short Title: Gawain

Lecturer Name: Dr. Brendan O’Connell

ECTS Weighting: 10 ECTS

Semester/Term Taught: Hilary Term

Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of this module a student should be able to:

1. Identify and describe the genres employed by the Gawain-poet, including dream-vision, romance, homily and exemplum.
2. Employ a range of interpretive strategies using critical vocabulary appropriate to the study of medieval literature.
3. Evaluate the importance of literary form and metre in interpreting medieval poetry.
4. Read the poems in Middle English with proficiency and competence.
5. Analyse the impact of key historical events and movements on the works of the Gawain-poet.

Option Learning Aims:

This one-semester course focuses on the four extant works of a remarkable medieval poet. Pearl, a poetic masterpiece, is a father’s moving lament for his lost daughter and a profound statement of the gulf between the physical and spiritual, the human and the divine. In sharp contrast, Cleanness offers a startling, apocalyptic vision of mass death and destruction, portraying human depravity and divine retribution in unforgettable depictions of the biblical Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Altogether more witty and playful, Patience tells another biblical narrative: the story of Jonah and the Whale. This miniature masterpiece describes one man’s hopeless and comic struggle with his destiny, and in many ways anticipates the final poem in the manuscript, the splendid Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Beginning with a Christmas game in which the uncanny Green Knight presents Arthur’s court with a lethal challenge, this wonderful narrative charts the fortunes of its hero, Sir Gawain, as he navigates a world full of danger, temptation and unwelcome revelations. While each poem will be considered in its own right, we will also highlight ways in which each text illuminates its neighbours, and ask what features unify the output of this brilliant but elusive master of medieval literature.

Option Content:

We will study all four poems in the order preserved in British Library Cotton Nero A.x: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Assessment Details:

This course will be assessed by a combination of a short research exercise and an exam.