

Sophister Module Description Template 2026-27

Full Name: **Surviving Trauma in the Middle Ages**

Short Name: **Surviving Trauma**

Lecturer Name and Email Address: **Brendan O'Connell (oconneb2@tcd.ie)**

ECTS Weighting: **10 ECTS**

Semester Taught: **Michaelmas Term**

Module Description:

This module considers the distinct ways in which medieval texts bear witness to the experience of trauma, and the strategies they propose for survival. We will examine texts that record the effects of catastrophic experiences such as war and plague, as well as more deeply personal experiences such as relationship breakdown, bereavement, sexual violence, mental illness, and social ostracization. We will explore the unequal power relations exposed by traumatic experience, and consider the ways in which medieval narratives of trauma both reproduce and challenge ideologies of oppression and intolerance. While these texts document great suffering, they also reflect philosophically on the place of pain in a universe created by a loving God, and speak to the human capacity for endurance, survival and growth in the face of seemingly impossible odds. Throughout, we will pay close attention to the voices that speak of trauma in the period, from the words of chroniclers describing periods of tremendous tumult, to poets struggling to find meaning in suffering, to women and men giving voice to their personal experience of trauma and survival. While our focus will be on medieval texts, we will also consider how these texts speak – often in startlingly ways – to the experiences of survivors of trauma in the present day.

Content:

The texts studied will include: *Sir Orfeo*, a re-imagining of the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice in which abduction and madness mask deeper anxieties about royal authority and the fear of military invasion; the legend of *Philomela*: a classical story of rape and revenge that develops into a lesson about survival and self-expression; *Anelida and Arcite*, in which wars and conquests provide an epic backdrop to a moving and lyrical account of a devastating romantic betrayal; the legend of Griselda, in which a woman's experience of her husband's cruelty raises challenging questions about justice and the limits of ethical endurance. We will also explore a number of texts, such as *Cleanness* and Chaucer's *Prioress's Tale*, that evidence the ways in which collectively traumatic experiences can be weaponised to target vulnerable and marginalised groups. In addition, attention will be paid to first-person narratives that record the experience of the author/narrator as they struggle to come to terms with trauma. *Pearl* is a father's meditation on the death of his young child, possibly as a result of the Black Death, which expands into a wider exploration of faith and the afterlife. In her *Revelations* (the first book in English written by a woman), Julian of Norwich offers a sophisticated reflection on human and divine suffering. Hoccleve's moving *Complaint* is a first-person account of recovery from a mental breakdown, providing an insight into the damaging effects of the social stigmatisation of mental illness, which resonates even in the present day.

Learning Outcomes:

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

- Evaluate the impact of historical and personal experience on the depiction of trauma in medieval literature
- Analyse narrative techniques relevant to the representation of trauma in medieval texts
- Identify a range of ways in which literary depictions of trauma are shaped by ideological concerns
- Comment on the survival strategies proposed in medieval texts about trauma
- Employ a range of interpretive strategies using critical vocabulary appropriate to the study of trauma in medieval literature

Assessment Details:

- Type of Assessment: Essay
- Number of Components: 1
- Word Count of Component(s): 4500-5000 words
- Percentage Value of Component(s): 100%

Preliminary Reading List:

A number of texts and translations will be provided on Blackboard, so you do not need to purchase all of these texts. A full reading list will be provided at the start of the module, but texts will include:

The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry Benson (Boston, 1987). Students who wish to read Chaucer in translation may want to acquire Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans David Wright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

Thomas Hoccleve, *'My Complainte' and Other Poems*, ed. by Roger Ellis (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2001). Extracts will be provided.

Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, trans. Elizabeth Spearing (London: Penguin, 1998). Extracts will be provided.

Pearl and Cleanness in Ad Putter and Myra Stokes (eds), *The Works of the Gawain Poet: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Cleanness, Patience* (London: Penguin, 2014). *Pearl*, trans. Simon Armitage (London: Faber and Faber, 2016)

Sir Orfeo, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995). Available online:

<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/orfeo.htm>