

ISS 1104: Wisdom and Heroism: Great Books in the Medieval World

Quest 1

I. General Information

Class Meetings

- Fall 2025
- 100% In-Person, no GTAs, 35 residential students
- MWF Period 3 (9:35-10:25 AM)
- CSE 0453
- 3 Credits

Instructor

- Karl Gunther
- CSE E512
- Tel: 352-294-6829
- k.gunther@ufl.edu
- Office hours: W 11:00-1:00 PM, F 11:00-1:00 PM and by appointment

Course Description

What did it mean to be wise and heroic in the Middle Ages? How do medieval European views of wisdom and heroism compare with modern views? We will explore these questions by examining different ideals of wisdom and heroism in medieval history, literature, philosophy, art, architecture, and music.

Quest and General Education Credit

- Quest 1
- Humanities

This course accomplishes the [Quest](#) and [General Education](#) objectives of the subject areas listed above. A minimum grade of C is required for Quest and General Education credit. Courses intended to satisfy Quest and General Education requirements cannot be taken S-U.

Required Readings and Works

1. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* (Penguin, 1999) – available on reserve
2. Cicero, *On Obligations* (Oxford, 2000) – available on reserve
3. *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (Norton, 2000) – available on reserve
4. All other readings and works will be made available through Canvas.
5. Materials and Supplies Fees: n/a

Course Objectives

1. Identify, describe, and explain the methodologies used across humanities disciplines to examine essential questions about wisdom and heroism as ideal aspects of character in the medieval world.
2. Identify, describe, and explain the historical, philosophical, and literary evidence for the twin ideals of wisdom and heroism as constitutive elements of the examined life in the medieval world, and the interpretive and normative questions that arise in seeking to understand the medieval approach to a life well lived.
3. Analyze how works across disciplines and genres from the medieval period represent the quest for defining heroism and wisdom amidst great social change.
4. Analyze and evaluate specific accounts of the pursuit of the ideals of wisdom and heroism, across diverse texts and works from a specific historical period, using close reading, critical analysis and group discussion, and personal reflection.
5. Develop and present clear and effective written and oral work that demonstrates critical engagement with course texts, visual and auditory media, and experiential learning activities.
6. Communicate well-supported ideas and arguments effectively within class discussion and debates, with clear oral presentation and written work articulating students' personal experiences and reflections on ideals of heroism and wisdom in the quest for the examined life.
7. Connect course content with students' intellectual, personal, and professional lives at UF and beyond.
8. Reflect on students' own and others' experience with the pursuit of the examined life in active class discussion.

II. Graded Work

Description of Graded Work

1. Active Participation and Class Attendance (15 pts total)

a. Active Participation (10 pts)

- i. An exemplary participant shows evidence of having done the assigned reading before each class, consistently offers thoughtful points and questions for discussion, and listens considerably to other discussants.
- ii. Students with concerns about speaking in class discussions should reach out to the instructor directly.
- iii. You will receive an active participation grade at the midpoint of the semester (5 pts) and at the end of the semester (5 pts).
- iv. For details about how active participation will be assessed, see participation rubric below.

b. Class Attendance (5pts)

- i. On-time class attendance is required for this component of the course grade. You may have two unexcused absences without any penalty, but starting with the third unexcused absence, each unexcused absence reduces your attendance grade by 1 point.
- ii. Except for absence because of religious holiday observance, documentation is required for excused absences, [per university policy](#). Please contact me as soon as possible to request an excused absence. If you miss 10 or more classes (excused or not), you will miss material essential for successful completion of the course.

2. Self-Reflection Essays (15pts total, 5pts each)

- a. You will write three brief reflection essays (min. 250 words) that discuss how a specific course reading and a specific comment/idea from a classmate in our class discussions has changed, refined, or confirmed the way you think about wisdom and/or heroism.
- b. Each essay should discuss a text we have read and comment that was made since the last essay was submitted.
- c. Your essays will be assessed on the following criteria:
 - i. Does it meet or exceed the required word count?
 - ii. How clearly does it state a thesis about how the reading and comment have affected your thinking about one of the central questions in the course?
 - iii. How accurately, specifically, and deeply does it explain the relevant passage from the reading?
 - iv. How effectively does it explain how and why the text and comment have affected your thinking?
- d. Due Dates
 - i. Essay #1 is due anytime between Friday August 29 and Friday September 19.
 - ii. Essay #2 is due anytime between Friday September 26 and Friday October 24.
 - iii. Essay #3 is due anytime between Friday October 31 and Friday November 21.
- e. Late essays will be penalized -1 points per day late.

3. Analytic Essay/Script Assignment (10 pts)

- a. You have been asked to speak to a group of incoming freshmen at Preview during Summer 2026 about challenges they are going to face in their first year at UF and the best ways to respond to them. As you prepare your talk, you decide that you'll draw on some of the ideas

you learned about wisdom and heroism in your Quest class this semester. Write a 1,000 word script that:

- i. Grabs the students' attention (they're bored – make them interested!).
 - ii. Tells them about 2-3 real challenges they may face as first-year students at UF (think about challenges that you or people you know have actually faced and be specific).
 - iii. Advises them how to respond to these challenges based on ideas found in our readings this semester.
- b. Your script will be assessed on the following criteria:
- i. How effectively does it catch the audience's attention?
 - ii. How well does it identify real-world challenges that students may face?
 - iii. How well does it explain *how* the ideas from course readings are relevant to the real-world challenges the audience will face?
 - iv. How accurately, specifically, and deeply does it explain the relevant ideas from the course readings?
- c. Due date:
- i. You may submit your essay/script anytime between Friday, October 24 and Friday, November 14.

4. Examinations (60pts total, 20 pts each)

- a. You will take three in-class written examinations.
- b. Exam dates:
 - i. Exam #1: Monday September 22
 - ii. Exam #2: Friday October 24
 - iii. Exam #3: Wednesday December 3
- c. The examinations will not be cumulative (i.e., they will only contain material covered since the previous examination).
- d. The examinations will be administered using the Canvas LockDown browser, so you will need to bring a laptop or tablet to class with you on exam days.

III. Annotated Weekly Schedule

WEEK 1: INTRODUCTION (AUGUST 22)

This week will introduce the course and the approach we will be taking in our study of wisdom and heroism in the Middle Ages. Why would we read old books about these topics? And why read such a wide range of philosophical, literary, historical, and religious texts? How will we be analyzing these texts?

No readings.

WEEK 2: ANCIENT IDEALS AND MEDIEVAL WISDOM & HEROISM (AUGUST 25, 27, 29)

This week we will discuss Cicero's *On Obligations*. Cicero wrote to impart wisdom about three subjects: doing what is right, doing what is useful in daily life, and what should happen when doing what is useful conflicts with doing what is right. How did Cicero answer these questions and how do his answers compare with common modern answers to these questions?

Readings:

1. Cicero, *On Obligations*, selections from Books 1-2 (41 pp.)

WEEK 3: WISDOM & HEROISM IN EARLY MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY (SEPTEMBER 3, 5)

We will complete our discussion of Cicero's *On Obligations* and then begin discussing Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, in which, having experienced a dramatic reversal of fortune, Boethius seeks consolation from "Lady Philosophy," wisdom personified.

Readings:

1. Cicero, *On Obligations*, selections from Book 3 (22 pp.)
2. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book 1 (19 pp.)

WEEK 4: WISDOM & HEROISM IN EARLY MEDIEVAL PHILOSOPHY (SEPTEMBER 8, 10, 12)

This week we will finish our discussion of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. What wisdom did Lady Philosophy seek to impart to Boethius about the nature of fortune, happiness, and justice? How do these views compare with Cicero's and with modern views?

Readings:

1. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Books 2-4 (79 pp.)

WEEK 5: WISDOM & HEROISM IN EARLY MEDIEVAL LITERATURE (SEPTEMBER 15, 17, 19)

Beowulf is one of the most famous epic poems of the Middle Ages. What ideas about heroism and wisdom are embedded in this early medieval narrative about a warrior doing battle against monsters and a dragon?

How does this vision of heroism and wisdom compare with those we have already studied? Do these ideals continue to animate modern thinking about these topics?

Readings:

1. *Beowulf*, trans. Seamus Heaney (ca. 100 pp. of verse)

Assignments:

1. Last day to submit Essay #1 (Friday, September 19)

WEEK 6: WISDOM & HEROISM IN EARLY MEDIEVAL HISTORY (SEPTEMBER 22, 24, 26)

In this week, we will move on from philosophy and literature to consider what we can learn from historical texts about medieval views of wisdom & heroism. We will read Einhard's biography of Charlemagne and consider the ways he depicts Charlemagne as a wise and heroic ruler.

Readings:

1. Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne* (42 pp.)

Assignments:

1. Exam #1 (Monday, September 22)

WEEK 7: WISDOM & HEROISM IN MEDIEVAL RELIGION & POETRY (SEPTEMBER 29, OCTOBER 1, 3)

This week, we will discuss developing views of wisdom and heroism in religious and poetic texts of the Middle Ages. We will discuss the Crusades and *The Song of Roland*, the foundational poem of medieval French literature, and consider the way it poses a possible conflict between wisdom and heroism as competing ideals. We will also read early Islamic texts and discuss the way the authors view tradition as crucial to the cultivation of wisdom.

Readings:

1. F. E. Peters (ed.), *A Reader on Classical Islam* (Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 212-239 (27 pp.)
2. Urban II, Sermon at Clermont (1095) (4 pp.)
3. *The Song of Roland*, selections (23 pp.)

WEEK 8: WISDOM & HEROISM IN THE RENAISSANCE OF THE 12TH CENTURY (OCTOBER 6, 8, 10)

This week, we will discuss developing views of wisdom and heroism during the 12th century, focusing especially on the writings of female authors. We will listen to and discuss the concept of spiritual wisdom and heroism in Hildegard of Bingen's *Ordo Virtutum*, the first work of musical theater in the European tradition. We will also discuss the famous letters of Abelard and Heloise.

Readings:

1. Hildegard of Bingen, *Ordo Virtutum* (20 pp.)
2. Letters of Abelard and Heloise, selections (45 pp.)

WEEK 9: WISDOM & HEROISM IN MEDIEVAL POLITICAL THOUGHT
(OCTOBER 13, 15)

This week, we will discuss John of Salisbury's and the vision of political wisdom and heroism that he developed in his *Policraticus*, the first work of political theory in medieval Europe.

Readings:

1. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, selections (31 pp.)

WEEK 10: WISDOM & HEROISM IN MEDIEVAL INSTITUTIONS: UNIVERSITIES AND CATHEDRALS
(OCTOBER 20, 22, 24)

This week, we will look at two of the crucial institutions developed in medieval Europe to impart ideals of wisdom & heroism. First, we will look at the creation of the first universities at the turn of the 13th century and consider the methods they used to convey wisdom to later generations and the ways they compare with modern universities. Then, we will look at the development of gothic cathedrals and discuss the ways that their builders saw them as embodying ideals of wisdom and heroism.

Readings:

1. Robert de Courçon, Statutes for the University of Paris, 1215
2. Gregory IX, Statutes for the University of Paris, 1231
3. University of Paris, *Condemnation of Errors*, 1241
4. Jacques de Vitry, *Life of the Students at Paris*
5. Abbot Suger, *On What Was Done In His Administration*
6. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Apology*

Assignments:

1. Exam #2 (Friday, October 24)
2. Last day to submit Essay #2 (Friday, October 24)

WEEK 11: WISDOM & HEROISM IN MEDIEVAL SAINTS
(OCTOBER 20, 22, 24)

This week, we will consider another strain of heroic ideals that ran throughout the entire medieval period: the idea of saintly heroism. We will discuss the development of the ideal of sanctity in medieval European and read medieval biographies of two of the most prominent saints of the 13th century, Francis and Dominic.

Readings:

1. Thomas of Celano, *Lives of St. Francis*, selections
2. Gerard de Frachet, *The Legend of St. Dominic*, selections

WEEK 12: WISDOM & HEROISM IN DANTE'S *INFERNO*
(NOVEMBER 3, 5, 7)

This week, we will discuss a text that has been described as the literary cathedral of the later Middle Ages: Dante's *Inferno*. As Dante underwent a literary journey through the underworld, he depicted a wide range of people who he thought had *not* lived wisely or behaved heroically. What *positive* vision of wisdom and heroism was he articulating?

Readings:

1. Dante, *Inferno*, selections (80 pp.)

WEEK 13: WISDOM & HEROISM IN CHAUCER'S *CANTERBURY TALES*
(NOVEMBER 10, 12, 14)

This week, we will discuss the views of wisdom & heroism developed in *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, a great admirer of Dante's. How does Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" return to Boethius's questions about wisdom, the passions, and fortune? We will also discuss medieval books themselves as we prepare to visit special collections to examine some late medieval books ourselves next week.

Readings:

1. Chaucer, "The Knight's Tale" from *The Canterbury Tales* (60 pp.)

Assignments:

1. Last day to submit the Analytic Essay/Script assignment, Friday November 14.

WEEK 14: WISDOM & HEROISM AT THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES
(NOVEMBER 17, 19, 21)

We began this course with Cicero's *On Obligations*, a book written before the Middle Ages, but one that had an enormous influence on medieval ideals of wisdom and heroism. We end the course with a book written at the end of the Middle Ages, Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Machiavelli had Cicero's book very much in mind as he wrote: how did the ideals of wisdom and heroism found in *The Prince* compare with those found in *On Obligations*? We also will visit special collections in Smathers Library and examine medieval manuscripts and early printed books, many of them copies of texts we have/will read in this class.

Readings:

1. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, selections (30 pp.)

Assignments:

1. Last day to submit Self-Reflection Essay #3 (Friday, November 21)

WEEK 15: THANKSGIVING: NO CLASS
(NOVEMBER 24, 26, 28)

WEEK 16: LOOKING BACK: MEDIEVAL IDEALS OF WISDOM & HEROISM
(NOVEMBER 24, 26, 28)

In our final class session, we will review what we have learned about medieval ideals of wisdom and heroism and consider the extent to which they were marked more by unity or diversity.

No Readings.

Assignments:

1. Exam #3 (Wednesday, December 3)

IV. Grading Scale and Rubrics

Grading Scale

For information on UF's grading policies for assigning grade points, see [here](#).

A	94 - 100		C	74 - 76
A-	90 - 93		C-	70 - 73
B+	87 - 89		D+	67 - 69
B	84 - 86		D	64 - 66
B-	80 - 83		D-	60 - 63
C+	77 - 79		E	<60

Grading Rubrics

Participation Rubric

5 points	3 points	1 pt	No points
Offers informed contributions in at least 2/3s of class discussions	Offers informed contributions in about 50% of class discussions	Offers informed contributions in less than 1/3 of class discussions	Participates very minimally or not at all in class discussion

Analytic Paper Rubric

	Excellent	Good	Average	Insufficient	Unsatisfactory
How effectively does the introduction catch the audience's attention? (1 pt)					
How well does it identify real world challenges that students will face? (1 pt)					
How accurately, specifically, and deeply does the paper explain the relevant ideas from the course readings? (5 pts)					

How well does the paper explain how the ideas from the course readings are relevant to real-world challenges the audience will face? (3 pts)					
--	--	--	--	--	--

Self-Reflection Essays Rubric

	Excellent	Good	Average	Insufficient	Unsatisfactory
Does it meet or exceed the required word count?					
How clearly does it state a thesis about how the reading and comment have affected your thinking? (1 pt)					
How accurately, specifically, and deeply does it explain the relevant passage from the reading? (2 pts)					
How effectively does it explain how and why the text and comment have affected your thinking? (2 pts)					

V. Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

At the end of this course, students will be expected to have achieved the [Quest](#) the [General Education student learning outcomes](#) for Humanities (H).

Humanities (H) Humanities courses must afford students the ability to think critically through the mastering of subjects concerned with human culture, especially literature, history, art, music, and philosophy, and must include selections from the Western canon.

Humanities courses provide instruction in the history, key themes, principles, terminology, and theory or methodologies used within a humanities discipline or the humanities in general. Students will learn to identify and to analyze the key elements, biases and influences that shape thought. These courses emphasize clear and effective analysis and approach issues and problems from multiple perspectives.

Content: *Students demonstrate competence in the terminology, concepts, theories and methodologies used within the discipline(s).*

- Identify, describe, and explain the methodologies used across humanities disciplines to examine essential questions about the wisdom and heroism as ideal aspects of character in the medieval world. (Quest 1, H) **Assessments:** Active class discussion, in-class examination, reading questions, analytic essay.
- Identify, describe, and explain the historical, philosophical, and literary evidence for the twin ideals of wisdom and heroism as constitutive elements of the examined life in the medieval world, and the interpretive and normative questions that arise in seeking to understand the medieval approach to a life well lived. (Quest 1, H). **Assessments:** Active class discussion, in-class examination, reading questions, analytic essay.

Critical Thinking: *Students carefully and logically analyze information from multiple perspectives and develop reasoned solutions to problems within the discipline(s).*

- Analyze how works across disciplines and genres from the medieval period represent the quest for defining heroism and wisdom amidst great social change. (Quest 1, H). **Assessments:** In-class examination; argument analysis paper, active class discussion.
- Analyze and evaluate specific accounts of the pursuit of the ideals of wisdom and heroism, across diverse texts and works from a specific historical period, using close reading, critical analysis and group discussion, and personal reflection. (Quest 1, H). **Assessments:** In-class examination, analytic essay, reading questions, active class discussion, experiential learning component.

Communication: *Students communicate knowledge, ideas and reasoning clearly and effectively in written and oral forms appropriate to the discipline(s).*

- Develop and present clear and effective written and oral work that demonstrates critical engagement with course texts, visual and auditory media, and experiential learning activities. (Quest 1, H). **Assessments:** analytic essay, experiential learning component, active class discussion, self-reflection essays.
- Communicate well-supported ideas and arguments effectively within class discussion and debates, with clear oral presentation and written work articulating students' personal experiences and reflections on ideals of heroism and wisdom in the quest for the examined life. (Quest 1, H). **Assessments:** In-class examination, active class discussion, analytic essay, experiential learning component, self-reflection essays.

Connection: *Students connect course content with meaningful critical reflection on their intellectual, personal, and professional development at UF and beyond.*

- Connect course content with students' intellectual, personal, and professional lives at UF and beyond. (Quest 1). **Assessments:** experiential learning component, active class discussion, self-reflection essays.
- Reflect on students' own and others' experience with the pursuit of the examined life in active class discussion and argument analysis papers. (Quest 1). **Assessments:** *Song of Roland* experiential learning component, argument analysis paper, paper draft workshop, active class discussion.

VI. Quest Learning Experiences

1. Details of Experiential Learning Component

Students will visit the Harold & Mary Jean Hanson Rare Book Collection in the UF Smathers Library, Room 100. Students will examine a range of medieval manuscripts and early printed books from the collection of texts that we are reading in this class. Students will experience handling these rare materials with their own hands and inspecting them directly.

2. Details of Self-Reflection Component

Self-reflection is built into many of the assignments, primarily through class discussion, the multiple Self-Reflection Essays, and the Analytic Essay assignment. In these opportunities for self-reflection offered by specific activities throughout the course, students will reflect on the broader implications of the themes of the course, considering the impact on themselves and/or on a wider community.

VII. Required Policies

Academic Policies

All academic policies in this course are consistent with the University of Florida's academic policies. To see academic resources and current university policies regarding attendance, make-up exams, assignments, disability accommodations, grading, course evaluations, the University Honesty Policy, and in-class recordings, click here: <https://syllabus.ufl.edu/syllabus-policy/>

Anonymous Grading Policy

I grade all written assignments anonymously and have enabled anonymous grading on Canvas. Please do not include your name anywhere on the assignments you submit.