

Instructions for the MA Thesis in English Philology

Word count:

- Your MA thesis should be 21,000 to 30,000 words (60 – 100 pp.)

When to write the thesis:

- Start thinking about topics in the first year of your MA, as it is normally expected that you will write up your MA thesis during your 2nd year.
- Depending on your individual circumstances, you may need the grade for your thesis by a particular date: plan ahead carefully and consult the English Department Secretary, Ms Meyer-Stephens, on deadlines.
- Remember that we will need time to mark your work. Agree a deadline with your thesis supervisor.

Contact with your thesis supervisor:

- Ask your thesis supervisor for a meeting at the beginning of your thesis, to agree a topic, a structure, and deadlines.
- Your thesis supervisor will normally wish to read at least the introduction and one chapter of your thesis while you are writing.
- While you are writing your thesis, you can also email a sample of the writing to your supervisor to check that you are working on the right lines.
- You can also email your supervisor with questions while you are writing up.

Topic:

- Define your topic in consultation with your thesis supervisor.
- Your MA thesis may be an opportunity to explore a question or topic that has occurred to you in relation to your taught courses, perhaps, for example, looking at a text that you have studied in class in comparison with other texts that you have explored on your own. You should **not** reproduce material from a Proseminar or Seminar paper.

Primary texts:

- You should engage directly with texts written in Old English and/or Middle English. In your essay you should cite these texts in the original, not in translation.

Secondary material:

- Use published scholarly work to support your arguments, but make sure your own argument does not become lost in the words of others.
- Use published scholarship to provide historical context and/or to support any statement you make that is broader than the primary evidence you have would support. E.g.: 'The fluid boundary between actor and audience that I will here discuss in relation to *Fulgens and Lucrez* is also a feature of much other late-medieval drama, as has been demonstrated by Greg Walker and John McGavin (2016)'.
- Use recent scholarly work! Ideally your bibliography should include works published in the last ten years. As a rough guideline only, you should cite at least twelve secondary sources.

Style sheet:

- See the domain style sheet at English Department webpages.

Useful resources:

- International Medieval Bibliography: www.brepolis.net
- Middle English Dictionary: quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/
- York Medieval Romances Database: www.middleenglishromance.org.uk
- Luminarium: www.luminarium.org
- TEAMS medieval texts online: d.lib.rochester.edu/teams

Some things to think about (not necessarily all relevant to all MA theses)

Philology is the study of words. We do **not** expect you to know all the details of phonological, orthographical, or dialectal developments during the medieval period. But we do ask you to be a little bit of a 'word nerd', to look *at* words, to look *up* words, and to consider where they have come from and how their meanings may have developed. When we study medieval literature, we have only the written word, but we should remember that the spoken word was at least as important as the written, and that even words that had been recorded on the page were often read aloud. So we should consider the sound of a text.

We should also remember that texts were not circulated in uniform, printed editions approved and controlled by an author; rather texts were copied into manuscripts and often abbreviated or expanded, altered and adapted, in the process: the *mise-en-page* might also change, and texts also appeared alongside different texts or images in each manuscript, so the 'reading contexts' were hugely variable. So we should pay attention to the physical form in which a text was preserved. The form in which you encounter texts now (in standardised printed editions, or online, under the name of an author) may be very different to the form in which a medieval reader met a text, and this may contribute to very different 'readings'.

As Swiss students, you have the advantage of living in a multilingual society and being familiar with both Romance and Germanic languages: Medieval England was also a multilingual society, and English is a fusion of French and Germanic elements. For this reason, you are likely to be better at English philology than native English speakers!

Your MA thesis in Philology should focus on primary texts. You should devise a project that enables you to look in detail at selected passages of your chosen texts. You should cite these passages **in Old or Middle English** and discuss the language of these passages in detail. Do not simply explain 'what the writer means', but explore *how* the writer communicates -- why does she choose a particular word or phrase? Does he use Latinate or Germanic words and if so does this create a particular effect? If the medieval English words look like Modern English equivalents, might the meaning have shifted slightly, and need some explanation? (Use the Middle English Dictionary or an Etymological Dictionary that shows the diachronic development of a word). Is the text in prose or verse and if in verse what sort, to what effect? Is the text a translation or adaptation and if so how does it relate to its original? Does the writer foreground herself through direct address to the reader? Does s/he draw attention to cited 'authorities' and if so which ones, and why? (These are examples: not all of these questions will be relevant to all texts, and there are plenty of other questions...).

The more historically remote a period is, the more tempting it is to fall into generalizations, such as 'in medieval times, everyone believed in God'. Avoid these! Question your assumptions! How could we possibly *know* what everyone believes *now*, let alone then? Try to think what might be a more reasonable statement, e.g. 'In the medieval world, the Church had great power and influence, and religion is an important concern of many medieval texts'. Use secondary sources to back up these statements about the context in which the texts you discuss were created.