

Tips for Reading Medieval Texts in Translation

Medieval Celtic tales often seem like fairy tales to modern readers. Some features seem familiar enough in a fairy-tale setting, but many things just look strange. Our task is to read for the cultural concerns the medieval audience had, not just our own. Once we understand more of the medieval concerns, our feel for the tales will be better informed and more satisfying.

So how do you read for “medieval concerns”?

First off, read actively. Interact with the text; get into a dialogue with it. Get your own copy of the text. Get a pen. Get a notebook. Mark things you don’t understand, write your question or comments on the page or on post-its or in your notebook. (Don’t bother with highlighters. Highlighting is a fairly passive intellectual activity, and it doesn’t help you dig into the text.) What questions do you have about details in the text?

Look up information you need in appropriate reference works. A short list of items available to UCB library users:

Oxford English Dictionary Online

<http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>

Oxford Reference Online—Literature

http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/SUBJECT_SEARCH.html?subject=s13

Oxford Reference Online—Mythology & Folklore

http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/SUBJECT_SEARCH.html?subject=s17

Oxford Reference Online—History

http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/SUBJECT_SEARCH.html?subject=s11&authstatuscode=200

Note that Celticists do not find Wikipedia to be particularly reliable for medieval Celtic studies topics, for reasons we’ll address later in the semester.

Good interpretive questions to start with in a medieval literary text:

Who are the characters? How do you find out about them—what indicators does the text give you about them? (Note that there are no internal monologues and that descriptions tend to be terse and visual.)

What things seem to matter to the characters in the world of the text?

What are the conflicts and the objectives of the characters?

What do you think needs to happen for the plot to resolve? Why?

What part does location or landscape play in the narrative?

Did the narrative end the way you thought it would? What unexpected elements did you encounter?

What do you like about the text? What do you dislike? Why?

After you've read the piece, write a brief summary of it in your notebook. Write down any further questions you have. Question your questions: Why do you find those particular questions important? Do you want definitions or explanations? Does something not make sense from the point of view of your experiences and expectations?

Please do bring these questions up in your homework response and in class discussion.

After reading the entire piece a couple of times, you can return to it with broader questions such as these:

Is there a single plot, or are there multiple strands of plot? What are they? Do they intersect, or do they come up in sequential episodes? Do different episodes comment on one another?

Do the characters do what characters in your culture's stories do? Do they go about attaining their objectives in ways people in your culture do? In what ways do their behaviors or feelings differ?

Different cultures may tell similar stories but talk about quite different issues through those stories. In what ways are the text's issues similar to situations in your culture or in your culture's stories? In what ways are they different? (For example, "The Wooing of Étaín" and the movie *Titanic* are both organized around a love triangle, but the pressures on the love affairs differ markedly from the medieval Irish tale to the modern American film—the former is largely a political tale, while the latter is about individuals breaking free from social constraints.)

Again, write your questions and your reactions.