

ENGL 830 Trauma and the Fourteenth Century

The fourteenth century was a dumpster fire. Famine, plague, political upheaval, civil and international conflict, heresy, backlash, extreme weather, chivalric collapse, social upheaval—it was basically the end of the world wrapped into ten terrible decades. But of course, it wasn't the end of the world. It's never really the end of the world. People lived through the fourteenth-century, survived the plague, scraped through the famine, came back from the war, weathered the literal and metaphorical storms just as they always have and just as they still do.

This is a course about the marks that those terrible decades left on those who survived, about the ways that the traumatic events of the 1300s were negotiated, understood, and rendered legible in a literary record that sometimes seems intent on forgetting them, about the way that a cataclysmic century could give rise to one of the most dazzling and singular moments in English literary history. It is, further, a course that considers how the historical and cultural traumas of the moment were mediated through artistic and cultural production, which considers the way that poetry in particular provided witness to both unspeakable losses and the tattered remains of traumatic events. We will focus on several more-or-less canonical English texts from the fourteenth century—*The Canterbury Tales*, *Piers Plowman*, *Pearl*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the lyrics of MS Harley 2253—through the lens(es) provided by contemporary theories of trauma and recovery. The intersection of medieval literature and trauma studies is an emerging discourse in the broader field medieval studies, and students in the class will be expected not only to come to grips with the linguistic difficulties of early-English texts but also be willing to immerse themselves in a shifting contemporary theoretical landscape.