

Department of English, Carleton University

ENGL 5207F

Fall 2012

\*\*\* Preliminary Course Outline / Subject to Change

**Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature- Holy Superheroes! The Old English Lives of the Saints**

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**Course description:**

Hagiography, or writing about the saints, was the most popular form of literature throughout the Middle Ages. About 100 prose saints' lives written in Old English, the earliest form of the language, survive to the present day, but these texts have largely been neglected by scholars of the period (597-1066). The author of about 60 of the extant saints' lives, Ælfric of Eynsham, recommended his passions of the martyrs to revive a flagging faith. The other 40 texts, written anonymously, seem more concerned with heroes and miracles, sidekicks and super villains, sequels and spinoffs, with the occasional foray into cross-dressing, time travel, and talking animals. What kind of cultural work do these texts perform? As exemplary figures, the saints model behavior that is meant to be imitated, but how could the average Anglo-Saxon put this into practice? For example, are the exceptional gender roles modeled by penitent harlots and hysterical hermits applicable to life in the mead hall? We will explore questions like these by reading a number of Ælfrician and anonymous saints' lives, a few examples Old English verse hagiography, and some non-literary texts such as calendars, litanies, and martyrologies. No prior knowledge of Old English is required; all reading assignments will be presented in translation or in a parallel Old English/Present-day English edition. However, any graduate student who would like to learn to read Old English is invited to enroll in ENGL 4105: Introduction to Old English, offered in the Winter 2013 term.