**English 304 : Take-home Midterm**

**General Directions:** Write on TWO of the following questions. You may take all the time you wish to think about the questions; you may consult your books and notes; and you may write an outline about what you plan to say. But once you start writing, you may write for no more than two hours. When you cite a text, please give some sort of “pointer” to the section that you are working with (page numbers in brackets will do). You may concentrate on aspects of the question that interest you the most provided that you do not distort the essential problem(s) poised by the question. The midterm is due on 26 March by 4:30 p.m. This due date cannot be extended.

1. Both Beowulf and Grettir have a fascinating capacity for words: Beowulf engages in feats of word-play, as often as he does sword-play, and Grettir composes more poems than he kills monsters. Explore the concept of artistic creation in the poem and the saga, with particular emphasis on its relation to heroism. Please add any issues raised by Gardner in his rewriting of *Beowulf*, if you wish. What kind of art appears in these texts, and how does it support, confirm, change, neutralize, or destabilize the actions and reputations of the hero?

2. You could describe *Beowulf* as a poem about a hero’s mortal combat with three monsters, and yet much of the text does not focus directly on these few moments of intense activity. The *Beowulf*-poet seems engaged by and concerned with reflection, – about human conduct, about human perception of the world, about the workings of the human mind – rather than with detailing action. Discuss a passage from *Beowulf* that is paradigmatic of its meditative quality and explain how – or if – a similar mood informs *Grettir’s Saga*.

3. To some extent, the *Beowulf*-poet conceives of Grendel as an Old Icelandic “undead man” or haunting spirit, a character familiar from Old Icelandic sagas. The exhaustive parallels between Grendel and Glam (ch. 32-35) have been examined by scholars in wearying detail. Instead of uncovering and commenting on their similarities, discuss several ways in which Grendel and Glam are strikingly different.

4. Choose any ONE of the following quotations and use it to illuminate important issues in any TWO of the texts that we have read this term:

> I draw these words from my deep sadness, my sorrowful lot, I can say that, since I grew up, I have not suffered such hardships as now, old or new. I am tortured by the anguish of exile.
> Old English, “The Wife’s Lament”
A man who speaks and is never silent
is bound to blunder;
a ready tongue, if it is not restrained,
will do you damage.

Old Icelandic, Hávamál, st. 29

Time has notably worn away the Dragon’s prestige. We believe in the lion as reality and symbol; we believe in the Minotaur as symbol but no longer reality. The Dragon is perhaps the best known but also the least fortunate of fantastic animals. It seems childish to us and usually spoils the stories in which it appears. It is worth remembering, however, that we are dealing with a modern prejudice, due perhaps to a surfeit of Dragons in fairy tales. – Jorge Luis Borges, “The Western Dragon,” The Book of Imaginary Beings (tr. by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author)

Good works of fiction study values by testing them in imagined/real situations, testing them hard, being absolutely fair to both sides. – John Gardner

5. In your initial wrestling match with early medieval literature, you may formulate your readings as a series of hierarchical oppositions: is Hrothgar weak or strong? is Grettir flawed or fated? are the texts pagan or Christian? are we being taught or entertained? The concept of balance does play an important part in the texts that we have read, and yet working against that balance yields some very rich readings as well. Can you discuss and then dismantle your own oppositions, suggesting a less resolved understanding of the texts?

6. In the Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic cultures, where war, death, and heroism are overriding and privileged values, female failure and “nonsignification” seem built into the systems of representation. Illuminate the role, worth, or status of women in Beowulf and Grettir’s Saga, paying special attention to their use of language within their particular cultures of violence.