

Sophister Module Description Template 2021-22

Full Name: The Arthurian Tradition

Short Name: The Arthurian Tradition

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ECTS Weighting: 10

Semester Taught: MT

Year: SS

Module Content:

The world of King Arthur is one that is familiar to us: the Sword in the Stone; Excalibur; the Knights of the Round Table; Morgan le Fay; Camelot; Avalon; Sir Lancelot; the Holy Grail; Sir Galahad; Guinevere; Glastonbury; King Arthur. But what do we really know? Who is, or was, King Arthur?

Arthurian narratives form the most important story-cycle in British mythology: the figure of Arthur is claimed by English, Welsh, and Scottish stories for 'their' hero. How is it that one man has come to bear the expectations, whether national, romantic or heroic, of so many competing versions?

In examining the Arthurian tradition we shall look at Arthur's emergence from pre-history, and at the ways in which regional English versions competed with the Arthur of the French romance tradition.

In reading Thomas Malory's defining 15th century text, we will examine how the English monarchy has deployed the figure of Arthur in the pursuit of political power. We will also look at versions of the narrative which offer critical perspectives on Arthur as king and on the centralizing powers of English government.

Arthurian narrative is full of items, symbols and places that are continually referred to in works both scholarly and popular; from the Holy Grail through Excalibur to the Round Table and the UK National Lottery's random number generators, Lancelot, Guinevere and Arthur: how and why have these ideas survived so strongly and have such resonance still, and in a world which may never read either Geoffrey of Monmouth or Thomas Malory?

We will look at the ways in which the figure of Arthur is still being used today in films, TV series, advertising and children's literature.

Schedule

Week 1: Introduction – When was Arthur?

Week 2: Arthur in History: Geoffrey of Monmouth, Wace, Layamon and the chronicle tradition.

Week 3: French Arthurianism: Chretien de Troyes, *Yvain*.

Week 4: English Arthurianism: *The Alliterative Morte Darthur*

Week 5: Sir Gawain and the Loathly lady: Criticising Arthur: *The Wife of Bath's Tale* and *The Awntyrs off Arthur*

Week 6: Malory 1: the historical context

Week 7: Reading Week

Week 8: Malory 2: Arthur and political propaganda

Week 9: Malory 3: The Quest for the Holy Grail

Week 10: Popular Arthurianism 1: Arthur for Children

Week 11: Popular Arthurianism 2: Arthur on film and TV

Week 12: Conclusion

Over the last three weeks students will select their own texts for study and will give a presentation which will form a component (20%) of their assessment.

For popular Arthurianism, texts could include Marian Bradley's feminist re-working, *The Mists of Avalon* (1983), which tells the story from the point of view of Morgan le Fay; or Bernard Cornwell's *The Winter King* (1995, from the *Warlord Chronicles*).

Arthurian literature for children includes works such as T.H. White's *The Once and Future King* (published as a complete volume in 1958 from earlier stories published 1938-40); Philip Reeve's *Here Lies Arthur* (2007); Kevin Crossley-Holland's *The Seeing Stone* series (2000).

For Arthur in film there is again a wide choice from Walt Disney's *Sword in the Stone* (1963); the musical film *Camelot* (1967); Monty Python's *Holy Grail* (1975); John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981); *Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade* (1989); *First Knight* (1995); or *Arthur* (2004).

Students may also examine the ways in which Arthur and his paraphernalia are used in advertising.

Learning Outcomes:

At the end of this course students will possess a knowledge of the different types of Arthurian narrative and their usage

Students will be able recognize the tropes and symbols which indicate the variety of uses to which Arthurian narratives are put

Students will demonstrate an understanding of the wider historical context in which the tales are deployed

Students will be able to offer analyses of particular passages, attending to their linguistic context, and relate them to wider concerns

Students will be able to argue clearly and authoritatively and show how the older texts are used in narratives of entertainment (including films and TV series) and instruction

Students will understand how the figure of Arthur is used in propaganda and advertizing

Learning Aims:

- This module aims to enable students to appreciate the Arthurian tradition, one of the most influential and widespread narrative cycles. In this course of study, students will examine the ways in which the story cycle continues to be deployed for entertainment, instruction and the examination of ideas and ideals of power, governance, gender identity, the past.

Assessment Details:

This module will be assessed by 2 components: an in-class presentation (20%); an essay of 4,000 words (80%)

Preliminary Reading List:

Primary texts

Chretien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, eds. W.W. Comfort and D.D.R. Owen (Everyman, 1975)

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, eds. Sebastian Evans, Charles Dunn, Gwyn Jones (Everyman, London, 1963)

Gildas, *The Ruin of Britain and Other Works*, ed. Michael Winterbottom (Phillimore, 1978)

Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales, ed. Thomas Hahn (TEAMS, Middle English text Series, Kalamazoo, Michigan, 1995)

Wace and Lawman, *The Life of King Arthur* eds. Judith Weiss and Rosamund Allen (Everyman, 1997)

Sir Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugene Vinaver (Oxford, 1971)

_____ *Le Morte Darthur* (ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd, Norton Critical Edition, New York, 2004)

Morte Arthure, ed. John Finlayson (Edward Arnold, London, 1967)

The University of Rochester maintains a website of literature, films and art relating to Arthurian material: *The Camelot Project*

A Bibliography for further reading will be posted on Blackboard later.

Please note:

- **Curricular information is subject to change.**
- **Information is displayed only for guidance purposes, relates to the current academic year only and is subject to change.**