

## **Imagining the Middle Ages**

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Lecturers: Dr Mark Faulkner, Dr Brendan O'Connell

ECTS weighting: 5

Year: JF

Term taught: Michaelmas Term

Assessment: Essay

### **Module Description:**

The module introduces students to a diverse selection of medieval literature, including works by both highly influential writers and less familiar figures. The medieval period witnessed many turbulent events, including war, plague, religious conflict and social revolt, but was also a period of dynamic cultural invention, as English writers drew on rich Classical and biblical traditions, while also engaging in cross-cultural dialogue with works in other European vernaculars, such as French and Italian. These early writers test the limits of literary possibility across a range of genres, from tragedy to comedy, romance to exemplum, dream-vision to autobiography; as they imagine a world of gods and fairies, of heroes and monsters, they challenge modern readers to question our assumptions about what literature can or should be.

### **Learning Outcomes:**

On successful completion of this module, students should be able to:

- identify the key historical and social forces that shaped the production of literature in the Middle Ages
- comment on the influence of native and European traditions on the production of Middle English Literature
- discuss medieval literary texts across a range of genres
- apply appropriate critical methodologies to the study of medieval literature

### **Indicative Module Content:**

**Harley MS 2253.** Focusing on one hugely significant miscellany, we will explore the linguistic and cultural diversity of medieval England, considering the diverse range of genres and audiences available, while also considering the material contexts in which literature circulated.

**Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.** This lecture will consider the ways in which the Arthurian romance constructs national and chivalric identities, looking at the poem's exploration of Britain's Trojan heritage, as well as its examination of masculine, aristocratic identity through Sir Gawain's encounters with the Green Knight and Morgan Le Fay.

**Pearl.** This session explores vernacular re-workings of biblical material. *Pearl* shows how dream-visions could be deployed to bridge the gulf between the human and divine, drawing on lessons from scripture and theology to bring comfort in times of profound personal loss.

**The Miller's Tale.** This lecture considers Chaucer's parodic response to didactic accounts of Noah's Flood. Whereas such narratives emphasise man's submission to God, good stewardship of the natural world, and the consequences of sexual misbehaviour, the Miller celebrates resistance to sexual and moral orthodoxies, as well as social hierarchies, in a literary Peasants' Revolt.

**The Book of Margery Kempe.** As the first autobiography in English, and one of the earliest books by a woman, Kempe's remarkable life is an important document of social, economic and religious concerns, which traces her journey from failed brewer to noted mystic, whose devotions led her around England, Europe, and the Holy Land, and also saw her accused of heresy.

### **Editions**

Most texts will be studied in modern translation, though students will be encouraged to read the more accessible texts, such as those by Chaucer, in the original Middle English. Students are encouraged to purchase the following text, which contains a number of the set texts:

*The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages*, ed. by James Simpson (New York, 2018)

Other useful editions and translations include:

*Sir Orfeo*, in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo,

1995); or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo*, ed. and trans. J.R.R Tolkien (London, 2006)

*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl* may be read in the original in *The Works of the Gawain Poet*, ed. by Ad Putter and Myra Stokes (London, 2014). A translation is available in the Norton anthology (above), or students may also like to read *Pearl*, trans. Simon Armitage (London, 2016), or *Pearl*, trans. Jane Draycott (Oxford, 2011)

Malory, *Le Morte Darthur*, ed. and abridged by Helen Cooper (Oxford, 1998)

*The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Jill Mann (London, 2005); *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. David Wright, with introduction and notes by Christopher Cannon (Oxford, 2011)

Henryson, ‘*The Testament of Cresseid*’ and *Seven Fables*, trans. by Seamus Heaney (London, 2009)

*The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. and ed. by Lynn Staley (New York, 2001)