



The period c.1250 to c.1450 was one of social and political flux across Britain and Ireland. Old hierarchies seemed to be breaking down. While royal pronouncements and church sermons present a picture of a harmonious and orderly world, legal texts tell quite a different story. Peasants challenged the rights of landlords and chased officials out of their villages; young men broke the rules by wearing elaborate outfits made from luxury materials that were forbidden to them; students rioted in the streets; religious dissenters refused to follow the teachings of the institutional church and debated doctrine with archbishops; the nobility engaged in banditry and extortion, earning them the label ‘fur-collar criminals’. It is no surprise that it is in this period that we see the first poems in praise of ‘Robyn Hood’, an outlaw acclaimed for attacking corrupt sheriffs and bishops.

This module invites students to look at the evidence for this breakdown in law and order, and to consider why the British Isles seemed such a ‘lawless’ place in this period. Why did the church and crown have such difficulty in asserting control? Was it social status, profit, or salvation that motivated people to defy the demands of authorities? Many of the themes we will consider in this module have modern resonances, as we consider the ways in which authorities sought to regulate sexual behaviours, antisocial activities, and speech.

This module offers students the chance to listen to the voices of ‘ordinary’ people caught up in these disturbances and challenges. We will not only consider legal evidence (law codes, petitions, trial records) but other sources, such as literature, poetry, and manuscript illustrations. Students will have the opportunity to focus on some of the most controversial and famous criminal trials of this period. We will look at the trial of Alice Kyteler, the first recorded person in Ireland to be condemned for witchcraft, after the unexplained deaths of four husbands. We will also examine the trial of Richard of Pudlicott, responsible for the most notorious medieval heist—the burglary of the royal treasury at Westminster. Students will also be able to draw on a stimulating body of secondary literature, and will be encouraged to use techniques from anthropology, sociology, and literary theory to consider how we interpret the evidence for medieval criminality.