

ENU11009: Imagining the Middle Ages

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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 will 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

Module Delivery

The module is delivered through a combination of lectures and tutorials. Please note that, as this is a Junior Fresh module, there will be no lecture during the first week of term, which is Orientation Week for first year students. Lectures will begin on 24 September 2025; tutorials will start in the week beginning 29 September. Please check your online timetable on my.tcd.ie for details of the time and location of your tutorial group). If you have any queries about this module, please contact the co-ordinator, Dr. Brendan O'Connell (oconneb2@tcd.ie), or speak to your tutorial leader.

Assessment:

This module is assessed by **one** essay (1500-2000 words). Details of assessment and submission requirements will be provided on Blackboard.

Lecture Schedule

Week One (beginning 15 Sept): Orientation Week for first year students (no classes)

Week Two (24 Sept): Introduction (Brendan O'Connell). The introduction to the course will provide a broad overview of the field, situating late-medieval literature within a wider historical and literary tradition stretching back to the origins of English, and outlining some of the key theoretical and methodological principles that have been brought to bear on the field.

Week Three (1 Oct): So Many Peoples, Languages, Tongues: Harley MS 2253 (Mark Faulkner).

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.

Week Four (8 Oct): Ovid's Myth of Orpheus and *Sir Orfeo* (BOC). This session explores medieval responses to classical literature, taking as a case study the tragedy of Orpheus, which was subjected to a series of didactic interpretations in the early Middle Ages, before being transformed by the fairy-world setting and happy ending of the romance *Sir Orfeo*.

Week Five (15 Oct): The Constance Legend (BOC). In this lecture, we will examine the popular medieval Constance tradition, with a particular focus on Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*. The story has been the subject of some imaginative modern retellings, including a version by Patience Agbabi, which will allow us to consider the continuing relevance of this ancient tale.

Week Six (22 Oct): *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (BOC). 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.

Week Seven (week beginning 29 Oct): Reading Week (no classes)

Week Eight (5 Nov): Faith and Imagination: *Pearl* (BOC). 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.

Week Nine (12 Nov): Thomas Hoccleve, 'My Complainte' (BOC). In this lecture, we will explore Hoccleve's fascinating poem about his experience of mental illness, which offers an urgent and moving account of the challenges and stigma he faced on attempting to re-integrate into society after an emotional breakdown.

Week Ten (19 Nov): *The Book of Margery Kempe* (MF). 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. *Note: this lecture will take online place over Zoom.*

Week Eleven (26 Nov): Chaucer, *The Miller's Tale* (BOC). This session 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 offers a radically different view of resistance to sexual and moral orthodoxies, as well as social hierarchies.

Week Twelve (3 Dec): Chaucer, *The Nun's Priest's Tale* and Conclusion (BOC). This lecture complements what students have learned so far throughout the module by considering how Chaucer's famous work plays with the generic and formal conventions of medieval literature. In this tale, a simple beast fable is expanded to breaking point with elements drawn from every available genre, as Chaucer addresses the limitations of didactic forms, and explores the possibilities for English as a literary language.

Preliminary Reading List

Recommended Anthology of set texts

Students will be encouraged to read texts in Middle English, especially the more accessible texts, but translations will be suggested where appropriate. Students are encouraged to purchase the following anthology, which contains almost all of the set texts:

The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages, ed. by James Simpson (New York, 2024). (The earlier 2018 edition is also acceptable if you find this easier to acquire).

Other Editions

Other useful editions of texts are noted below, but please note that it is **not** essential to purchase any of these books – the majority of texts are found in the Norton anthology mentioned above, while you can also use library copies if you need to consult these editions, or you can begin with the course materials provided on Blackboard.

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). The best modern translation is by Simon Armitage, and is found in the 2024 Norton Anthology mentioned above, or can be found in a separate edition. Another acceptable translation is provided in the 2018 edition of the Norton anthology.

The Canterbury Tales, ed. Jill Mann (London, 2005); *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. David Wright, with introduction and notes by Christopher Cannon (Oxford, 2011). These books can be pricy, so I do consider using second-hand or library copies, or the extracts provided on Blackboard.

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

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