

Option Name: Arthurian Literature

Option Short Title: Arthurian Literature

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ECTS Weighting: 10

Semester/Term Taught: Michaelmas Term

Year: SS

Module Content:

The figure of Arthur has been a subject of story, repeatedly retold and reimagined, for over a millennium. Arthurian literature goes back to the ninth century at least, when the writer of the *Historia Brittonum* listed his battles and made enigmatic reference to other legends such as the hunting of 'the pig Troyt'. References to Arthur in the Welsh poem *Y Gododdin* may be even earlier. Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century made the legend of Arthur the centrepiece of his vast, tragic, largely fictitious history; courtly writers such as Chrétien de Troyes made the Arthurian world a laboratory for the testing of ideas of fidelity, honour and love. This module will trace the development of the Arthurian legend from Geoffrey and Chrétien through major Middle English texts (the alliterative *Morte Arthure* and Malory's great 15th C synthesis of the tradition) and also some shorter romances, including the tale of Sir Launfal and his fairy mistress (*Sir Launfal*) and the comic story of the Loathly Lady (*The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*). The course will conclude with a choice of 20th C film treatments of King Arthur.

Learning Outcomes:

On successful completion of this module students should be able to

- demonstrate general knowledge of the development of the Arthurian legend in the Middle Ages in the French and English traditions
- analyse selected Middle English Arthurian texts in detail
- comment on the treatment of Arthurian material in different forms and genres, including history/chronicle, 'popular' romance and prose romance
- construct an essay on one or more medieval Arthurian text(s)

Option Learning Aims:

- to gain appreciation of the development of Arthurian story in (chiefly) the Middle English tradition
- exploit this large body of closely related material to read comparatively, considering issues of date and genre
- explore large themes that have been addressed through Arthurian material, such as loyalty, kingship, national identity and the relationship between the personal and the public
- become more adept at reading and analysing Middle English literature
- consider aspects of the post-medieval uses of Arthurian legend

Assessment Details:

Assessment will be by one essay of 5000 words (100%).

Provisional schedule:

1. The “Real Arthur”?: the early sources
2. Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Chronicle Tradition
3. The Romance Tradition: Chrétien de Troyes, *Lancelot*
4. From French to English: Chrétien’s *Yvain* and the ME *Yvain and Gawain*
5. Short Middle English romances: *The Awntyrs off Arthure* and *Sir Launfal*
6. The Alliterative *Morte Arthure*
7. Reading week
8. Malory I: Tale of King Arthur; Tale of Sir Gareth
9. Malory II: The Grail Quest
10. Malory III: The Downfall
11. Arthurian comedy: *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*
12. Choice of Arthurian film: *Excalibur* or *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*

Preliminary Reading List:

Primary Texts

It is important that you obtain copies of the following and start reading them early – during the summer, if you are signing up for this module in the initial module enrolment period. Malory in particular is very long, though we will not be discussing all sections in detail. Please make sure you are using the specified edition:

- Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) [focus on the Arthurian section]
- Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William Kibler and Carleton Carroll (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1991)
- Malory, *Complete Works*, ed. Eugene Vinaver (Oxford: O.U.P, 1971)

The following can be accessed through the METS website <https://metseditions.org/editions> but, as the Alliterative *Morte Arthure* is a lengthy poem, it would be preferable to have your own copy or a physical copy from the library. Again, read it in advance if you get the chance:

- *King Arthur’s Death: The Middle English Stanzaic Morte Arthur and Alliterative Morte Arthure*, ed. Larry D. Benson, rev. Edward E. Foster, TEAMS Middle English Text Series (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1994)

The other texts can all be accessed through METS <https://metseditions.org/editions> or through copies that I will make available on Blackboard.

Secondary Sources

The following general guides and handbooks are suitable preliminary reading:

- *The Arthur of the English: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*, ed. W. R. Barron (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999)
- *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and Ad Putter (Cambridge: C. U. P., 2009)
- *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, ed. Helen Fulton (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009)
- *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996)
- *A New Companion to Malory*, ed. Megan G. Leitch and Cory James Rushton (Cambridge, D. S. Brewer, 2019)
- Pearsall, Derek, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003)

Further reading lists and resources will be provided during the term.