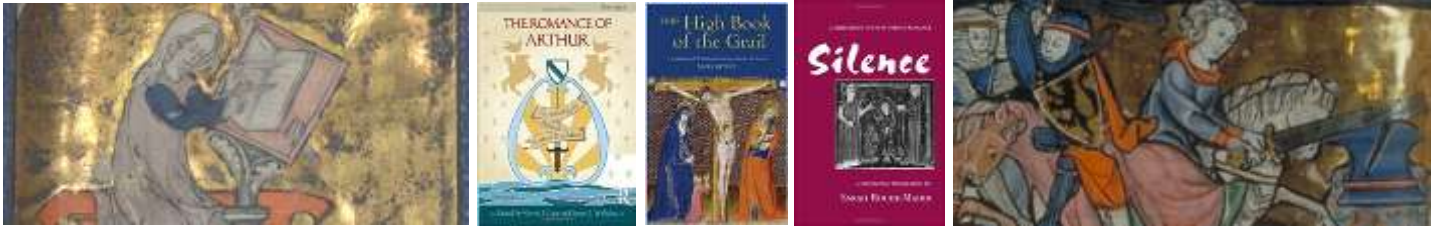


MEDIEVAL ARTHURIAN LITERATURE

COURSE SYLLABUS



Flanking illustrations: Marie de France composing verse and Arthur removing the sword; both c. 1300. (BNF Arsenal Library, 3142, fol. 256; BNF, Fr. 95, fol.156v).

Instructor: Adrian McClure
Class Mtg: MWF

Email: adrianjmclure@gmail.com
Office Hours: MW

COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this course, we will delve into the weird, wild, and wonderful world of medieval Arthurian literature, beginning with what is generally regarded as its earliest work, the eleventh-century Welsh tale *Culhwch and Olwen*, and finishing up with the fifteenth-century *Le Morte Darthur* by the imprisoned English knight Sir Thomas Malory. While a few of these texts will strike a familiar chord, there are also many surprises in store. (We will witness the mortally wounded King Arthur being healed with sizzling blood from the severed head of a demon-adversary, for example, and a cross-dressing female knight being outed by Merlin to the court.) The Arthurian works you will encounter range in genre from pseudo-chronicles to short verse *lais* to longer verse and prose romances, and their tone runs the gamut from courtly sophistication to high religiosity to Monty-Pythesque burlesque and bawdiness.

To help us make our way through this wild forest of textual diversity, we will focus on several key interpretive threads: medieval conceptions of authorship and authority, constructions of gender and national identity, and how texts may encode historical trauma. The goal is to achieve a balance between enjoyment and analysis—we will approach these texts both as lively, engaging works of fiction that speak to modern readers with powerful immediacy, and as windows into historical settings with very different social practices and ways of understanding the world. Medieval Arthurian literature entertains us, but it also makes us stretch.

I will also ask you to do a little stretching in the classroom. Throughout the semester, you will participate in a wide variety of class activities, from small-group discussion sessions to impromptu role playing to classroom debates. The goal of these exercises is to help you appreciate that literary interpretation benefits from active engagement and willingness to approach texts from unfamiliar angles.

Class requirements include regular class attendance and participation in small-group activities, three 750-word papers on a broad range of topics, and a take-home final.

PRIMARY LEARNING GOALS

- To promote imaginative engagement with literature
- To introduce students to a wide variety of medieval texts across multiple genres
- To enable students to analyze literary texts both orally and in written form with increasing skill and confidence
- To have some fun along the way

REQUIRED TEXTS

Here are the texts you will be required to purchase for this course, in the exact editions indicated:

1. Lacy, Norris J., and James J. Wilhelm, editors. *The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2013. ISBN-10: 0415782899
2. Bryant, Nigel, translator. *The High Book of the Grail: A Translation of the Thirteenth Century Romance of Perlesvaus*. D.S. Brewer, 2007. ISBN-10: 1843841215
3. Heldris de Cornuaille. *Silence: A Thirteenth-Century French Romance*. Translated by Sarah Roche-Mahdi, Michigan State University Press, 2007. ISBN-10: 0870135430

COURSE SCHEDULE

Our readings this semester (all in English translations) are divided into five roughly chronological and thematically linked units. A detailed weekly course schedule with all assignments and due dates is available on Blackboard.

Unit 1. BEGINNINGS (Weeks 1-2)

In this unit, we will survey the scanty evidence for the “historical” Arthur and peer into the shadowy origins of his court in Celtic myth and legend. In the boisterous Culhwch and Olwen, you will encounter an Arthurian world steeped in wordplay and witches, farce and folklore; from there, the view turns grander as you read selections from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s monumental History of Britain, a pseudo-chronicle that purports to be based on an ancient Welsh book, but that tosses together classical borrowings and traditional Celtic tales of the marvelous with gleeful abandon. Authorship, gender, and the formation of national identity will all be on the agenda, and buried trauma will make a brief but important appearance.

Unit 2. COURTLY FICTIONS (Weeks 3-5)

This set of readings introduces the courtly Arthurian world of sophisticated banter, chivalric adventure, and amorous entanglements that still holds a place in our cultural imaginary. You will read the two playful but thought-provoking Arthurian lais of Marie de France and the iconic Arthurian verse romance, The Knight of the Cart (aka Lancelot), by her contemporary Chrétien de Troyes. Gender will be the main focus of this unit, as we puzzle over the quicksilver ironies of the earliest known French female author and wrestle with Lancelot’s quasi-religious yet adulterous devotion to Guinevere, but there will also be much discussion of issues of authorship. (Were there two authors of the Lancelot, or did the slippery Chrétien invent the second?)

Unit 3. VISIONS OF THE GRAIL (Weeks 6-8)

Grail narratives—with their mystical visions, spiritualized quests, and hints of secret lore—seem to exercise a perennial allure. In this unit, we will examine two particularly fascinating moments in the evolution of this rapidly proliferating, dizzyingly labyrinthine subgenre. We will begin by making the acquaintance of the naïve Grail-hero prototype of Chrétien’s unfinished Perceval and then spend time with his hyperviolent, messianic counterpart in the phantasmagorical High Book of the Grail. In this set of readings, we will explore how medieval romance in general, and the High Book of the Grail in particular, encodes historical trauma.

Unit 4. SUBVERSIVE STORIES (Weeks 9-11)

Medieval Arthurian literature typically combines the high and the low, but the bawdy Icelandic version of the Tale of the Short Mantle specializes in the latter and revels in coarse, salacious humor. The Old French verse romance Silence that we take up next is courtlier in tone but equally fixated on transgressive behavior. Gender norms will be our main focus as we read these two subversive tales, the first of which relates the shame-inducing outcome of a chastity test at Arthur’s court, and the second of which recounts the roller-coaster adventures of a cross-dressing female aristocrat who was raised as a boy, becomes a respected knight and then a troubadour, is vindictively accused of rape by a spurned queen, and who receives regular visitations from argumentative avatars of Nature and Nurture.

Unit 5. LATE WORKS (Weeks 12-14; includes Thanksgiving break)

Our encounter with medieval literature ends with the beguiling poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and selections from Malory’s darkly brooding synthesis of Arthurian literature, Le Morte Darthur. Concluding with these two works highlights the diversity of the Arthurian canon and brings together the principal interpretive threads that we have been following all semester.

ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING:

5% Discussion/Participation

- As noted above, class participation is an important component of this course. If, for whatever reason, you do not feel comfortable with this, see me to arrange an alternative form of assessment.

75% Three papers

- Each paper will be 750 words (approximately 3 pages); I will hand out a list of diverse topics and approaches to consider well in advance.
- There will be extensive discussion—and training—prior to the first paper in order to review the conventions of academic writing and clarify expectations.
- I encourage every student submit a preliminary draft for the first paper to me at least a week and a half before the final due date.

20% Take-Home Final Exam

- This is an essay exam that will ask you to make connections among texts and to synthesize key themes and concepts discussed in class throughout the semester.