

## Medieval Arthurian Traditions

Spring 2012

**Organiser:** Dr Karen Smyth (office: Arts 2.46; email: k.smyth@uea.ac.uk)

**Teaching:** seminar on Thursday 1pm – 4pm.

### Course description:

Who has not heard of Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table? Yet why, of all medieval traditions, is this legend the most pervasive medievalism of modern culture? We will explore how in order to understand Cornwall's page turning historical thriller *Excalibur* or Monty Python's *Holy Grail* comedy for instance, we need to travel back to the Middle Ages. Beginning with the 12<sup>th</sup> century Celtic roots through many twists and turns to its final medieval flourishing in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in a work by Malory, which all modern versions are today based upon. In so doing the translation from heroic to romance cultures will be the focus. A variety of English Arthurian texts will be read alongside the folkloric Welsh *Mabinogion* collection, Geoffrey of Monmouth's influential Latin work and French romance texts in translation. Variations in form will also be addressed as the source base of the medieval Arthurian legend is diverse, encompassing chronicle, ballad, verse and prose. Students will examine the genres and voices of prophecy, pseudo-historical discourse, pseudo-exegesis and courtly romance. The various national responses to ideas of myth, legend and histories of British imperialism, the cultural significance of differences in the representations of women in the various texts, as well as questions regarding individuality and selfhood that arise in literature produced in a volatile period of religious and social uncertainty and dissent will be explored.

This course will enable those students who have encountered *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* to enhance their awareness of the wider traditions within which this Arthurian text belongs, but is also suitable for students who are embarking upon their first encounters with medieval literature.

### Learning Outcomes:

- demonstrate a perception of the Arthurian tradition as a phenomenon of cultural, aesthetic, political, and religious importance;
- demonstrate a detailed knowledge of particular Arthurian texts and of their relation to appropriate genres;
- display skills of comparative analysis and competencies in literary translation when considering the intertextual and ideological relations which are translated across medieval Arthurian texts;
- develop awareness of modern adaptations of medieval material;
- develop skills in reading Middle English;
- demonstrate knowledge of medieval literature through the research, organization, and articulation of a scholarly critical argument in written work.

**Seminar schedule:** (may be subject to amendment)

Wk 1: The Celtic tradition: *The Mabinogion*. **NOTE: Please read this section in the module dossier BEFORE THE START of the module, in preparation for week one.**

Wk 2: Arthur and Merlin in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae*.

Wk 3: Chrétien de Troyes.

Wk 4: Marie de France.

Wk 5: The *Alliterative Morte Arthure*.

Wk 6: Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Arthurian Beginnings.

Wk 7: READING WEEK

Wk 8: Malory: Lancelot and Women

Wk 9: Malory: The Holy Grail.

Wk 10: Malory: Endings.

Wk 11: Medievalism: Bernard Cornwall, *Excalibur*

Wk 12: Reading Films: Monty Python's *The Holy Grail*.

### **Assessment:**

1) **Coursework:** the first essay is designed to test your ability to offer a disciplined close reading of a set passage selected from the texts studied on this module. Your response should be 1,500 words and is worth 25% of the total marks for the module, due in week 7.

2) **Project:** an essay of 3,500 words worth 75% due in week 13 (spring assessment period). This will be thematically based, asking you to draw material together from different parts of the course.

### **Required Reading:**

- Vinaver, ed. *Malory, Works*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. revised by P.J.C. Field. Oxford, 1990. You will need to purchase a copy (earlier editions are fine), for week 6.
- Bernard Cornwall, *Excalibur*. You will need to purchase a copy for week 11.
- Module dossier.

### **REQUIRED READING FOR WEEK ONE:**

**The *Mabinogion* extracts in the module dossier. Dossiers will be available for collection at the end of the first semester.**

### **Preparatory Reading:**

There has been an abundance of critical material on the Arthurian traditions, some of which is below. More directed reading material will be suggested for each of the main areas of the course, but as a starter it will help if you can read some of the following:

W. R. J. Barron, ed., *The Arthur of the English: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval English Life and Literature*

Christopher Baswell and William Sharp, eds, *The Passing of Arthur: New Essays in Arthurian Tradition*

Gillian Beer, *The Romance*

Martin Biddle, ed., *King Arthur's Round Table*  
Mary Flowers Braswell and John Bugge, eds, *The Arthurian Tradition: Essays in Convergence*  
Rachel Bromwich, A. O. H. Jarman, Brynley F. Roberts, eds, *The Arthur of the Welsh: The  
Arthurian Legend in Medieval Welsh Literature*  
E. K. Chambers, *Arthur of Britain*  
Ronan Coghlan, *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Arthurian Legends*  
Laurie A. Finke and Martin B. Shichtman, *King Arthur and the Myth of History*  
D. H. Green, *Irony in the Medieval Romance*  
Claire Hamilton, *Arthurian Tradition: A Beginner's Guide*  
Nick Higham, *King Arthur: Myth-Making and History*  
Stephen Jaeger, *Ennobling Love*  
Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology*  
M. Keen, *Chivalry*  
Edward Kennedy, ed., *King Arthur: A Casebook*  
Stephen Knight, 'The Social Function of the Middle English Romances', in Aers, ed., *Medieval  
Literature: Criticism, Ideology, and History*  
— , *Arthurian Literature and Society*  
Roberta Krueger, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*  
Norris Lacy, ed., *The Arthurian Encyclopedia*  
Roger Sherman Loomis, *Development of Arthurian Romance*  
Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm Maddox, eds, *Literary Aspects of Courtly Culture*  
Richard Moll, *Before Malory: Reading Arthur in Later Medieval England*  
Nicholas Orme, *From Childhood to Chivalry*  
Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*  
John Stevens, *Medieval Romance*  
Michelle R. Warren, *Excalibur and the Borders of Britain, 1100-1300*  
Bonnie Wheeler, ed., *Arthurian Studies in Honour of P. J. C. Field*