

## HL3044: The Legends of King Arthur

Semester 1, AY2025-26

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### Course description

Who was King Arthur, and how did he evolve into the household name that we know today? Where did the legends of his knights originate, and how did they develop over time? How widespread were the Arthurian legends across medieval Europe, and what made them so appealing to authors of English literature in more recent centuries? These are some of the questions we will explore in this module, which surveys the long development of several of the major narratives involving King Arthur, the men and women surrounding him including Merlin, Morgan le Fey, Vivian, and his knights, stretching from their medieval origins to modern literary and mediated adaptations. The first half of the module focuses on medieval texts, which will be studied in translation. You will gain an understanding of the generic, stylistic and thematic uniqueness of these medieval texts, as well as an awareness of the ways in which each text reflects the composer's explorations of the fundamental moral questions underpinning themes such as chivalric heroism, ideals of masculinity and femininity, and romantic love. The second half of the module turns towards modern reception and adaptation, and here you will explore the changing significance and adaptations of the Arthurian tradition as they evolve within the recent two centuries. As Arthurian adaptations and reinventions continue to be produced and to occupy the public consciousness in the twenty-first century, this module seeks to offer you a sense of the enduring appeal of the legends of the 'once and future king'.

### Course Readings

- Geoffrey of Monmouth, History of the Kings of Britain [selections]\*
- "Culhwch and Olwen," in Patrick K. Ford, trans., *The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 2019)\* (short story)
- Gwyneth Lewis, trans. *The Book of Taliesin: Poems of Warfare and Praise in an Enchanted Britain* (London: Penguin Books, 2020) [select poems] \*
- "Lancelot, Knight of the Cart," in Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, trans. William W. Kibler and Carleton W. Carroll (London: Penguin, 1991)\* (translation of poem)
- Judith Shoaf, trans. *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Toronto: Broadview P, 2018.
- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. and trans. William Allan Neilson (Read Books, 2021)
- Simon Armitage, trans. *Death of King Arthur* (London: faber and faber, 2021)
- Thomas Malory, *Le Morte De Arthur: The Winchester Manuscript*, ed. and trans. Helen Cooper (Oxford: OUP, 1998) [selections]
- Alfred Tennyson, *Idylls of the King* (1859) [selections]
- Marion Zimmer Bradley, *The Mists of Avalon* (1983)

#### Films and television media:

- *Camelot* (television drama series, Starz TV production) (2011) (select episodes)

- *The Adventures of Merlin* (BBC television drama series) (2008-2012) (select episodes)
- *A Knight's Tale* (Hollywood movie) (2001)
- *Tristan and Isolde* (Hollywood movie) (2004)
- *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (Hollywood movie) (2017)
- *The Green Knight* (Hollywood movie) (2021)

**\*Texts to be provided by instructor on course website**

Recommended Optional Readings (But Not Necessary):

- "Perceval," in Nigel Bryant, trans., *Merlin and the Grail. Joseph of Arimathea; Merlin; Perceval* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001)\*
- "The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell," in ed. Stephen H.A. Shepherd, *Middle English Romances* (New York: Norton, 2022)\* online versions at [The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell | Harvard's Geoffrey Chaucer Website](#) and [The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell for Helping King Arthur \(sfsu.edu\)](#)
- Gottfried von Strassburg, *Tristan and Isolde*. With Ulrich von Turheim's Continuation. Trans. William T. Whobrey. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2020.

## Assignments

Participation (10%):

You will be expected to come to class prepared to discuss the set readings for the week and participate actively in discussion.

Presentations (10%):

Every week, small groups students will take it in turn to present on the topic and readings of the class, guided by worksheets provided by the instructor.

To do well on the team assessment, it is necessary for you to demonstrate positive interdependence and teamwork. In principle, you will receive the same marks as your team. However, your individual score may vary based on instructor observations and peer feedback about your contributions to the group project.

Mid-term essay (40%):

Your first essay will explore a key aspect of on one or more of the medieval texts covered in the first half of the course.

## Planned weekly schedule

Week	Topic	ILO	Readings/ Activities
Week 1	Arthur's Early Development	1, 2	Geoffrey of Monmouth, <i>History of the Kings of Britain</i> (selections)  Wace, <i>Brut</i> (selections)
Week 2	The Earliest Arthurian Tale and Merlin's Beginnings	1, 2	The Middle Welsh <i>Culhwch and Olwen</i>  (Short Poems from <i>Taliesin</i> )  <i>Spoils of Annwfn</i>  <i>The Great Prophecy of Britain</i>  <i>Elegy for Uther Pendragon</i>  <i>To Pacify Urien</i>  <i>An Unfriendly Crowd</i>  <i>Taliesin's Sweetnesses</i>
Week 3	Lancelot and the Knights of Purity (Perceval, Galahad)	1, 2	Chr�tien de Troyes, <i>Lancelot, The Knight of the Cart</i>       <i>The Quest of the Holy Grail</i>
Week 4	Sir Gawain	1, 2, 3, 4	<i>The Quest of the Holy Grail</i> (continued)       <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i>       (Essay 1 Topics released around this time)
Week 5	The English Verse Tradition of Arthur	1, 2, 3, 4	       <i>Alliterative Morte Arthure</i>
Week 6	Malory's Le Morte Darthur (I)	1, 2, 3, 4	Thomas Malory, <i>Le Morte Darthur</i>

Week 7	Malory's Le Morte Darthur (II)	1, 2, 3, 4	Thomas Malory, <i>Le Morte Darthur</i> (Essay 1 Due the end of this week)
Reading Week	Reading Week Break	--	--
Week 8	Alfred Tennyson: Historical Allegory	1, 2, 3, 4	Alfred Tennyson, <i>Idylls of the King</i> (select idylls/poems)
Week 9	Marion Zimmer Bradley: The Women of Arthur	1, 2, 3, 4	Marion Zimmer Bradley, <i>The Mists of Avalon</i>
Week 10	Marion Zimmer Bradley: The Clash of Worlds and Religion	1, 2, 3, 4	Marion Zimmer Bradley, <i>The Mists of Avalon</i>
Week 11	Marion Zimmer Bradley: Tragedy and Reconciliation in Arthurian Legend	1, 2, 3, 4	Marion Zimmer Bradley, <i>The Mists of Avalon</i> (Essay 2 Topics Released This Week)
Week 12	Arthur and Modern Media	1, 2, 3, 4	<i>A Knight's Tale</i> (2001)  <i>King Arthur: Legend of the Sword</i> (2017)  <i>The Green Knight</i> (2021)  <i>Tristan and Isolde</i> (2004)
Week 13	Arthur and Modern Media	1, 2, 3, 4	<i>Camelot</i> (2013)  <i>The Adventures of Merlin</i> (2008-2012) (watch select episodes)  (Essay 2 Due on Week 14)

- This is a provisional and tentative reading schedule, subject to possible changes according to sudden holidays which might clash or the students' reading pace. We will stick as closely to it as possible.

## **Course Policies:**

**Attendance and Participation:** The success of any seminar depends on the active participation of all its members. Barring illness or emergencies, you must attend every seminar. You must arrive on time, having done the required readings and any assigned work, and be ready to participate in the class discussion. Failure to do so will reduce your participation grade significantly. If you need to miss a class either due to family emergencies (compassionate leave) or job purposes, you must get in touch with me before that week's meeting and an official letter or medical letter needs to be given to me, especially in the event that you are unwell.

**Late Work and Extensions:** if your essay is late, it will be marked down by one third of a letter grade (5 points) for each day that it is overdue (i.e. a paper that would have received an A will receive a A-). No work will be accepted more than three days late without prior permission. Extensions will be granted only in exceptional circumstances, including documented illness or genuine emergency. You can earn a two-day extension if you work on your paper with a writing coach at the LCC Communication Cube. If you require extensions for deadlines, you need to seek permission from me at least two days in advance before the deadline. Please do not inform me right before the deadline at the very hour or after, because it reflects very badly on your timing.

**Seeking Help Outside Class:** you are encouraged to use any form of legitimate aid to help you write papers and research topics that interest you. Obvious sources of legitimate assistance include your tutors, the coaches at the LCC Communication Cube, and the subject librarians at the library. If you work on a paper with a writing coach, you are eligible for a two-day extension. Please speak to me if you would like to take advantage of this!

**Generative AI:** generative AI (such as ChatGPT) is not designed for research and essay writing in the humanities and is inclined to make things up alongside inaccuracies of information. If you intend to use generative AI for your work in any capacity (such as image generation), you must get written permission from me first. You must follow the university's prevailing policies about how to acknowledge the use of generative AI in your work. Although it can be a useful tool, you must not use it to replace your own thinking or learning.

**Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty:** Don't do it! If I find that you have misrepresented someone else's work or wording as your own you will fail the assignment and possibly the course. If you are unsure of how or when to cite a source, please ask me or refer to the university's academic integrity resources online. Where in doubt, remember to adhere to the MLA (Modern Language Association) style of citation which is used in literary humanities.