

# British Literature, Origins to 1800

Survey course for majors and non-majors

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## Course description and objectives

### Course description

This class is designed to give students a basic understanding of early British literary history, from Anglo-Saxon literature through the eighteenth century. Along with reading a wide variety of literary works, we will also consider the historical, political, social, and cultural contexts for medieval and early modern literature. For our discussion of medieval literature (500–1500), we read texts originally composed in a variety of languages, including Old Irish (OI), Old English (OE), Latin, Old Norse (ON), Middle Welsh (MW), Anglo-French (AF), Anglo-Hebrew (AH), and Middle English (ME). The multilingual nature of our readings reflects the multicultural society of medieval Britain.

Instead of moving through the readings chronologically, each week we will discuss a few texts which fit into a genre or theme common in medieval and early modern literature. Through these groupings, we will learn about how a theme or genre developed over time, and we will compare texts written centuries apart for their treatment of similar topics. We will read literature in a variety of genres, including epic, chronicle, lais, lyric, sonnet, saga, saint's life, dream vision, romance, and drama. Books for the course will include *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (vols. A, B, & C) and a course pack with additional primary texts.



A thirteenth-century map of Britain, showing the borders of present-day Wales and Scotland. From Matthew Paris's map of Great Britain in London, British Library, MS Cotton Claudius D. vi, fol. 12v.

### Learning objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to

- identify and discuss recurrent themes in British literature from the Anglo-Saxon period through the eighteenth century
- articulate the historical and cultural contexts for medieval, Renaissance, Restoration, and eighteenth-century literature
- analyze a work of literature using literary terminology such as allegory, alliteration, allusion, analogy, assonance, convention, form, hyperbole, irony, metaphor, metonymy, motif, onomatopoeia, paradox, personification, oxymoron, simile, synecdoche, and more
- identify and discuss medieval and early modern genres of literature, including epic, chronicle, lais, lyric, sonnet, saga, saint's life, dream vision, romance, drama, and more
- construct a narrative about the development of a genre or theme across the medieval and early modern periods
- discuss the formation of literary canons and recognize that scholars deliberately shape our understanding of the historical development of literature

### Assignments

- **Paper 1**, a close reading and literary analysis using any two primary sources from weeks 1–5 (4–5 pages, due on weekend after week 5)

- **Midterm exam** (beginning of week 8)
- **Paper 2**, a close reading and literary analysis using any two primary sources from weeks 6–10 (4–5 pages, due on weekend after week 10)
- **Diachronic essay** which discusses the development of a theme or genre (across time), using at least four primary sources from the course readings and three scholarly sources (7–8 pages, due at last class). Proposal for diachronic essay due at end of week 12.
- **Final exam**

## Course schedule

### **Week 1. Anglo-Saxon Poetry**

W Introductions & Caedmon's *Hymn* (Latin/OE)

F "The Wanderer," "The Wife's Lament," & Anglo-Saxon riddles (OE)

### **Week 2. Myth & Heroism**

M *Beowulf*, pt 1 (OE)

W *Beowulf*, pt 2

F *Mabinogion*: "Culhwch and Olwen" (MW)

### **Week 3. Writing History & Invasions of Britain**

M The Celts: Early Irish life of *St Patrick* (OI)

W The Vikings: excerpts from various Old Norse and Old Icelandic sagas

F The Normans: The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (OE) & the Bayeux Embroidery

### **Week 4. Dreams & Visions**

M "Dream of the Rood" (OE) & the Ruthwell Cross

W Geoffrey Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls* (ME)

F *The Pearl* (ME)

### **Week 5. Romance, Magic, & Religion**

M *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, fitts 1 & 2 (ME)

W *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, fitts 3 & 4

F *The King of Tars*

*Sunday night: Paper 1 due*

### **Week 6. Gender & Authority**

M Geoffrey Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Prologue & Tale* (ME)

W Gwerful Mechain's "Cywydd y Cedor" (Poem of the Vagina), "I Wragedd Eiddigus" (To Jealous Wives), "I'w Gŵr am ei Churo" (To Her Husband, for Beating Her) (MW)

F Margery Kempe's *The Book of Margery Kempe* (ME)

**Week 7. Exemplary Women**

- M Clemence of Barking's *Vie de Caterine* (AN)
- W Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger's *The Virgin Martyr*
- F John Dryden's *Tyrannick Love, or The Royal Martyr*

**Week 8. Animal Fables**

- M Midterm exam *In class: Midterm exam*
- W Marie de France, *Del cok e del gupil* (*The Cock and the Fox*) (AF); Berechiah ha-Nakdan, two fables from *Mishlei Shu'alim* (AH)
- F Geoffrey Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* (ME)

**Week 9. History, Fiction, & Royalty**

- M Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum Britanniae* (Latin)
- W William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Acts 1, 2, & 3
- F William Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Acts 4 & 5

**Week 10. Drama & Performance**

- M *Second Shepherd's Play* (ME)
- W Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*
- F Aphra Behn's *The Rover* *Sunday night: Paper 2 due*

**Week 11. Christianity, the Bible & the Protestant Reformation**

- M Geoffrey Chaucer's *Pardoner's Prologue & Tale* (ME)
- W Excerpts from William Tyndale, Anne Askew, Lady Jane Grey, John Foxe, and Aemilia Lanyer
- F Selections from English Bible translations ranging from Old English to the eighteenth century

**Week 12. Poetry & Love**

- M *Pe Wohunge of Ure Lauerd* (ME); Robert Southwell's "The Burning Babe"; George Herbert's "The Altar," "Easter Wings," and "Love (III)"; Richard Crashaw's "The Flaming Heart"
- W Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* 1, 2, 5, 74; Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti* 1, 34, 75
- F William Shakespeare's *Sonnets* 18, 30, 73, 116, 129, 130; John Donne's "The Flea," "The Canonization," & *Holy Sonnet* 14 *Sunday night: Proposal for diachronic essay due*

**Week 13. The Devil & Evil**

- M *Seinte Iulienne* (ME)
- W John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Book I, lines 1–380; Book II, lines 629–1055; Book III, lines 1–430; Book IV, lines 288–538

F John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Book IX, excerpts; Samuel Johnson, "On Milton and *Paradise Lost*," in *Lives of the Poets*

**Week 14. Travel Narratives**

M *Sir John Mandeville's Travels* (ME)

W Walter Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana*

F Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*

**Week 15. Conclusion**

M Discuss essays as review for final exam

*In class: Diachronic essay due*

*Final exam during exam period*