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## MASTERPIECES OF MEDIIEVAL LITERATURE COURSE GUIDE



Professor Timothy B. Shutt  
KENYON COLLEGE

# Masterpieces of Medieval Literature

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Professor Timothy B. Shutt

Kenyon College



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Masterpieces of  
Medieval Literature  
Professor Timothy B. Shutt



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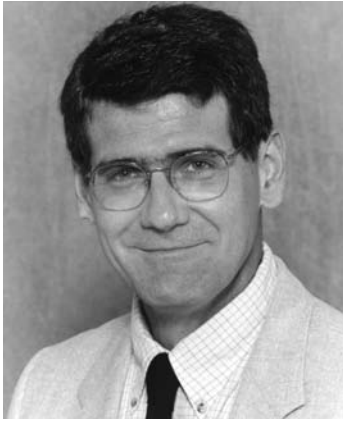
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## Course Syllabus

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### Masterpieces of Medieval Literature

About Your Professor .....	4
Introduction .....	5
Lecture 1 Historical Background .....	6
Lecture 2 The Germanic North .....	11
Lecture 3 The Icelandic Family Sagas .....	16
Lecture 4 <i>Njal's Saga</i> .....	20
Lecture 5 Anglo-Saxon Attitudes .....	24
Lecture 6 <i>Beowulf</i> .....	28
Lecture 7 Anglo-Saxon Poetry .....	31
Lecture 8 The Celtic West: <i>The Lais of Marie de France</i> .....	35
Lecture 9 To the Sunny Southlands: Troubadour Poetry, Chivalry, Knighthood, and the <i>Chanson de Geste</i> .....	39
Lecture 10 The Matter of Arthur .....	44
Lecture 11 Chrétien de Troyes .....	48
Lecture 12 <i>Sir Gawain and the Green Knight</i> .....	52
Lecture 13 Religious Literature .....	56
Lecture 14 The Later Middle Ages .....	60
Course Materials .....	64



## About Your Professor

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### Timothy B. Shutt

For twenty years, Professor Timothy Baker Shutt has taught at Kenyon College, famed for splendid teaching, literary tradition, and unwavering commitment to the liberal arts. No teacher at Kenyon has ever been more often honored, both by the college and by students, for exceptional skills in the classroom and as a lecturer. Professor Shutt's courses in Kenyon's interdisciplinary Integrated Program in Humane Studies and in the Department of English alike are always heavily oversubscribed, and he lectures on Homer, Plato, Aristotle, the Bible, the Greek historians, Virgil, and Dante every year to a packed house.

Shutt is a native of Ohio, raised in Michigan and schooled in Connecticut. During his high school years at the Hotchkiss School, he was honored as an All-American swimmer and devoted much of his time to drama. He majored in English as an undergraduate at Yale ('72). After three years at St. Mark's School of Texas, where he taught English and history and coached swimming, Shutt went on to graduate school in English, specializing in medieval literature and the history of ideas at the University of Virginia as a Du Pont Fellow. After earning his Ph.D. in 1984, Shutt spent two further years at Virginia as a Mellon Post-Doctoral Research Fellow and took a position at Kenyon in 1986, where he has taught happily ever since, deeply enjoying interaction with his students and the peaceful life of the Ohio countryside.

Shutt is a jovial extrovert and a polymath—a born teacher and lecturer—interested in nearly everything and everybody. In the Integrated Program in Humane Studies, he teaches literature, philosophy, history, art history, religious studies, and, at times, the history of science. He has written on military history, baseball, and birding in addition to his academic studies and gives regular talks at the Brown Family Environmental Center at Kenyon on migratory birds and on observational astronomy and the lore of the stars. He also works, when time permits, as a sports announcer for Kenyon football games, and for championship swimming meets nationwide, claiming longtime Detroit Tiger announcer Ernie Harwell as his inspiration. Shutt also travels regularly as a spokesperson for Kenyon, giving talks and lectures on behalf of the college from coast to coast. But his real vocation is reading and the classroom.

## Introduction

The Middle Ages receive bad press. When people hear the term “medieval,” they tend to think of knights and castles on the one hand, and cathedrals and pale ascetics on the other—hard-working monks in the scriptorium, laboring away at manuscripts, ladies fair, and dragons, sure enough. But people also think of ignorance, cruelty, and squalor—fanaticism, poverty, and vast, unbridgeable divisions between rich and poor. The Middle Ages are thought to comprise a series of social and cultural limitations swept away



at last by the Renaissance, and more thoroughly still by the Enlightenment, when sturdy rationalists dissipated the last foggy hollows of medieval superstition and backwardness. All told, it was a time no doubt interesting enough, in its way, if your tastes should run in that direction, but in a world of secularism, science, and high technology—dare we say so?—the Middle Ages are a bit irrelevant, and beyond that, a bit dull.

Having taught medieval literature for thirty years, and before that, having answered as best I could the profound skepticism of even some members of my own family when they heard what I was up to—“You’re studying what?,” they’d ask, with a charitable but rather pained expression, as if I’d told them I’d decided to take up the trade of professional thimble-making. I am well aware of what a tough sell medieval literature can be. And yet, its bad press is in overwhelming measure undeserved (if you want to read something really dull, I can point out some fine candidates from the Renaissance, as a matter of fact). Medieval literature is full of love and magic, monsters and heroes, cosmic yearnings—and cosmic yearnings fulfilled—and careful assessment of pretty much the whole range of social, moral, and personal problems that we confront today.

It is during the Middle Ages that modern Europe, indeed, modern Western culture as we know it, comes to be. Classical Mediterranean culture drew from the ancient Middle East, and more directly, from the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans. The Middle Ages add the Northlands, Celts, and Germans, and ultimately, Slavs as well, to the mix. And the Middle Ages saw the birth of the immediate predecessors of our own ideas about love and marriage as important concerns in their own right, utterly central to a happy and fulfilling personal life. Beyond that, the Middle Ages saw the composition of some of the greatest and most rewarding literary works ever written, the works of Chaucer and Dante no doubt preeminent among them, but by no means are they alone in their surpassing merits. In this course, we will look at some of those other splendid works—*Beowulf*, the little-known, but utterly splendid *Njal’s Saga*, and *Sir Gawain the Green Knight* among them.

## Lecture 1: Historical Background

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Peter Brown's *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*.

We tend to think of the Middle Ages as an age of faith, and as far as it goes, this characterization is by and large a true one. But valuable as it is, even this vision of things is to some degree misleading and embodies several misconceptions. First of all, no one alive at the time thought of the Middle Ages as the Middle Ages. No one could. To think of the Middle Ages as the Middle Ages meant that you had to think of them as in the middle of something, to think of them as having taken place between two other things. And during the Middle Ages, no one did. People didn't start thinking that way until the Renaissance, which means, of course, the "re-birth," and what was reborn during the Renaissance, according to those who named it, was the classical culture, and in particular, the classical, Ciceronian Latin of the high-Roman past. To medieval thinkers, Latin was simply a language that they cheerfully and efficiently adapted to meet their current needs, without paying much attention to high-classical precedent. If they needed a new word, they coined a new word. Renaissance writers, by contrast—or at least some Renaissance writers—took pride in paring the language down to what Cicero might have used. The gain in "purity," if such it was, was counterbalanced at nearly all points by a diminution in utility. But that was a price well worth paying if your aim was to sound as much like Cicero as possible, and to avoid—indeed, to avoid at all costs—"barbarous" neologisms. The result, over the course of three or four centuries, was to kill Latin as a living language and a universal language of European scholarship.

### From the Ruins of the Western Roman Empire

Again—and this took me a long time to figure out—the "Dark Ages" were not literally dark. The sun shone as bright then as now. Indeed, in many areas, it shone brighter, because there was much less air pollution (though a Dark-Age city, few and small as they were, would no doubt have been a major affront to more recent olfactory sensibilities—Dark-Age civic sanitation was, to put the matter charitably, rudimentary).

One final point—the Dark Ages, such as they were, were for the most part confined to what had once been the Western half of the old Roman Empire. The East did quite well, thank you very much.

The darkness lay elsewhere, or, in any case, for the most part lay elsewhere.

The Middle Ages, then, as we think of them, concern predominantly, if not overwhelmingly, what used to be called "Christendom." This is a rather misleading term. It does not mean, as you might expect, "everybody who was Christian." It means, in fact, "everybody who was a Catholic Christian," as opposed to an Orthodox Christian, in the predominantly Greek and

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Slavic-speaking world of the East, and still more, as opposed to a Muslim. It subsumes, in short, Western Europe, what we now think of as France, England, Italy, Spain, and Germany, as various outliers, such as what are now Portugal, Switzerland, Ireland, Scotland, and others. This is where—France and England, perhaps, especially—the Middle Ages as we think of them took place. (Italy was, interestingly enough, both behind and ahead of the curve—Italy was never really medieval in the sense that England and France were, but on the other hand, the Renaissance came earliest and, far and away, most pervasively there.)

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, because the medieval world arose from the ruins of the Western Roman Empire, it centered, of course, on Rome herself. But by the late 300s CE, the Western Empire was in trouble. Precisely why is a question that has exercised historians for centuries, and there is no easy or all-pervasive answer. But certainly a major factor was the so-called “Germanic invasions.” Rome had long felt the pressure from Germanic-speaking tribes from beyond the frontier—Visigoths and Ostrogoths, Burgundians and Vandals, Franks and Lombards and Alemanni. And over the course of the late 300s and 400s, Roman defenses slowly collapsed. In the East, at Adrianople in 378, the Gothic heavy cavalry rode down the emperor Valens, and a generation or so later, in 410, Alaric and the Visigoths sacked Rome herself. To be sure, the Germans themselves were under pressure from, among others, steppe warriors like the Huns. One way or another, though, by the end of the 400s, the Western Empire was no more, with Germanic tribes dominating throughout the region. St. Augustine himself, in fact, writing near the very end of Western antiquity, died while a Vandal army was besieging his own episcopal city of Hippo in what is now North Africa—a long way in every sense from the Vandals’ cool and cloud-bound homeland.

### **The Church**

Meanwhile, though, while Roman political control collapsed, the young Church did what it could to fill in the gaps. Christianity had been legal in the Empire since Constantine’s victory in 312 at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, just outside Rome, Constantine purportedly having learned in a vision that he would conquer under the “Chi Rho” sign of Christ. The Edict of Milan, granting toleration to Christians, followed shortly thereafter, and by the death of Constantine, the Empire was officially Christian. This did not change, by and large, when the Germanic tribes triumphed (save for the fact that they were, at least initially, often “Arian” rather than Catholic Christians, with what came in time to be considered heretical notions about the nature of Christ).

Much of the impulse that had under Roman rule found expression in political life now found expression within the Church, in many instances in monasticism. St. Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480–543) in particular—himself by birth a Roman aristocrat—helped to order and regularize monastic life, and Benedictines to this day live more or less in accordance with his rule, composed about 529.

Despite the efforts of the Church, however, both within the monasteries and beyond, the collapse of the Western Empire saw a pronounced narrowing of cultural horizons, and for all sorts of reasons. Transportation became more



difficult without Roman power to police and maintain roadways. Trade diminished accordingly. The Church aside, large-scale institutions withered away. Urban life contracted almost to the vanishing point, and high culture and learning suffered accordingly. Life became, in virtually all senses, more predominantly rural and more local. And living standards, predictably, declined.

All of these trends were accentuated, for the West at least, by the rise of Islam during the 600s, which in short order exploded from its desert heartland to take over most of the Near East and North Africa and ultimately the Iberian Peninsula as well. Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem—with Byzantium and Rome three of the five primary churches of the Christian world—fell within a generation or so and have remained largely, if not overwhelmingly, Muslim ever since. Under Roman rule, the Mediterranean basin had enjoyed a sort of cultural and economic unity. With the rise of Islam, that unity was shattered, and again, to this day, has yet to return.

Western Europe found itself isolated in a way that it had not been since the conquests of Julius Caesar half a millennium and more before. And this isolation, in its turn, led ever so slowly to a shift in the European center of cultural gravity—from the Mediterranean basin, to nowhere, to the Carolingian Empire, to France, to Italy (again, during the Renaissance), back to France, to England, and beyond. And this shift brought about a slow mixing and melding of cultural traditions. The roots of Western culture lie deep in the past, in the Near East and Egypt, and, famously, among the Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans. Increasingly, though, as time passed, the Germanic and Celtic cultures of the North and West made their contributions. And European culture changed accordingly, so that it was no longer exclusively, or even primarily, Mediterranean—from wine and olives and sheep and goats to beer and beef and milk and cheese, from sunny and warm to cold and cloudy. For good and for ill, things have never been quite the same since.

### **Influences from Antiquity**

Our topic, though, is not so much the Middle Ages themselves as medieval literature, and before beginning that story, it will be worth our while, at least briefly, to look at the written works from antiquity that most influenced medieval writers.

Chief among these was, of course, the Bible, but not the Bible as originally written. For the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament was written predominantly in Hebrew, and the New Testament was written almost entirely, save for a few Aramaic expressions, in koine Greek, the Greek of the Eastern Roman Empire. During the Middle Ages, virtually no one in Western Europe could read either, and as a result, the Bible known to Western Europeans was the Latin translation of St. Jerome, the so-called “Vulgate,” completed between 391–406, and until Vatican II in the 1960s, the official Bible of the Catholic Church. Almost as influential were the writings of the forementioned St. Augustine (354–430), whose *Confessions*, *City of God*, and study of the Trinity gained a particularly wide readership. Also widely read and influential was *The Consolation of Philosophy*, written by the learned Roman aristocrat Boethius (480–524) as he was awaiting execution (on false charges) at the hands of the otherwise capable Theodoric the Ostrogoth, currently ruling in

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Italy. Two secular authors as well had a deep and rich influence on Christian posterity—Virgil and Ovid, authors of the *Aeneid* and the *Metamorphoses*, respectively. Both of which found wide use in medieval schools and, contrary to what one might expect, within the monasteries that did so much to preserve what has come down to us from the high classical past.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. How did the culture of the Middle Ages differ from that of the Classical part?
2. What Classical authors were most influential in shaping the literary sensibility of the Middle Ages?

### Suggested Reading

Brown, Peter. *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*. Second edition. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003.

### Other Books of Interest

Hollister, C. Warren, and Judith Bennett. *Medieval Europe: A Short History*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001.

Irvine, Martin, ed. *The Making of Textual Culture: Grammatica and Literary Theory 350–1100*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

## Lecture 2: The Germanic North

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are Snorri Sturluson's *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson: Tales from Norse Mythology* and Tacitus's *The Agricola and the Germania*.

So who were these Germanic tribes, and what was their vision of things like? Well, in one sense, at least, their world is very familiar. In many ways, it was the world of J.R.R. Tolkien, whose academic specialty was the old North. Elves, dwarves, and dragons, even orcs, all make their appearance in old Germanic literature (though hobbits, as it happens, do not—they are, as I take it, Tolkien's slightly cutified version of the English, as Tolkien's "Shire" is assuredly England). The Narnia tales of C.S. Lewis likewise draw heavily on the worldview of the old North.

### The Germans

And it was the incursions of the Germanic tribes that more than any other single factor put an end to the Western Roman Empire and in the process began the series of cultural developments that would lead to the medieval world and, ultimately, insofar as we are ourselves the cultural heirs of the Middle Ages, to our own. The Germans make very nearly their first historical appearance in the works of Julius Caesar, though they had presumably been living in the Northlands, near the Baltic, for centuries, if not, indeed, millennia before. Their homeland, though, was by and large beyond the purview of the early Classical world. In his conquest of Gaul, in effect modern France, Caesar encountered from beyond the Rhine warrior tribes that seemed even bigger, fiercer, and more primitive than the Gaulish Celts against whom he fought. Caesar's own attention was directed for the most part elsewhere, but his successors chose to engage the Germans head-on, and, at least briefly, Rome established an incipient province of "Germania," comprising most of what was once West Germany. In 9 CE, however, a Roman-trained German leader known to us in Latin as Arminius Germanicus (the name translates wonderfully as "Hermann the German"), caught two Roman legions on the march in what is now north-western Germany and annihilated them. The Romans withdrew to the Rhine line, and never again made a serious attempt at conquest. The landscape in Germany didn't much appeal to them anyway. Heavy soil and dark, seemingly endless forests, nasty weather, and ferocious, if chronically undisciplined warriors—a conquest hardly seemed worth the trouble. But the Germans were, if nothing else, anthropologically interesting, and the earliest extensive account of the Germans comes from the hand of the celebrated Roman historian, Tacitus (ca. 56–117), whose father-in-law was a Roman governor in Britain during the mid-to-late first century. Tacitus' *Germania* in particular, completed just before the beginning of the second century, was especially—and damagingly—cherished by the Third Reich as the fullest surviving evocation of early Germanic culture. Rather like Montaigne in his famous essay on cannibals, Tacitus has ulterior motives in evoking the virtues of the German tribes. His

hope is thereby to rebuke the reigning vices of Rome. But even so, he has a good deal to say about the Germans.

They were, in the first instance, brave, almost suicidally brave, and in love with warfare, which was, for a man, the quickest and surest route to prestige and power. They were, from a Roman perspective, big, pale, ugly, and stupid, in many cases with disturbingly long blondish hair. They were loyal to a fault. The expectation seemed to be that the members of a warrior band would fight to the death with their chosen leader—who had in turn rewarded them with gifts and plunder, above all with rings, at least in a later Old English context (hence, of course, *The Lord of the Rings*, though the rings in question, at least early on, were generally worn like bracelets on the upper arm—bicep bracelets, in effect). Generosity was important. Kinship was important. Honor, or something very like it, was important, which meant, in conjunction with the Germans' characteristically fluid political arrangements, that revenge and interpersonal and inter-group violence were endemic. And from a Roman perspective, women were important. Women, in fact, were amazingly important and amazingly influential, as is amply attested from surviving early Northern literature as well. The Germans did some farming, but more herding, and again from a Roman perspective, they ate a great deal of meat—perfectly understandable considering the climate—and drank, to exuberant excess, what the Romans regarded as a more or less undrinkable grain-based swill, a thoroughly miserable substitute for wine and water that has come to be known as beer.

The Romans found their languages hard going—the Germans were as yet functionally illiterate—though from the surviving vestiges scholars have managed to trace out a family tree of sorts. There was, presumably, a proto-Germanic branching off from Indo-European roots that soon enough split in turn into East Germanic, West Germanic, and North Germanic. Of East Germanic and Gothic, not very much survives, but the descendants of North and West Germanic are very much alive to the present day. From North Germanic, we have Old Norse (in effect, Old Norwegian) and Old Icelandic—very similar indeed—and the various modern languages of Scandinavia: Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Icelandic, of which Icelandic remains closest to its roots. From West Germanic, we have, among others, Old and Middle English, Middle High German, and modern Dutch, Flemish, and Frisian, to say nothing of modern German and English (the last resolutely Germanic in its basic vocabulary and structure, but altered by a huge influx of French, Latin, and even Greek words).

Despite the testimony of Tacitus and others, though, the bulk of what we know about the world and worldview of the old North comes from Old Icelandic. The Icelanders were the last of the Germanic groups to accept Christianity, so the old beliefs held on there longest, and for a variety of reasons, which we will address more closely later on, the Icelanders were, by medieval standards, a highly literate culture. So it is above all to Iceland that we must look for what remains of Norse mythology and for much old poetry as well.

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## The Twilight of the Gods

The Icelandic poetry that has come down to us appears for the most part in two forms. One is what is known as “skaldic” poetry—the poetry, that is to say, of the “Skald,” or “shaper,” of the professional or semi-professional poet. To an outsider, skaldic poetry is almost impenetrably strange stuff—an immensely sophisticated, almost overwrought, poetic form. Its art depended in large part on the deft use of what are called “kennings,” semi-standardized mini-metaphors, like “gannet’s bath” or “whale-road” for “ocean.” In skaldic poetry, more often than not, these appear in such profusion that the literal meaning of a given poem is all but nonsensical. You have to know the code to make much sense of what is being said. It gives one pause to think of the Vikings as given to a mode of poetry that seems to have valued above all a kind of ornate dexterity and obliqueness, but that seems in fact to have been the case. On that account, though, however highly valued at the time, skaldic poetry is for moderns very much an acquired taste.

The case stands otherwise, however, with the sort of poetry that appears in the *Elder*, or *Poetic Edda*, upon which much of our knowledge of Norse mythology depends. This poetry makes far less use of kennings and approaches far more closely something not unlike ordinary (if admittedly allusive) narration. It is not particularly hard to follow. And it makes use of an alliterative meter—a meter depending upon the line-by-line repetition of initial stressed sounds—which seems to have been more or less common currency throughout the Northlands. Old English meter, Old Saxon meter, and Old High German meter are all very similar.

The most interesting of the lays appearing in the *Poetic Edda* is perhaps the “*Völuspá*,” or the “Seeress’s Prophecy,” most likely composed, so we are told, late in the 900s and drawing upon traditions dating to many centuries before. Here Odin, the father of the gods, interrogates the seeress about what is past and what is to come. This poem is a primary source for old Norse views about the creation, about the *Æsir* and the *Vanir*, the Norse gods, about the World-Ash Tree, *Yggdrasil*, about Loki and the death of Baldr, about the valkyries, or the “choosers of the slain,” and about Valhall, or Valhalla, where chosen heroes and gods await the final assault upon Asgar from Jotunheim, or “Giant-home,” the realm of the giants. This assault, in its turn, will lead to Ragnarök, the end of the world as we know it—it will lead to what Richard Wagner termed in his own operatic “Ring Cycle” the “*Götterdämmerung*,” the very “twilight of the gods.”

Likewise interesting and influential is the *Prose Edda* (or *Snorra-Edda*) of Snorri Sturluson (1179–1241). The last two parts of Snorri’s *Edda* are concerned with poetic diction and meter, but the first, the so-called *Gylfaginning*, or *Deluding of Gylfi*, contains the fullest early account that we have of Norse mythology and the Norse Gods. Snorri draws heavily upon the traditions, and indeed, many of the poems that appear in the *Elder Edda*, but his prose account of Thor, and Frey, and Freyja, and the rest is, by the nature of the case, less fragmentary and a good deal easier to follow.

Many of the other poems in the *Elder Edda* concern the cycle of legends that centers upon the exploits of Sigurd the Dragon-slayer, and his family—the tales that formed the mythological basis not only for Richard Wagner’s

“Ring Cycle” ( in which Sigurd appears as “Siegfried”), but also for the Middle High German Nibelungenlied and the Old Icelandic *Saga of the Volsungs*, or *Volsungasaga*. Despite the relatively late date of the surviving witnesses—none dates earlier, or very much earlier, than the Christian conversions in the North—these tales of bloodshed, revenge, and passion convey more clearly than any other the old heroic ethic of the Germans. And indeed, for good and for ill, more recent Germans have at times valued them for just that reason. It is no accident that the final defensive line of Imperial Germany in World War I was named for Siegfried, nor, perhaps even less so, that the Third Reich looked back with nostalgia upon their reconstruction of the pagan German past.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. How did the culture of the Germanic tribes of the North differ from that of the Romans?
2. What are the major literary sources for Norse and old Germanic mythology?

### Suggested Reading

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Sturluson, Snorri. *The Prose Edda of Snorri Sturluson: Tales from Norse Mythology*. Trans. Jean I. Young. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966.

Tacitus. *The Agricola and the Germania*. Trans. H. Mattingly and S.A. Handford. New York: Penguin, 1970.

### Other Books of Interest

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Anonymous. *The Nibelungenlied*. Trans. Arthur Thomas Hatto. New York: Penguin, 1970.

———. *The Saga of the Volsungs*. Trans. Jesse L. Byock. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Larrington, Carolyne, ed. *The Poetic Edda*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.



## Lecture 3: The Icelandic Family Sagas

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Robert Kellogg's (ed.) *The Sagas of Icelanders*.

Among the unquestioned masterpieces of medieval literature are the greatest of the Icelandic sagas, the best of which will stand comparison with the most distinguished works of any time and place. There is nothing quite like them—or like the strange isolated culture that developed on the bleak island which saw their birth—in medieval times or in any other time. To the extent that the culture depicted in the sagas reminds me of anything at all, in fact, it recalls, however distantly, some aspects at least of the culture of the nineteenth-century high-plains American West. You see in the sagas the same isolation, the same touchy pride, something like the same sporadic and brutal violence, the same sort of concern for the law, and the same sort of difficulty in enforcing it. But real-live cattle barons and cowpokes left, on their own behalf, nothing like the saga legacy.

### Iceland

Iceland lay uninhabited and all but unknown until late in the ninth century, when the first colonists arrived from what is now Norway in about 870. Their only predecessors were a few—a very few—Irish monks who had found their way there seeking utter isolation, if not indeed death, by setting to sea in tiny boats to land, if at all, wherever God willed. They caused the Viking immigrants no trouble. According to their own later accounts of the matter, the Icelanders-to-be came seeking freedom, or came at least seeking to avoid the growing power of King Harald Fair-Hair, who was bent on consolidating his power back home in Norway. And they came in some numbers. Within a few generations, they numbered in the tens of thousands at least, Norwegians mostly, with a large admixture of people captured and enslaved or enthralled in raids on Ireland. Their culture was distinctive from the very outset.

Iceland is a big island—the size of West Virginia, more or less—but much of the center is glacier-covered and uninhabitable. The Icelanders settled along the coast. And even with the moderating influence of the Gulfstream and the milder climate of the time, agriculture was marginal at best. The island was, and is, almost treeless, and raising grain was very difficult, hardly worth the effort, in fact. What you could raise easily was livestock, and it was upon livestock—and fish and sea-birds—that the Icelanders depended. There were no cities. There was no king or aristocracy. There were instead farmers—or ranchers—some more prosperous, some less, and, lower on the social scale, laborers and thralls. That was it. Nonetheless, the Icelanders ruled themselves by law, and the leaders of the society met annually during high summer, from 930 on at Thingvellir in western Iceland for the legislative assembly they termed the Althing. Here, before literacy came with Christianity, a designated “law-speaker” would recite the laws from memory, one-third of them

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each year, and cases of one sort or another would be brought to court. Icelandic law was elaborate and respected, but the government, such as it was, suffered from a near-fatal difficulty. The Icelanders had a legislative branch and could make law. They had a judicial branch to adjudicate. What they lacked was an executive branch to enforce the law, and what they lacked in particular was anything resembling a police force. As a result, offenders were characteristically fined or outlawed. The problem arose with outlawry. In theory, an outlaw lay outside legal protection. If an outlaw were killed, no legal compensation could be claimed. Outlaws were supposed, in fact, to leave Iceland, either for three years or forever, depending upon the offense. But only their enemies could make them do it—or kill them if they didn't. And often enough that started a cycle of killing all over again. Such disputes and the ensuing feuds are the characteristic subject matter of the most distinctive of the sagas.

### The Sagas

To be sure, not all of the sagas concern such matters. Some, the so-called *fornaldersögur*, depicted the legendary past, among them, of course, the *Volsunga* saga.

Some, the *ridðarasögur*, were in effect retellings of traditional classical tales and chivalric tales. The *konungasögur*, many appearing in the *Heimskringla* attributed to Snorri, told the life stories of Norwegian kings. And a few dealt with near-contemporary events. The Icelanders also wrote what we would think of as short stories, and some are very good indeed. Most distinctive, though, and generally considered the best, are the so-called “family sagas,” or *Íslendinga sögur*, of which about forty have survived.

These are historical or semi-historical, written for the most part during the 1200s, and they generally concern themselves with events taking place two or three hundred years before. How historical they are is disputed. The Icelanders did in fact write more or less straight historical accounts, particularly of the process of settlement. The *Íslendingabók* and the *Landnámabók* come to mind as examples, and the sagas seem by and large to be less historical than they. My own guess, for what it is worth, is that they are about as accurate as the story of, say, George Washington or Abraham Lincoln would be if we pieced together from memory what we recalled. And in fact the sagas seem to serve the same sort of memorial purpose. That is not, though, what is most noteworthy and admirable about them.

### A Unique Sensibility

They are almost unique in their time as extensive prose narratives. Medieval writers far more often chose to tell stories in verse, and other long prose works, like the Old French Vulgate Arthurian cycle and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, are contemporaneous or later. Neither work remotely like the sagas in terms of narrative strategy or style. For the sagas are notably, indeed bracingly, straightforward and understated in style. I remember to this day the first time that I picked one up, right after my first year in college. It was *Njal's Saga*, the greatest and noblest of them all, and it could hardly begin in a more terse and deadpan way—“There was a man named Mord.” Well, there we are. My initial impression was that this was the sort of straight,

unadorned style that Hemingway had worked so hard (and in my view, so misleadingly) to achieve. Here, though, it was done without effort, certainly without apparent effort. And the style is consistent, to an astonishing degree, throughout the sagas. No striving for effect, no frills or flourishes—just the story, plain and tall. To me, and to many other readers, the effect is deeply exhilarating and in almost moral terms. The style says, “We do not flinch; we are not trying to impress; we simply take things the way they come and then deal with them as best we can.” And the tales that follow bear that out. That really does seem to have been a hallmark of Icelandic culture.

Why this unique mode of prose narration, and indeed, this unique sensibility, developed when and where it did has long been a topic of dispute, and there are no absolutely agreed answers. The Icelanders were independent-minded and precociously literate, or in any case—and very surprisingly—literacy seems in Iceland to have extended much further down the social scale than elsewhere in Europe at the time. And, as my own mentor in things Icelandic, Robert Kellogg, pointed out, the Icelanders during the winter had a lot of time on their hands. Iceland lies just south of the Arctic Circle, and winter nights are long. Beyond that, they had lots of vellum. They had lots of livestock, much of which had to be slaughtered in the fall, Icelandic winters being what they are, so there was lots of writing material lying more or less ready to hand. Beyond that, who’s to say? But we can all enjoy and admire the results.

In the next lecture, we will take a closer look at *Njal’s Saga*, one of the greatest, if regrettably least-read, prose works in the Western canon. By all means, read it if you can. But *Njal’s Saga*, superb and well-crafted as it is, by no means stands alone. *Egil’s Saga*, or in Icelandic, *Egil’s Saga Skallagrímssonar*, about a ferocious poet-outlaw, stands worthily beside *Njal*, and so too does the widely esteemed *Laxdæla Saga*, or *The Saga of the People of Laxardale*. The shorter *Saga of Hrafnkel, Frey’s Godi*, is a terse and well-focused masterpiece. The two Greenland sagas, *Eirik the Red’s Saga* and *The Saga of the Greenlanders*, are perhaps less accomplished in a literary sense but are fascinating all the same for what they reveal about Norse voyages to America. My personal favorite, *Njal* aside, is *Grettir’s Saga*, the saga of a fierce and conflicted strongman who purportedly survived longer under “full” or for-life outlawry than any other Icelander before or since, falling victim in the end to, among other weaknesses, his uncontrollable fear of the dark. And better still is a jewel-like short story, Audun’s *Thattir*, or “The Tale of Audun,” from the West Fjords, an Icelandic reconception of Jesus’ parable concerning the “pearl of great price,” in which the “pearl” becomes a polar bear, which Audun decides to give as a gift to the king of Denmark. All reward and repay careful reading.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What is the characteristic subject matter of the Iceland “family sagas”?
2. How do the family sagas differ from other contemporary literary works?
3. What factors might help to account for the precocious development of accomplished prose narrative in medieval Iceland?

### Suggested Reading

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Kellogg, Robert, ed. *The Sagas of Icelanders*. Preface Jane Smiley. New York: Penguin, 2001.

### Other Books of Interest

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Asmundarson, Grettir. *Grettir's Saga*. Trans. Denton Fox and Hermann Pálsson. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974.

## Lecture 4: *Njal's Saga*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Robert Cook's translation of *Njal's Saga* by an anonymous author.

*Njal's Saga*—composed by an anonymous author of stunning brilliance some time about 1280, and dealing with events taking place from roughly 940 to 1020—strikingly embodies one of the rarest and most demanding modes of literary excellence. So far as can be told, the author composed no other surviving works, though I must confess it would not surprise me to learn that the tale of Audun came from the same hand—it is almost equally good, and good, beyond that, in much the same way. For what both works embody, small-scale and large-scale respectively, is what critics would term a sort of “architectonic” perfection. That is to say, they are organized with an almost frightening tightness and deftness. The only large-scale rivals I can think of that compare to *Njal* in this regard are Dante's *Commedia*, the Middle English *Gawain* and *Pearl* (of which more anon), and the *Aeneid*, and, perhaps, *Tom Jones*. The saga writer's achievement is all the more astounding because, on a first reading, at least, the tale seems governed entirely by the internal flow of events. It seems at times even haphazard. Only after the fact do you realize that, at every moment, the author is utterly in control, and the work has been crafted from beginning to end to underscore certain thematic points. It is intricately and minutely patterned, but as you read, it doesn't feel patterned. It feels, or feels to me at least, like life. That is high-level work. Art concealing art.

### The Merits of *Njal's Saga*

But architectonics is by no means the only merit of *Njal's Saga*. It tells a great story. It is full of great characters, indeed, of unforgettable characters, all vividly evoked not so much through description as through their own portrayed words and actions. And it addresses themes of abiding importance and addresses them with a calm, seemingly dispassionate, wisdom and bite.

Its fundamental theme is the containment of violence—a theme of profound relevance not only to the Icelandic world that the author depicts, but to the world in which he lived, and he begins on the periphery of the events that, as things transpire, will form the primary actions of his tale. Right at the outset of the story we are introduced to a young girl, “tall and beautiful, with hair as fine as silk and so abundant that it came down to her waist,” and her father is understandably proud of her. Her uncle, however, is less impressed. “The girl is quite beautiful,” he concedes, and notes that “many will pay for that.” But “what I don't know,” he concludes, “is how the eyes of a thief have come into our family” (3–4). And sure enough, by the end of the story, the beautiful and imperious Hallgerd has seen three husbands to their deaths, the last of them Gunnar of Hlidarendi, a mild-mannered man who is nonetheless the greatest and most formidable warrior in Iceland, brought down by a series of events

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that begins when Hallgerd sends one of her minions to steal a bit of butter and cheese from the household of one of Gunnar's enemies.

In one sense, Hallgerd's problem is straightforward enough. She is, as she herself claims, a descendant of "Sigurd Fafnisbani" (29), that is, Sigurd the slayer of the dragon Fafnir—the hero of the *Saga of the Volsungs* and the most celebrated Germanic hero of them all. And she runs true to type, for we are told in the *Volsungasaga* itself that "the descendants of Volsung," Sigurd among them, are distinguished from others not only by their strength and courage, but by their ambition and their "desire to win" (37). So too Hallgerd. So most emphatically Hallgerd, in fact, and on just that account, she will tolerate no rebuke to her pride and will not honor "any settlement" (62). She operates, in other words, entirely outside the law.

Hallgerd's antithesis within the story is the self-controlled and peace-loving Njal. The author here toys with a strange flexion of gender roles. The ferocious Hallgerd, despite her irresistibly feminine sex appeal and beauty, embodies many traditionally masculine, warrior-like traits, and as she gleefully and maliciously points out, "Old Beardless" Njal is, life-long, as clear-chinned as a boy. Njal is, however, "so well versed in the law" that he has "no equal" in Iceland. So the polarities are set, and over the course of three generations, an interrelated series of devastating conflicts play themselves out.

This is not the place to trace through their intricately balanced complexities—though intricately balanced and complex they most assuredly are. The tale, in effect, begins with an escalating killing duel between Hallgerd and Njal's wife, Bergthora, which very nearly destroys the friendship of Njal and Gunnar, and comes close to killing them both. Only the magnanimity of Njal—and finally and decisively of Gunnar—saves them. Gunnar, at last, simply refuses to respond, legally or otherwise, and accepts his losses when the logical next step in the feud would be for him to kill Njal's sons.

The same sort of pattern plays out on a larger scale in the remainder of the work, when Njal's self-sacrificing decision not to resist when his enemies come to burn him in his house after his sons have been goaded into a particularly heinous killing leads finally to an abatement of the violence, though even this abatement takes years to work itself out.

## **Reconciliations**

The point seems to be that only transcending the law makes the law work—only a willingness on the part of a noble someone, whomever that might be, not to respond to ills and injuries by retaliating. It is, accordingly, no accident that the thematic centerpiece of the saga is an interpolated and lightly edited account of the Christianization of Iceland, for it is precisely those who are willing to return good, or in any case, neutrality, for evil who prove capable of stopping the endemic violence that had for so long characterized the unruly society of Iceland.

All this is suggested, though, with the very lightest of hands. The author never preaches, never comes remotely close to preaching. He simply narrates and lets the events—and their balanced and patterned narration—speak for him. The events speak clearly, though. Taking the conversion account as a centerpiece, the reconciliation of Njal and Gunnar after the

killing feud of their wives is precisely balanced by the reconciliation of the man who oversaw Njal's burning and Njal's son-in-law, who avenged it, at the very conclusion of the work. The death of Njal and the death of Gunnar are likewise balanced, and so too, in great detail and on a smaller scale, are a good many less decisive, but still significant, events. This is a writer who knows his work, and if I have praised *Njal's Saga* highly, I have most assuredly not praised it lightly. It is, or so more than thirty years of rereading have convinced me, every bit as good as I say it is.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What are the central themes of *Njal's Saga*?
2. In what senses can Njal and Hallgerd be considered antithetical characters?

### Suggested Reading

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Anonymous. *Njal's Saga*. Trans. Robert Cook. New York: Penguin, 2001.

### Other Books of Interest

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Anonymous. *Njal's Saga*. Trans. Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Pálsson. New York: Penguin, 1966.



## Lecture 5: Anglo-Saxon Attitudes

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are Bede's *A History of the English Church and People* and Kevin Crossley-Holland's *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology*.

The earliest recorded inhabitants of what is now England were Celts, speaking a predecessor of what we know now as Welsh, and the now-extinct language of Cornish. Archaeology suggests that the area was inhabited long before the Celts arrived, but of those earlier inhabitants, the builders of Stonehenge among them, we have no literary record. During his conquest of Gaul (in effect, what is now France), Julius Caesar briefly sortied in Britain, in part because, as he records, the *de facto* headquarters of the Druids—the influential priestly leaders of Gauls and ancient Britons alike—lay on the isle of Anglesy, off the northwest coast of what is now Wales.

### Warlike Peoples

But Caesar did not long remain, and it was another century until the Romans returned in force, under the nominal leadership of the Emperor Claudius (of *I, Claudius* fame), who oversaw the conquest of what are now England and Wales during the 40s CE. The Roman conquest did not go uncontested—Queen Boudicca of the Iceni led a fierce rebellion, or resistance movement, in the early 60s—but by the turn of the century, if not before, Britannia had become the relatively peaceful, if bleak and isolated, Roman province that it was to remain for three centuries more. The Romans made no effort to conquer Ireland, and though they made sorties into what is now Scotland, they decided that on balance the heather and the Highlands weren't worth the military effort they would cost to subdue, so though the border fluctuated a bit, it remained fixed for the most part at the line marked by Hadrian's wall, constructed during the 100s.

As the pressure from the Germanic tribes on the Roman borders began to mount, however, Rome was forced to devote its attention to dealing with problems closer to home, and in 410, the year in which Alaric sacked Rome, Rome was forced to withdraw the legions that had heretofore protected Britannia from incursions. The Britons continued their appeals for military help until the mid-400s, but Rome had other matters to attend to, and the legions never returned. Our primary source for the years to follow is *The History of the English Church and People*, completed by about 731 by the Venerable Bede (673–735), who lived and worked on the North Sea coast in the monastery at Wearmouth and Jarrow.

According to Bede, it was in 449 that “King Vortigern” invited the first of the Angles and the Saxons across the North Sea to help him out with his military difficulties. They reportedly did so, and so Bede continues, sent word back to their homeland that “the country was fertile and the Britons cowardly.” Their

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continental countrymen evidently took the hint, and Angles, Saxons, and Jutes came in numbers. The Jutes, from Jutland, or mainland Denmark, settled, so we are told, in Kent and in and around the Isle of Wight. From a bit further south on the North Sea coast came the Angles, who settled in what is now East Anglia, and from further south still came the Saxons, who settled in the south and southwest, in Essex, Sussex, Wessex, and environs. All were ethnically German, not Celtic, and unlike the largely Christian Britons, they worshipped the old gods. The result appears to have been two or three generations of intermittent warfare, which at last confined the Britons by and large to Wales and Cornwall, where they were known to the Angles and Saxons as the “foreigners” or the “Welsh.”

At some point early in 500s, so we are told, the Britons for a generation or so mounted a successful counteroffensive under the leadership of one “Ambrosius Aurelianus,” who may or may not have been the historical prototype of King Arthur (of whom we will hear a good deal more in a later lecture).

But the Anglo-Saxons remained pagans, speaking their native Saxon or “Anglish” until in 597 Pope Gregory the Great dispatched a Christianizing mission, centered at Canterbury in Kent. The Anglo-Saxons, by all accounts, were every bit as grim and warlike as their continental counterparts, and you would not think, on the face of things, that they would be easy to convert. According to Bede, though, the conversion was a good deal smoother than might have been anticipated. A famous anecdote concerning the mission of Paulinus to King Edwin of Northumbria suggests why. Paulinus has made his pitch, and King Edwin, good Germanic ruler that he is, invites his advisors to make their comments. One responds by comparing “the present life of man on earth” to the flight of a sparrow through a well-lit feasting hall—warm and secure once inside, but menaced before and afterward by the winter cold and dark. “Even so,” Edwin’s retainer continues, we appear on earth “for a little while” but “of what went before” or “of what follows, we know nothing.” Therefore, he concludes, if Christian teaching offers something better, “we should follow it.” And so eventually they did.

### **A Grim Worldview**

Even after they accepted Christianity, however, the worldview of the Anglo-Saxons remained grim. Life wasn’t easy in the cold, dark North, and the Anglo-Saxons never forgot it. As the great lyric, *The Wanderer*, puts it, “Everything is difficult on the kingdom of earth” (106). The Anglo-Saxons were masters of many crafts; as shipwrights, as smiths, and gold workers their work was superb. But characteristically, they did not build in stone, and the ruins of Roman roads and architecture were an enduring and highly visible testimony of cultural decline. They had an acute sense of living in the shadow of cultures richer and more sophisticated than their own, pervasive sense of what we might anachronistically term “entropy”—a deep-rooted sense that the intrinsic tendency of things was to fall apart and that even to hold your own, however briefly, took all the effort that you could muster.

All of these tendencies find eloquent expression in perhaps the greatest of Old English lyrics, the aforementioned *Wanderer*. The poem focuses on the plight of a man in an open ship on a winter sea, a man whose lord and people have fallen victim to the intergroup strife that so beset the old Germanic world.

The poet compares the plight of the “wanderer” in a broader sense to that of all humans, confined as we are in a world of suffering, cut off, for now at least, from our final, heavenly home. The opening lines of the poem evoke its flavor. Here is the translation of Kevin Crossley-Holland.

Often the wanderer pleads for pity  
and mercy from the Lord; but for a long time,  
sad in mind, he must dip his oars  
into icy waters, the lanes of the sea;  
he must follow the paths of exile: fate is inflexible.

Or to render the final comment in slightly different terms, “fate will be entirely fulfilled.”

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. What are the leading characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon vision of things?
2. How did the Anglos, Saxons, and Jutes find their way to what is now England?

### Suggested Reading

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Bede. *A History of the English Church and People*. Trans. Leo Sherley-Price and Rev. R.E. Latham. New York: Penguin, 1970.

Crossley-Holland, Kevin, ed. *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

### Other Books of Interest

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Cassidy, Frederic G., and Richard N. Ringler. *Bright's Old English Grammar and Reader*. Third edition. New York: Holt, 1971.

## Lecture 6: *Beowulf*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*, translated by Howell D. Chickering, Jr.

The most ambitious surviving Old-English poem, and the only surviving Old-English epic, is *Beowulf*—the tale of a great Northern hero who overcomes monsters in his youth, and in his old age dies, having given his life to overcome a dragon. Considering the merits of the poem and its familiarity in recent times, it is perhaps surprising to learn that it survived the Middle Ages in only a single manuscript, *Ms. Cotton Vitellius A.xv*, collected by the Elizabethan Sir Robert Cotton after the dissolution of the English monasteries under Henry VIII. Even that unique manuscript was damaged to some extent in a 1731 fire, and the first edition of *Beowulf* was not published until 1815, a thousand years or more after it was composed at some time around 750.

### The World of *Beowulf*

It was composed, then, a hundred and fifty years or so after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons, drawing upon traditions dating to well before their migration to Britain. *Beowulf*'s own lord, Hygelac, for instance, is evidently a historical figure, evidently killed around 520. *Beowulf* himself (and Hygelac with him) is a Geat (pronounced “Yate”), a member of a group living in what is now southern Sweden, and the early part of the story takes place for the most among the Danes. And yet, in this Old-English context, *Beowulf* is not treated as a “foreign” hero—the underlying sense of cultural unity is unquestioned. Within the poem, in fact, what differentiates the world of *Beowulf* from the implied world of the poet is not language or culture—in that sense he clearly seems “one of us,” even though he is a Geat rather than an Angle or a Saxon. It is, rather, religion, for hero though he is, *Beowulf* is a pagan, and the poet, most clearly, is not.

Traditionally, in fact, *Beowulf* was often taught as if an intrusive Christian scribe had stepped in and messed up a perfectly good pagan hero story. Many of my students still first learn about *Beowulf* in that way. My own reading, though, is different. What I see instead is a Christian author to whom the recent pagan past is still very much alive, in memory if not in practice, who seeks to reappropriate and revalue the virtues of his pagan predecessors in a Christian context. The situation reminds me at times of the situation of those Americans with Confederate veterans as ancestors—soldiers who, often enough, fought heroically for their cause and people, as they saw things, despite what from a modern perspective might be the moral ambiguity of their convictions. What, if anything, are we to value in their actions from our own quite different perspective? That is the question which, in his own way, the *Beowulf* poet faces as well in dealing with the pagan past.

And his answer is, “a great deal.” The young *Beowulf*, at least, is about as close to perfect, in his context, as a human being can be. Not only does he

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repay—and more than repay—a debt of honor to old King Hrothgar of the Danes, who once helped out Beowulf's father in a time of need, in killing the monstrous Grendel and Grendel's mother, Beowulf rids the Danes of a homicidal plague that has crippled them for years. But beyond that, he proves himself entirely loyal and trustworthy as a retainer. Hrothgar hints, after having seen Beowulf's prowess in action, that Beowulf would make a superb king. But Beowulf does not take advantage of the situation in Denmark—where Hrothgar is old and his sons are young. Nor does he later take advantage of the situation back home in Geatland, where soon enough Beowulf's own king—and uncle—Hygelac is killed, leaving only Hygelac's young son to replace him. The Geats, we are told, go so far as to ask Beowulf to take the throne, but he refuses, acting as regent for his young cousin as long as he lives, and only then accepting the kingship on his own behalf.

As a king in his own right, Beowulf rules well, so we are told, “for fifty winters.”

But then, when he is old, one of his subjects disturbs a dragon, which, in the way of disturbed dragons, goes on a rampage. Beowulf has to fight the beast to protect his people, if for no other reason, and he gathers his closest retainers, old as he is, and sets out to complete the task—in the first instance, alone, as he long ago fought Grendel and Grendel's mother. This time, though, he is not up to the task, and when they see their lord in trouble, all but one of Beowulf's followers take to their heels. Only his young relative Wiglaf comes to his aid. And together, though with difficulty, they manage to kill the dragon—and then the fatally wounded Beowulf expires.

The Geats are in trouble, and they know it. They have plenty of enemies—Swedes, Franks, and Frisians, among others—and when word gets out about their disgraceful performance against the dragon, none of their enemies will be much intimidated. And sure enough—you can go to Sweden or Denmark, and you can even go Frisia or the land of Franks, but you cannot go to Geatland, because Geatland is no more. The Geats have good reason to be worried.

### **Beowulf and Christianity**

The larger point, though, seems to be this: what, under the pagan conditions evoked in the poem, is the best we can hope for? Beowulf is certainly as good a leader as we are likely to get, and what can he give us? The answer appears to be fifty good years. The plot line of *Beowulf* accordingly mirrors what we saw in the tale of Bede's sparrow—things are grim, things are good for a while, and again things are grim. So for the sparrow. So for the Geats. And so, the poet implies, for the pagan world in general, even under the leadership of a hero as admirable as Beowulf.

Beowulf can defeat the malice of Grendel, he can keep the Swedes at bay. But the dragon is too much for him. Age and weakness, the fundamental order of things, the sheer entropic limitedness of our world—in the long term, no one can defeat that, even if, like Beowulf, we have the strength of thirty in our hand-grip.

And hence, too, as in *The Wanderer*, the implied comparison. Beowulf is a great hero. As great as his culture allows. But Christ, so the poet implies, has more to give—not just fifty years, but an eternity of bliss.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. In what sense does *Beowulf* celebrate the values of old North and the Anglo-Saxon past?
2. In what sense does *Beowulf* suggest the limitation of those values?

### Suggested Reading

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Anonymous. *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*. Howell D. Chickering, Jr. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 2006.

### Other Books of Interest

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Anonymous. *Beowulf*. Trans. and notes E. Talbot Donaldson. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975.

## Lecture 7: Anglo-Saxon Poetry

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Kevin Crossley-Holland's *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology*.

*Beowulf* and *The Wanderer* by no means exhaust the riches of Anglo-Saxon poetry, and before heading southward in our next lectures, I'd like to take a look at two further poems of exceptional merit, the *Dream of the Rood* and the *Battle of Maldon*.

### ***Dream of the Rood***

The *Dream of the Rood* (or "of the Cross") is a poem that dates at least in part to shortly after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. Some lines, in any case, appear carved on the so-called "Ruthwell Cross" in southern Scotland, which apparently dates to about 700. The full text appears in the so-called "Vercelli Book," dating as a manuscript to about 880, and discovered, as the name suggests, at Vercelli on a pilgrim route to Rome through the Alps. Part of it appears again on an old reliquary in Brussels. And this last is significant, because the *Dream of the Rood* is in some strong sense connected with the veneration of the "True Cross," devoutly believed to have been discovered by St. Helena—herself by birth a Briton—and the mother of the Roman emperor Constantine. Dismissive rumor has maintained that the purported fragments of the true cross could make an ark, but be that as it may, such fragments were deeply venerated relics, taken as earthly, tangible testimony of the power and glory of Christ.

And indeed, for much of the *Dream of the Rood*, it is the cross itself that speaks. From our perspective at least, this gives the poem an odd flavor—the technical term for this literary trope involving speaking objects is *prosopopoeia*, and we don't make much use of it, but to the Anglo-Saxons it was familiar from, of all things, the riddles of which they seem to have been fond. And in Anglo-Saxon riddles, objects often speak and describe themselves, inviting listeners or hearers to guess from the description what they are (even in England the nights were long).

In any event, in the *Dream of the Rood*, the dream-speaker describes a dream—and I suspect this is no literary trope, but in origin at least a real dream—in which the true cross speaks to and confronts him. The narrative has a genuinely dream-like, hallucinatory quality, as before the cross begins to speak the dreamer sees it modulating back and forth between suffering and glory—at one moment defaced with nails and soaked in Christ's blood, at the next exalted and bejeweled as a token of cosmic triumph.

And when the cross begins to speak, it describes not only the sufferings and sacrifice of Christ, but its own, as it suffers and endures both humiliation and ultimate triumph with him. This is theologically interesting—it implies, as in the biblical *Letter to the Ephesians*, that all creation, the entire universe, par-



ticipates and is renewed in the Passion, that somehow all creation is subsumed is revived, in Christ. But the Christ who appears in the *Dream of the Rood* is, in some respects, very different from the Christ we encounter in the gospels. The poet characterizes him as a “young hero or warrior,” who “stripped Himself, firm and unflinching” as He “climbed / upon the cross, brave before many, to redeem mankind.”

It was Pope Gregory’s wise advice to the missionaries he sent off to the North to go as far as they could in incorporating the existing beliefs and convictions of those whom they sought to convert to the Christianity to which they hoped to win them, and we see the results of such an attitude here. The Christ of the *Dream of the Rood* is a distinctly Germanic, or Anglo-Saxon, Christ.

One last point. The dream vision has strong classical antecedents and became very popular during the Middle Ages. Indeed, it is with us still, as the *Wizard of Oz* abundantly testifies. And in all cases known to me, as here, what you see in a dream vision is, however strange it might be, the truth.

### ***Battle of Maldon***

The *Battle of Maldon*, as might be expected, has a very different flavor. It is, for one thing, a late Anglo-Saxon poem, and it concerns a real battle, fought, according to the *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, at Maldon in eastern England on the shores of the River Panta, or Blackwater, in August 991. Even then, however, clearly the old heroic ethic was strong, at least as an ideal, if not always in practice.

A Viking host under the leadership of Unlaf, or Anlaf, we are told, had come upstream and pulled ashore at a small river island in order, if they could, to shake down the residents of Maldon for tribute. Pay up and we’ll leave was the offer.

The local Essex levy, led by one Byrhtnoth—who was at the time over sixty and had served as ealdorman since 956—was having none of it. They stood firm and ready to fight.

The River Panta estuary, though, was strongly tidal, and the only way from the island to the mainland, where Byrhtnoth and the levy stood, was a narrow, easily defended causeway. The Vikings—tricky fellows that they reportedly were—asked for free passage across, and Byrhtnoth, as the poet puts it, for his “offermode,” or pride, allowed it.

The result was disaster. Soon enough, Byrhtnoth fell, fighting heroically, of course (his beheaded remains, so I have read, suggest that in his day he was a very formidable warrior, even at sixty-plus years, well over six feet six inches in height). Some of his panicked followers fled, one among them riding Byrhtnoth’s easily recognizable horse, suggesting that he himself has given up, but the remainder of his retainers, true to their code, fought to the death around his lifeless body. One among them, an *eald geneat*, or “old retainer,” named Byrhtwold, according to the poem, gives voice to what has generally been considered the clearest expression of the old ethic.

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Crossley-Holland translates:

Mind must be the firmer, heart the more fierce,  
Courage the greater, as our strength diminishes.

Or a bit closer to the original:

Mind has to be the harder, heart the keener,  
Determination has to be the more, as our power grows less.

Some have heard in the words of a more recent indomitable soul, faced with an even greater threat, an echo of the *Battle of Maldon*.

*We shall not flag or fail.  
We shall go on to the end. . . .  
We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be,  
We shall fight on the beaches,  
We shall fight on the landing grounds,  
We shall fight in the fields and in the streets,  
We shall fight in the hills;  
We shall never surrender.*

~Winston Churchill

Speech on Dunkirk, House of Commons, June 4, 1940

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. How does the *Dream of the Rood* testify to fusion of old Germanic and Christian values?
2. How does the *Battle of Maldon* testify to the survival of the old heroic code?

### Suggested Reading

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Crossley-Holland, Kevin. *The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

### Other Books of Interest

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Campbell, James, Eric John, and Patrick Wormald, eds. *The Anglo-Saxons*. New York: Penguin, 1991.

Swanton, Michael, ed. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. London: Routledge, 1998.

**Lecture 8:**  
**The Celtic West:**  
*The Lais of Marie de France*

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are Jeffrey Gantz's translation of *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* and Marie de France's *The Lais of Marie de France*, translated by Glynn S. Burgess and Keith Busby.

Early on, it wasn't easy for the Greeks and Romans to distinguish between the "Galli," whom we know as the "Celts," or the "Gauls," and the even fiercer, wilder Germanic tribes that lay beyond them. They were both, from the perspective of the sunnier lands to the south, big, fair, brave, disorganized, drunken, and—not to put too fine a point on it—stupid, probably, and barbarian to the core, beyond any doubt. And in each case, the Germans, when at last the Greeks and Romans encountered them, proved worse and more alien than the Celts. Not that the Celts weren't bad enough.

### **The Celts**

One group proved able, to the horror of Greece, for instance, to sack Delphi, and another very nearly took Rome some 800 years before Alaric the Goth. The heart of Rome was purportedly saved by the timely warning of the sacred geese, for which the Romans for centuries were grateful. And the Gauls and Celts remained a major threat for centuries to come, to be subdued once and for all only in the time of Caesar, so far as Gaul was concerned, and in Britain, as we have seen, a century or so later.

Celtic languages are still spoken, to some extent at least, to this day. Of Gaulish itself very little remains other than names like "Vercengetorix," Caesar's great Gallic rival, but other Celtic languages have done at least a bit better. In the "Brythonic" branch, for instance, originally in an early form, the predominant language of "Prydian," or Britain, Welsh, and Breton survive, albeit narrowly, as spoken tongues, and Cornish, the language of Cornwall, had native speakers until a few centuries ago. In the Gaelic, or Goidelic, branch, Scots Gaelic, the language of the Highlands and Irish still have speakers, and Manx, the language of the Isle of Man, long did as well. Nowhere, though, at least at present, are Celtic languages really thriving. That is not to say, though, as we shall see, that in the past they did not produce noteworthy writings, nor, still less, is it to say that Celtic culture has faded away. Quite the contrary. In many circles it has enjoyed a sort of revival.

In earlier days, the culture of the Celts seems in many respects at least to have been similar to, if often more sophisticated than, that of their Germanic neighbors. Their organization was more or less tribal or clan-based, as indeed, it long remained in Ireland and the Scottish Highlands. In the days of Caesar, in Britain at least, the Celts were chariot-warriors when they could be, and archaeological evidence as well as early literary testimony from outsiders, suggests that at one point at least they were enthusiastic head-hunters and practitioners of human sacrifice (though this last has at times, to me at least, unconvincingly, been heatedly disputed). As among the

Germans, early Mediterranean witnesses were impressed with the relatively high social position of women among the Celts, and were impressed as well by what seemed to be a strange and straightforward sexual energy, if not exactly sexual freedom. And the archaeological remains abundantly testify to their skills in the visual arts, as do, for that matter, such later witnesses as the *Book of Kells* and the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. There seems, in fact, at some point to have been a pan-boreal taste for the intricate and elaborate spiral designs that are characteristic of Celtic and Viking work alike. Again, it is hard to imagine that the distinctive, minor-key music that at present is so highly valued in Celtic culture (and which has so profoundly influenced popular music in the Anglophone world) had no ancient antecedents, though here, to be sure, records are scanty.

Classical observers found Celtic religion particularly interesting, and in some respects, it lives among us still. The great Celtic religious festivals of Samain, Imbolc, Lughnasa, and Beltane, each celebrated at or near what are called “cross-quarter-days,” that is, days more or less equidistant between a solstice and an equinox, on or around November 1, February 2, August 2, and May 1, still find celebrants—Beltane and Samhain particularly, now known as May Day and as the Halloween, All Souls’ Day, and Day of the Dead complex, respectively. The whole northern world thought of the year as divided between two seasons, winter and summer, and Samhain and Beltane marked the beginnings of winter and summer respectively (and to this day in temperate regions mark with astonishing closeness when the trees lose their leaves and regain them). Samhain in particular was noteworthy as a time when the barriers between worlds were believed to open, not only the barriers between the world of the living and of the dead, but also the barrier between the world of mortals and the world of the so-called Tuátha de Danaan. These last have come down to us as “fairies,” the “good folk,” and no one now takes them very seriously. The have been too cutified, infantilized, and sanitized for that—a realm, if anything, of discrete pedophilic artistic fantasy. But they were originally gods and goddesses, more or less human-sized, lusty, powerful, and amoral, and often heart-destroyingly beautiful, and one of the keynotes of Celtic lore is a sense that their world is very close to our own. Some mortals are allowed to enter, to their peril and often their delight, and if they return, they often find that they have been gone from our own world far, far longer than they would or could have suspected. The rules of fairyland are not our own. Tales like *Brigadoon*, *Rip van Winkle*, and, in their own way, the *Chronicles of Narnia*, are late echoes of such beliefs. The other world was believed to loom especially close in the prehistoric burial mounds, or *sídh*, or *side* (pronounced “sheeth”), to give them their Irish name, which dot the Atlantic seaboard of Europe. As such notions suggest, the Celts were, by report, strong believers in an afterlife, and indeed, in metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls. That is one reason, at least supposedly, why Celtic warriors fought with such suicidal, if erratic, abandon—generally fighting naked to show their courage, or wearing their characteristic, and to Mediterranean eyes, hopelessly barbaric, long, plaid trousers and glorious moustaches (no Greek or Roman sported one), their long hair standing as nearly erect and terrifying as lime could make it, their bodies often dyed blue or copiously tattooed. They were an intimidating crew, and their devotion to the forests of their realm—the oaks, holly, and mistletoe in particular—did nothing to diminish

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that. The Greeks and Romans found the trackless forests of the North about as terrifying an environment as any they encountered. Nor did the Celts' Druid priestly caste do anything to diminish their unease.

The literary remains of this largely lost world are patchy and scattered. With regard to the whole of the old North, we have clearly lost much more than we have. One problem is that old Celtic literature, as much or more so than the old German, seems to have been overwhelmingly oral. Would-be Druids, we are told, embarked on a twenty-year course of instruction—roughly the time, in a contemporary context, between kindergarten and a doctorate. And the instruction was entirely oral. To my knowledge, not one bit of it survives. The Celts clearly valued poetry—an oral poet or bard, so we are told, was an important part of the household of any self-respecting Celtic aristocrat, and this continued in Wales, Ireland, and Scotland well into historic times, surprisingly recent historic times, in fact. But virtually none of their work has survived. These were entirely performance-based arts—real-time arts, with no perceptible concern for posterity in any other guise than reputation.

What has survived is a series of fragments, more or less, and a pervasive, if subtle, influence on the literary works that followed. From Ireland we have the so-called *Ulster Cycle*, or a substantial part or reworking of it—most notably the *Táin* (pronounced “Toyn”), which contains many of the adventures of the great Irish culture-hero Cúchulainn—and a variety of other, less substantial, though still very interesting narratives. From Wales we have the *Mabinogion*. And from Brittany, in what is now France, we have Breton lays, though not, as it happens, characteristically in Breton. Instead, what we have appears in literature, non-Breton retellings or redactions, a good many in Middle English, among them Chaucer's “Franklin's Tale” and the entirely admirable *Sir Orfeo* (or *King Orfeo*), a Celticized reimagining of the classical tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, and in Anglo-Norman, which is to say, the sort of French that was long spoken in England by the Anglo-Norman aristocracy after the conquest of William the Bastard, later to be known as William the Conqueror, after 1066. Among these last, far and away the most notable is *The Lais of Marie de France*, composed, so we are to believe, some time around 1190 by an aristocratic Frenchwoman living in England and writing in Anglo-Norman French.

The lais of Marie are genuinely fine work—for my money the best women's writing of the Middle Ages, and by a considerable margin (women, we must recall, were very seldom literate during the Middle Ages and were even less often encouraged to write, so Marie clearly had her work cut out for her). And they reveal what was for the time a distinctly unusual vision—that vision itself presumably encouraged by the unusually powerful women who appear to have been Marie's patrons. For what Marie appears at times to suggest is the utterly unclassical notion that being in love is in some deep sense its own validation, and not only that, but indeed, at least potentially, a source of moral improvement instead of moral distraction. Such a vision, drawing as it apparently does, at however many removes, from the high Celtic valuation of sexuality and sexual happiness, is something pretty much unprecedented in either classical or Christian culture—not entirely unique to Marie, but unprecedented all the same—and in our next lecture we will take a closer look at what this new vision seems to have entailed.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. How did the culture of the Celts differ from that of the Germanic tribes and from that of the classical world to the south?
2. What are some of the major surviving literary works from the Celtic past?
3. What were some of the leading characteristics of the traditional religions of the Celts?

### Suggested Reading

Anonymous. *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*. Trans. Jeffrey Gantz. New York: Penguin, 1981.

de France, Marie. *The Lais of Marie de France*. Trans. Glynn S. Burgess and Keith Busby. Second edition. New York: Penguin, 2003.

### Other Books of Interest

Anonymous. *The Mabinogion*. Trans. Jeffrey Gantz. New York: Penguin, 1976.

———. *The Tain from the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cuailnge*. Trans. Thomas Kinsella. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.

de France, Marie. *The Lais of Marie de France*. Trans. Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante. Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1978.

Rumble, Thomas C., ed. *The Breton Lays in Middle English*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965.

**Lecture 9:**  
**To the Sunny Southlands: Troubadour Poetry,  
Chivalry, Knighthood, and the *Chanson de Geste***

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are *The Song of Roland*, translated by Glyn Burgess, and Guillaume de Lorris's and Jean de Meun's *The Romance of the Rose*, translated by Charles Dahlberg.

At the outset of these lectures, I suggested that the Middle Ages represented, among other things, a new wave of cultural fusion in which the mutual influence of the classical and Christian cultures of the Mediterranean south and the Germanic and Celtic cultures of the north gave rise to what was, in effect, a new culture, drawing in one way or another upon all of these older, parent traditions. In this process, innovations were by no means confined to lands more or less outside the Mediterranean heartland, but in fact new and distinctly medieval forms of thought and culture arose there as well, in part at least in response to ideas stemming from further north.

### **Erotic Love**

One of the most influential of these, whose effects are very much with us still, was a reconceptualization of the role of erotic love in human life. This had precedent, of one sort or another, in the relatively high regard of traditional Germanic and Celtic culture for women—in comparison, at least, to cultural norms in the Mediterranean south, and we can see such new ideas very clearly at work in writings of Marie de France, at whom we looked briefly in the last chapter. But the change in sensibility, if such it was, seems to have begun most decisively not in Anglo-Norman England, but much further south, in Provence and Aquitaine, in what is now the south of France, and in the poems of the troubadours.

The new vision of love that the troubadours celebrated, beginning late in the eleventh century, or the 1000s, and with ever more clarity as time passed, was once regarded as one of the most far-reaching cultural transformations in history. So C.S. Lewis argued in his first major work of criticism, *The Allegory of Love*, and so argued Denis de Rougemont in his once-influential *Love in the Western World*. More recent critics, two or three generations of them now, would dissent from many of their conclusions. But nonetheless, something striking happened.

In the classical world, so the records suggest, being in love had very little to do with marriage. Not that people didn't fall in love, but marriages were ordinarily arranged, and something as erratic and ephemeral as erotic passion didn't enter much into account. Marriage was about children, and family, and property—and if one was grand enough, about dynastic bonds. Love was extramarital, and if heady and enticing, in some deep sense not fundamentally serious. In Greece, we hear for the most part about the love of early middle-aged men for adolescent boys. In Rome, poets like Ovid, Horace, and Catullus talk of love for women, but almost never about love for women of their own class, potential consorts. Love is, in that sense, a pleasant distract-



tion—not something a serious person takes seriously, and there is something agreeably transgressive about even pretending that it matters much. The stories of Dido and Aeneas in epic fiction, and of Antony and Cleopatra in life, suggest the perceived dangers of getting swept away. And isolated figures like Sappho aside, we hear virtually nothing about women being in love at all.

### The Troubadours

To greater or lesser degree, all this changes with the troubadours. Not all at once and not consistently, but in the end profoundly all the same. The central change is that being in love is no longer seen as an abandonment of good sense and moral balance, and thus as a distraction or even a danger, however pleasant. Instead, it is seen as ennobling—as something that makes you a better person and, often quite literally, a nobler person. Perhaps the most celebrated, though by no means the earliest, expression of this idea is Guido Guinicelli (or Guinizelli) and Dante's assertion that love and a "noble heart" (*cor gentil*) are in some strong sense the same thing—that if you are the right sort of person you will necessarily be in love, and, conversely, being in love reveals that you are the right sort of person.

The first of the troubadours—or the first of whom we have record—was Guillaume IX, Duke of Aquitaine and Count of Poitiers, who lived from 1071–1127, but soon enough the tradition spread far and wide, from the troubadours in the "*langue d'oc*" in southern France, to the trouvères in the "*langue d'oïl*" further north, to the "*minnesingers*" in what is now Germany, to the practitioners, Dante among them, of the *dolce stil nuovo*, or "sweet new style" in Italy. There has been, of course, a good deal of speculation as to what might have prompted this new poetic tradition and the *fin amour*, or "courtly love," that it celebrated. It clearly is part of a more wide-ranging reevaluation of the emotional life, and in some sense, of the feminine as well. Veneration of the Virgin Mary and of the infant Jesus seems to have intensified concurrently. Some have argued for influences from the Islamic world, in Spain particularly. Some have argued that the rise of "courtly love" reflects conditions at court—not very many women and lots of more or less unattached youngish men as aristocratic retainers or warriors. Some, indeed, have argued that as material conditions improved and upper-class life became easier and more sophisticated, the courtly tradition arose as, in effect, a new mode of aristocratic self-justification. As in the days of Beowulf, leaders were justified by their courage and prowess, their facility in dealing with death and with danger, so in softer and easier times, leaders were justified by their facility in controlling not fear, as before, but rather desire, an equally deep-rooted and primal passion.

### A New Sensibility

In any case, and for whatever reasons, over time, the new sensibility transformed pretty much everything it touched, and not by any means least, contemporary notions of what it meant to be an elite warrior. For Beowulf and his peers, Gunnar and even Cúchulainn, are all alike—elite warriors, heroes of the field of battle, whatever or whoever their foes. What none of them is, though, is a knight—or a chevalier, a caballero, or a ritter, the corresponding word in French, Spanish, and German indicating quite clearly and in each

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instance a “rider,” a mounted warrior. But the question at issue isn’t only horses. It is, in fact, a new aristocratic code—the code of chivalry (or, as the name suggests, the code of the mounted warrior). And this involved not just courage and prowess, but courtesy—the mastery, as once again the name suggests, of behavior appropriate not only to the battlefield, but to the court.

The cultural transformations at issue are complex. But the code of chivalry—of gentlemanliness and, indeed, of ladylike behavior as well—had a very long future ahead of it. It was still—and fatally—very much alive in the newly recruited officer corps that led the British over the top and into the German barbed wire and machine-guns at the Somme during World War I, and among the old-fashioned at least, it is not entirely dead among us yet.

A table seeking to organize in chronological and thematic terms some of the works that contributed, in one way or another, to the new “courtly” sensibility, is provided on page 45.

Before departing from this transformed world, we need to pause, at least briefly, to look at one last group of works that contributed to the new “courtly” sensibility that contributed so much to the tales of King Arthur that we will address in the next lecture. The so-called *Chansons de geste* were, in effect, the southern counterpart to the heroic tales of the north, composed, on the whole, a bit later, and from the outset a little closer to what became the “courtly” sensibility, but even so, they were more concerned with battlefield loyalty and heroics than deft behavior in the feasting hall or boudoir.

The most celebrated of them is *The Song of Roland*, composed some time about the year 1100, which chronicles the death of Roland, purportedly the nephew of Charlemagne (reigned 768–814), in a rear-guard defense in 778 at Roncevalles in the Pyrenees—historically, as it happens, against the opportunistic Basques, but in the poem, against the Muslims of Moorish Spain. Likewise chronicling war against the Moors is *El Cid*, composed about 1140, the great national epic of Spain, which celebrates the career of the redoubtable Rodrigo Diaz, the Cid himself, who lived from 1043 to 1099.

## Works Contributing to “Courtly Sensibility”

ARTHURIAN WORKS	TROUBADOURS AND THE ROMANCE OF THE ROSE	CHANSON DE GESTE AND OTHER WORKS
		<i>La Chanson de Roland</i> ca. 1100
	Guillaume IX Duke of Aquitaine, Count of Poitiers 1071–27 (ca.1100–25)	
Geoffrey of Monmouth ca. 1135		
		<i>El Cantar del mio Cid</i> ca. 1140
Wace ca. 1155	Bernart de Ventadorn ca. 1150–80	
La3amon <i>Brut</i> , ca. 1160	Bertran de Born ca. 1170–75	
Chretien de Troyes ca. 1160s–70s and later <i>La Chevalier de la Charette</i> <i>Lancelot</i> , c. 1177–81		
Marie de France ca. 1160–85	Arnaut Daniel ca. 1190s	Andreas Capellanus <i>De arte honeste amandi</i> <i>The Art of Courtly Love</i> ca. 1180s
Wolfram von Eschenbach <i>Parzival</i> , 1190s		
Gottfried von Strassburg <i>Tristan</i> ca. 1200		
Prose Lancelot aka <i>Vulgate Cycle</i> <i>Lancelot du Lac</i> Early 1200s <i>Quested u Sant Graal</i> ca. 1215–30 <i>Le Mort le Roi Artu</i> ca.1230–35 (in Champagne?)	Guillaume de Lorris <i>Le Roman de la Rose</i> first 4058 lines ca. 1230–35, near Orléans	
		St. Thomas Aquinas ca. 1265
		Jacobus de Voragine ca. 1266
	Jean de Meung aka Jean Chopinel <i>Le Roman de la Rose</i> lines 4059–21780 (1268–85, ca. 1275, d. 1305) Near Orléans on the Loire	
		Guido Guinizelli, ca. 1276 “Al cor gentil reppaira sempre amore.”
		Dante Alighieri <i>Vita Nuova</i> , 1290s

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. How did the ideas of the troubadours and the rise of the so-called “chivalric code” transform older ideas about love and about what it meant to be a warrior?
2. What are some modern-day examples of the chivalric code in practice?

### Suggested Reading

Anonymous. *The Song of Roland*. Glyn Burgess. New York: Penguin, 1990.  
de Lorris, Guillaume, and Jean de Meun. *The Romance of the Rose*. Trans. Charles Dahlberg. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983.

### Other Books of Interest

Anonymous. *Poem of the Cid: Dual Language Edition*. Trans. W.S. Merwin. New York: Plume, 1975.  
———. *The Song of Roland*. Trans. Dorothy L. Sayers. New York: Penguin, 1957.  
Capellanus, Andreas. *The Art of Courtly Love*. Trans. John Jay Parry. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.  
Goldin, Frederick, trans. *Lyrics of the Troubadours and Trouvères: An Anthology and a History*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith Publishers, 1983.

## Lecture 10: The Matter of Arthur

The **Suggested Readings** for this lecture are *The Death of King Arthur*, translated by James Cable, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*, edited by J.J. Anderson.

The Arthurian tradition is unique—there is really nothing very much like it. Its historical antecedents, such as they are, go back to the late fifth and early sixth century, when for a generation or so the last of the more or less Romanized Christian Britons were able, at least briefly, to stem the incoming Anglo-Saxon tide from the cross-North Sea shore from the lowlands lying from what is now the Netherlands to southern Denmark. The leader of the Britons was the historical precursor to Arthur. Or then again, maybe not. But whatever happened, it was to those years that the first of those who wrote about Arthur looked back when they began to formulate their tales.

### A Cultural Phenomenon

Once the tradition was well begun, however, in the 1100s, it exploded into something like a Europe-wide cultural phenomenon—to call it a fad wouldn't be far off—the resonances of which affect us still. In the interest that it generated, and in its cultural effect, the matter of Arthur was comparable to a religious movement, though despite the tale of the Grail, its religious content was never primary. And like the Graeco-Roman tales of the gods and legendary heroes, the Arthurian tradition never attained a single canonical form. Lots of people wrote about Arthur and his knights for lots of reasons, and the tales cannot be fully reconciled. They can only be—and have been repeatedly—retold.

Clearly, from the time that the Arthurian tradition really took off in the twelfth century until the present, it provided a way of talking about and thinking about a whole range of issues that seemed important, and, more often than not, remain important still. How should one love? What does the best imaginable earthly society look like? Can we attain it? For how long? What do nobility and honor mean? What is, or should be, the relation between social norms and religious norms, between courtesy and virtue? When might it be best not to know what in fact you know, or at least to pretend that you do not know? What are the limits of human virtue? Can trying too hard be counterproductive—or to put the matter another way, is the ideal best, in fact, the enemy of the attainable good? Such questions remain timely—and the Arthurian tradition lives still.

### The Arthuriana

The early Arthuriana is, by and large, pretty rough stuff, without the high gloss and sophistication that we associate with many later Arthurian tales. The earliest mention of all appears in Gildas, writing about 540 about one Ambrosius Aurelianus doing his best to stem pagan incursions. Nennius, writing in the

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early 800s, has a bit more to say on the subject. These are scattered and inconclusive leavings, though, and it is not until Geoffrey of Monmouth (1100–1154) and his *Historia Regum Britanniae* (ca. 1135–1136) that we get something more substantial. And then, suddenly, within a generation, the story seems to be everywhere—in the Anglo-Norman writings of Wace (ca. 1100–1175) and just a bit later in La3amon’s *Brut*, and in the alliterative *Morte d’Arthur*. All then, all but astonishingly, in something very close to full flower in the delicate, precocious, and immensely sophisticated romances of Chrétien de Troyes (ca. 1135–1183), which we will examine more closely in the lecture to follow, and, as above, in the Breton *Lais of Marie de France*. And then, the immense French *Lancelot*, or “Vulgate Cycle,” in prose, dating from the first half of the 1200s and consisting of *Lancelot of the Lake*, *The Quest of the Holy Grail*, and *The Morte d’Arthur*. Other authors focused on other strands of the wider story. Gottfried von Strassburg, for example, wrote his *Tristan and Isolde* about the year 1210 in the Rhineland. Wolfram von Eschenbach wrote his *Parzival*, his own version of the Grail Quest, shortly before.

Perhaps the finest of all the works speaking of Arthur is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, written by an anonymous contemporary of Chaucer in the English northwest Midlands at some time near 1380. *Sir Gawain*, too, we will address more closely in a later lecture. For speakers of English, though, perhaps the most definitive of all Arthurian works is Sir Thomas Malory’s capacious *Morte d’Arthur*, written about 1470, during the English dynastic Wars of the Roses, and first printed by William Caxton in 1485 (a somewhat different version was recovered in manuscript early in the twentieth century, and readers now, in fact, have a choice). Malory himself, if the Sir Thomas Malory who appears in the records is indeed our author, was in real life, evidently, a Yorkshire knight of rather unsavory reputation. No matter, though. The *Morte* is a splendid and moving work, more than 1,000 pages long, and if at times the first five or six hundred pages are slow, the last four hundred or so amply compensate. A high point, for me at least, appears near the end, when the by-now thoroughly compromised Lancelot is pressured into attempting to heal Sir Urré, whom, so we are told, only the “best knight of the world” can heal. Sir Lancelot, fresh from the grail quest and, of course, from his long love affair with Arthur’s queen, is understandably reluctant to set himself up for what he has every reason to think will be a public humiliation. But beyond all expectation, he succeeds. For he truly is, despite everything, the best “of sinful men.” And as Malory unforgettably tells us, after the miracle, “Sir Launcelot wept,” as a “child that had been beaten.”

But Malory, influential as he was, by no means marks the end of the influence of Arthur. The Tudors, with their Welsh roots, were concerned to foster Arthurian tales for propaganda purposes, and indeed, the older brother of Henry VIII (and the first husband of Catherine of Aragon) was a significantly named Prince Arthur who died before Henry himself could ascend the throne. Sir Edmund Spenser’s *The Fairie Queene* draws heavily upon Arthurian themes, and the notes of even John Milton reveal that before he turned to *Paradise Lost*, he thought long and seriously about composing an epic on Arthur.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson turned to King Arthur in his *Idylls of the King* to address in oblique and thoughtful terms the issues of his own Victorian era. And Arthur is with us still in works as varied as T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, as Lerner and Lowe's Kennedy-era musical *Camelot*, as Walt Disney's *The Sword in the Stone*, as the films *Excalibur* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, as, indeed, *The Mists of Avalon*.

All of which is to suggest that in all sorts of contexts, the tales of Arthur still call to artists as a vehicle for reflection, as a means of addressing themes as varied as the limits of personal and political virtue to something not unlike an exploration of feminist neo-paganism. It's all in the story.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. What might it be in tales of Arthur that has fascinated readers and writers alike for the better part of a thousand years?
2. What might account for the perennial appeal of Arthur and his knights?

### Suggested Reading

Anderson, J.J., ed. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*. London: Dent, 1996.

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### Other Books of Interest

Alcock, Leslie. *Arthur's Britain: History and Archaeology, AD 367–634*. Pelican Books. New York: Penguin, 1982.

Anonymous. *Lancelot of the Lake*. Trans. Corin Corley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

———. *The Quest of the Holy Grail*. Trans. Pauline M. Matarasso. New York: Penguin, 1976.

Borroff, Marie, trans. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Patience and Pearl*. New York: Norton, 2001.

Malory, Sir Thomas. *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Two volumes. Ed. Janet Cowen. New York: Penguin, 1969.

von Strassburg, Gottfried. *Tristan*. Trans. A.T. Hatto. New York: Penguin, 1975.



## Lecture 11: Chrétien de Troyes

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Chrétien de Troyes's *Arthurian Romances*.

In terms of breadth of vision and sophistication, if not, in broad terms, of subject matter, Chrétien de Troyes has no real predecessors in the Arthurian tradition. As he writes, just a generation later than Geoffrey of Monmouth, and just a few years later than Wace and La3amon, the Arthurian romance comes to be in something close to perfected form. Indeed, he seems to critique the form as he devises it—the Arthurian romance is in this sense born already self-reflective, self-critical, and old. There is nothing one-dimensional or provisional about Chrétien's vision; he writes as a master from the very outset.

### From the World Headquarters of Courtly Love

Part of the explanation of his precocity may be the context in which Chrétien wrote. For he wrote at what was arguably the most fashionable court on earth—world-headquarters, if it makes sense to think in such terms, of courtly love and courtliness in his time, and every page of his romances is colored by that context. For he worked, as he tells us explicitly in the prologue to his *Lancelot, or The Knight of the Cart*, at the behest of Marie de Champagne. Marie was the daughter of Louis VII of France and Eleanor of Aquitaine, one of the most formidable and sophisticated women of the Middle Ages, who later married Henry II of England. She was a generous and influential patron, and her court was a cultural showplace. Eleanor's daughter Marie was married in 1159 to Henry the Liberal of Champagne, and her court too became a showplace. Marie was patron not only of Chrétien, but also of his contemporary Andreas Capellanus, or "Andreas the Chaplain," who wrote a curious work entitled *De arte honeste amandi*, or *The Art of Courtly Love*, which more or less systematically lays out the "rules" for the sort of love that finds its way to "a noble heart"—with what degree of ironic detachment, if indeed any, is unclear.

The works of Chrétien pose very similar challenges for interpretation. What happens is generally clear enough. What we are to make of what happens, though, is a different question. In any case, his surviving works are five—first, *Erec and Enid*, which parallels a tale found in the Welsh *Mabinogion* and is later retold by Tennyson in *Idylls of the King*, then *Cligés*, then *Lancelot*, or *The Knight of the Cart*, the first extant mention of Lancelot, who evidently formed no part of earlier tradition, then *The Knight with the Lion*, or *Yvain*, and finally, the incomplete *Perceval*, or *The Story of the Grail*, which is the first work to mention the grail quest. Clearly, as the apparent introduction of Lancelot and the grail quest reveal, the Arthurian tradition as we know it owes as much to Chrétien de Troyes as it does to any other writer, and his *Lancelot* in particular will repay a closer look.

Chrétien's sources for the tale are unclear—again, this is the first mention

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we have of Lancelot, and for that matter, of Camelot—but he could hardly be more direct in telling us the immediate impetus for the work. The tale begins, “Since my lady of Champagne wishes me to begin a romance, I shall do so most willingly, like one who is entirely at her service in anything he can undertake in this world.” No courtly lover could be more dutiful. And Chrétien continues to assure us that “the subject matter and meaning” of his tale “are furnished and given him by the countess,” and that “he strives carefully to add nothing but his effort and careful attention.”

This suggests, at a minimum, at least a putative effort to please, but at a distance of more than eight centuries, it is not so easy to tell whether Chrétien’s scrupulous and submissive avowals are meant to suggest to us that, perhaps, had he enjoyed a freer rein, he might have written a bit differently. One can read the tale that follows either way.

### Lancelot

The thematic heart of the story, in any case, is Lancelot’s utter and abject submission to the whims of Guenivere—or as Chrétien calls her far more often, “the Queen”—who has been abducted into the distinctly otherworldly “Land of Gorre” by a malefactor named, appropriately enough, Maleagent, or “Malefactor.” The Land of Gorre has clear affinities to the Celtic otherworld—it is, we are told, “a kingdom from which no foreigner returns,” and there are only two entrances, one “The Underwater Bridge,” which is just what its name implies, and the other, “The Sword Bridge,” which consists of a (very long) sword, razor edge up. A formidable, indeed, manifestly life-threatening challenge for Lancelot either way.

As he proceeds on his quest, Lancelot at one point finds himself without a horse and encounters a cart driven by a rude and surly dwarf, no respecter of the entitlements of class. “In those days,” Chrétien informs us, “carts were used as pillories are now.” To ride in a cart, in the terms of the story, is an ineradicable disgrace. But Lancelot must ride if he is to make his way to the Queen. He hesitates for two steps, weighing his love and reputation. And then he gets in.

Later on, after much difficulty and many adventures, Lancelot succeeds in rescuing the Queen. But their meeting is not what he hoped. When at last he is introduced to the newly freed Queen, she responds by saying, “I have no interest in seeing him,” and goes to suggest that Lancelot “has wasted his efforts,” for as she puts it, “I shall always deny that I feel any gratitude towards him.”

Lancelot is nonplussed, and as the story continues, all but suicidally depressed. The problem is, though, he hesitated. For two or three seconds, he weighed his reputation against his love. And Guenivere, clearly, is not interested in such half-hearted devotion as that. Well, the story continues, and Queen and lover are reconciled, though not without a few more tests, but the crux of the matter rests here, as the title *The Knight of the Cart* suggests. What are the limits of devotion then? There are none, abject blasphemy, perhaps aside (and even there the case is complicated—Lancelot finds a strand of the Queen’s hair in a comb and worships it as a relic). What does a lover owe the beloved? Anything and everything.

This vision, in its way, is true to the more extreme formulations of the code. But the question remains. How seriously are we to take it? On one level, *The Knight of the Cart* reads like a dry and subtle satiric send-up. This is ridiculous behavior. But on the other hand, ideals need not be taken in their full extremity to be influential—indeed, to be very influential indeed. And glorious self-sacrificing irrationality has a perennial appeal, as many more recent—and equally fantastic—cultural ideals abundantly attest. There is always a market for glorious folly. The case, I think, stands unproved—and unproved either way.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. To what extent is Chrétien a founder of the Arthurian tradition?
2. How might Chrétien's claim that he writes his *Lancelot* at the instigation of his patron, Marie de Champagne, affect our interpretation of what he has written?
3. To what extent does Chrétien celebrate the boundless devotion of Lancelot to Guenivere? To what extent does he satirize or critique that devotion?

### Suggested Reading

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de Troyes, Chrétien. *Arthurian Romances*. Trans. William W. Kibler and Carleton W. Carroll. New York: Penguin, 1991.

### Other Books of Interest

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Lacy, Norris J., and Joan Tasker Grimbert, eds. *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2005.

## Lecture 12: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*, edited by J.J. Anderson.

Whoever he wrote for—and nobody really knows precisely whom it might have been—the *Gawain* poet did not have the privilege of writing for Marie de Champagne. And the tone of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* could hardly be more different than that of the works of Chrétien, despite its equally Arthurian subject.

### An Anonymous Genius

Like *Beowulf*, the works of the *Gawain* poet survive in but a single manuscript, *Cotton Nero A.x.*, which likewise comes to us from the manuscript collection of Sir Robert Cotton. *Cotton Nero A.x.* is not particularly big—about the size of a modern paperback—and it contains four works, titled by modern editors, in order, *Pearl*, *Purity or Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. All four are works of very high quality; three of the four—the first and last and *Patience*—are works of genius, and *Pearl* and *Sir Gawain* are unmistakable masterpieces, the equal in poetic dexterity and profundity of vision, if not, perhaps, in scope, of any works written during the Middle Ages, Dante's *Divine Comedy* aside.

All the more regrettable, then, that no one knows who this splendid, anonymous poet in fact was. He is, at his best—and he is generally very close to his best—the equal, in my view at least, of Chaucer. But where Chaucer lived in London, in close contact with the court since mid-adolescence, and was celebrated in his own lifetime as the greatest of English poets and since that time has never so much as come close to falling even momentarily out of favor, the *Gawain* poet worked in relative obscurity. And as the survival of his works in only a single manuscript suggests (unless, as some would argue, the poem *St. Erkenwald* is his as well—I am not convinced), he worked without anything remotely like the celebrity and recognition of Chaucer. No matter, in the end. Sometimes, sad to say, fame and merit do not walk hand in hand.

### The Language of Medieval Poets

The language of the *Gawain* poet's works is, through no fault of his, part of the problem. Medieval poets wrote as they spoke—there were, of course, no dictionaries, and they spelled relaxedly and by ear. Even Chaucer (or his scribes) shows no qualms about spelling the same word in different ways on the same page. There really was no right way to spell. But Chaucer's language, the language of London and of the court, became the ancestor of modern standard English, in no small measure, as a matter of fact, because of the prestige of Chaucer's own works. The *Gawain* poet wrote in language of what was presumably his homeland, the "Northwest Midlands," Cheshire and Staffordshire, the region just inland from the mouth of the rivers Mersey

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and Dee. The difference is striking. After a bit of practice, most students can without too much trouble learn to handle Chaucer on their own. Here is an example from his *Nun's Priest's Tale*: "But ye that holden this tale a folye, / As of a fox, or of a cok and hen, / Taketh the moralitee, goode men." Here, by contrast, is a brief passage from *Sir Gawain*: "Make we mery quyl we may, and mynne upon joye, / For the lur may mon lach when-so mon lykes." In modern English, "Make we merry while we may, and think about joy, / For a man may have sorrow whenever he likes." The difference is just enough to make *Gawain* pretty rough going without special training, and a poetic master, a master of sound, alliteration, and rhythm like the *Gawain* poet loses a great deal when modernized.

### A Grim Game

Nevertheless, a good deal remains. The *Gawain* poet works, or so it appears, from a Welsh strand of tradition in which Gawain and not the French Lancelot is the most noteworthy of Arthur's knights, and it is Gawain, upholding the honor of Arthur's court, who undergoes the tests that form the main line of the story. A mysterious knight—brilliant green from head to toe—barges into King Arthur's Yuletide feast and requests what he calls "a Christmas game." The game turns out to be a grim one, stemming from deep in the Celtic past, the "so-called "beheading game."

The Green Knight invites someone from Arthur's court to strike off his head, with the proviso that a year later the Knight be allowed to return the blow. To protect his king, Gawain takes up the challenge, but the Knight survives Gawain's mighty blow, picks up his severed head, and invites Gawain to seek him out at the "Green Chapel" in a year's time.

A year is a long time to wait, with such prospect in store, but Gawain does so, and at the appointed time sets out on what proves to be a rough winter journey. As the poet tells us, "Ner slayn with the slete he sleted in his yrnys / Mo nyghtes then innoghe in naked rockes," "Near slain with the sleet, he slept in his irons / More nights than enough in naked rocks." He faces the further difficulty that he doesn't know where the Green Chapel is. But seek and ye shall find. As Christmas approaches, Gawain prays that he might find himself somewhere where he can hear mass, and low and behold, a castle appears. His host at the castle, the energetic Sir Bertilak de Hautdesert, tells Gawain that the Chapel is very near, and invites him, meanwhile, to join his court for Christmas. And meanwhile, he proposes a game—the "Exchange of Winnings Game." Each day the host is to hunt and Gawain to stay at the castle, each to exchange winnings at day's end.

And for the next three days, the host hunts and turns over the game that he kills, and Gawain does his best to resist the increasingly straightforward overtures of the host's beautiful wife, turning over at day's end polite kisses. Until the third day when, though he has maintained both his chastity and his courtesy—no easy task under the circumstances—Gawain accepts a green "girdle," which, so Lady Bertilak informs him, has the property of protecting its wearer from wounds. Just what Gawain needs. He decides not to exchange such useful protection.

The next day, Gawain keeps his appointment, only to find, to his consternation, that his host, Bertilak, and the Green Knight are one and the same. The Green Knight spares Gawain, however, only nicking him on the neck, because, the girdle aside, Gawain has passed the test—not only the test of keeping his promise to return to endure his blow, but also the unannounced test of Bertilak's wife. He has failed only in concealing the girdle, and that, as he thought, just to save his life. The Green Knight, in fact, terms Sir Gawain "On the faultlest freke that ever on fote yede," in effect, the most faultless man who ever walked on foot. But Gawain is not perfect, and to his humiliation, he knows it.

The author addresses many themes here, the relation between courtly ethics (which require courtesy) and Christian ethics (which require chastity), the perils of reputation and heedlessness, and perhaps most searchingly, the limits of human goodness, human virtue, and human institutions. But all with consummate lightness, with understated and self-effacing tact. And beyond that, in a work as carefully crafted and deftly balanced as any in the English Middle Ages, the author's own *Pearl*, an inimitable, meterical *tour de force* aside. *Sir Gawain* is truly a masterwork, and one that amply repays the most careful reading and rereading.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. How does the Gawain poet combine the folkloric motifs of the “Beheading Game” and the “Exchange of Winnings Game” into a coherent narrative pattern?
2. What does Sir Gawain suggest about the poet’s vision of the limitations of human virtue?

### Suggested Reading

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Anderson, J.J., ed. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience*. London: Dent, 1996.

### Other Books of Interest

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Borroff, Marie, trans. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Patience and Pearl*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.



## Lecture 13: Religious Literature

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Jacobus De Voragine's *The Golden Legend*.

In talking about secular works, as we have thus far, we have in one sense at least taken a rather misleading course. The overwhelming majority of medieval manuscripts are more or less directly religious in focus. Our own preferred focus on secular writings testifies to our own predominant interests, not to those of our medieval forebears. Even in a literary context—Bibles and theological works aside—works with a religious focus abound, some of the very highest quality. And in fidelity to what has survived, if for no other reason, we need in this lecture to take a look at a few noteworthy works that testify to this facet of medieval sensibility.

### The Survival of Religious Writings

One sort of writing that survives in abundance is religious lyrics. These are interesting on several counts. For one thing, on the whole, they testify to the new, affective Christianity that rose more or less in conjunction with the new ideas about the place of love in human life, which we have discussed in the last several lectures. St. Francis of Assisi was influential here—and no mean poet in his own right, though his interests lay predominantly elsewhere. Coupled with this change in sensibility was a new reverence for the figure of Mary, conceived, in effect, as the universal mother of humankind, always willing to forgive and to welcome sinners, a motherly refuge from divine wrath. A fine expression of this mode of devotion appears in the Middle English lyric whose refrain might have been taken from a poem of courtly love—“*Quia amore languet*,” “because I languish for love.” But the speaker here is not a love-lorn knight of his lady, but Mary herself, who languishes with love for her human children, sinful or not. As the poet puts it, speaking imaginatively on Mary's behalf, “yet if thou sinne, som prayere take / Or trust in me as I have tolde. / Am I not thy moder called? / Why shuldest thou flee? I love thee, lo! / I am thy frende; thy helpe beholde, / *Quia amore languet*.” Other lyrics focused on Mary's sufferings as Christ died on the cross, the idea being to suggest her all-encompassing human sympathy—she too had suffered; she knew and cared. An analogous sensibility, of course, found copious expression in the painting of Visitation scenes and Madonnas.

But Marian lyrics by no means exhaust the secular expression of religious devotion. Saints' lives too were an immensely popular, if perhaps suspect, genre. (One of my professors once suggested to us that martyrdom narratives in particular sometimes manage rather uneasily to combine the attractions of a sermon and a sado-masochistic striptease.) Noteworthy in this regard is the *Legenda Aurea*, or *The Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine (1229–1298).

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Likewise influential were the Corpus Christi, or “mystery” plays. These were generally performed in mid-summer, near the time of the summer solstice when days were longest, in honor of the “body of Christ,” the “real presence” of Christ in the eucharist. These plays characteristically sought to depict the whole course of Christian history, from the Creation and the Fall of the Angels through the Incarnation and the Crucifixion, all the way to the Last Judgment. Various episodes were ordinarily assigned to various guilds in the cities that undertook such performances, and the same guilds performed them, year after year, on the elaborate “pageant wagons,” which were, in effect, moveable stages. York, Chester, and Townley, among other cities, staged plays that have survived, some very vigorous and entertaining indeed. They had a clear effect on the later rise of Elizabethan drama, and so too did the “morality plays,” which were elaborate allegories of salvation. The most famous among these last are probably *Everyman* and *The Castle of Perseverance*, and many critics have seen their influence even in Shakespeare, in particular in characters like Falstaff, who has cheerfully manifest predecessors in old figures of “Gluttony” or “Vice.”

### The Works of Langland

Entirely different in tone are the works—or the work—of William Langland (ca. 1330–1400), who seems to have worked on one version or another of *Piers Plowman* for pretty much his entire life. The works survive in three versions, the so-called A-, B-, and C-texts, evidently composed in that order, each of the latter two a more or less full-scale revision of what came before. And indeed, some have argued that a Z-text precedes even A. Langland is an edgy and obsessive writer—very powerful at his best—and very much concerned with inequity and corruption throughout his text. He writes in a dialect closer to modern standard English than the *Gawain* poet—Langland seems to have come from the Southwest Midlands, though he evidently spent a good deal of time in London, and his outrage at injustice gives him rather the tone of an old-style Manchester Labour MP. He lived to see the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381, during which, so we are told, at least some of the leaders quoted his works, and saw too its grisly aftermath, which evidently gave him pause. But his commitment to finding salvation, to social justice, and to righteousness remains constant throughout. It is a dangerous game to seek to identify proto-protestants—one falls all too easily into anachronism—but if there were in fact any such, Langland may well have been among their number. He seems to share something of the deep-rooted dissatisfaction with the complacent ecclesiastical and social status quo that motivated the early reformers.

We have already had occasion to discuss *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The other three works appearing in *Cotton Nero A.x* are likewise noteworthy, all explicitly (as opposed to implicitly) religious in theme. *Purity* or *Cleanness* is a good poem, and *Patience*, a brief, humane, wise, and witty retelling of the tale of Jonah, is better still. The opening poem in the collection, though, known to us as *Pearl*, is an unquestioned, untranslatable masterpiece—fully the equal, in my view, to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and one of the most astonishing triumphs of metrics and organization composed in any language at any time. That is, in fact, why it is so fiendishly difficult to translate.

Like *Sir Gawain*, *Pearl* consists of 101 stanzas—100 being a “perfect” number, and one more being equivalent to one less, so far as attaining perfection is concerned. Humans can’t. But while *Sir Gawain* makes use of Middle English alliterative meter, a legacy, so one presumes, of the Anglo-Saxon meter of the past, *Pearl* makes use of alliteration *and* rhyme *and* a stanzaic construction that systematically concludes stanzas, five or six stanzas at a time, with a variation on the same line—and by and large does so with seeming ease, without visible sign of effort or strain, as if the words just came out that way. All that, coupled with the poet’s numerological concerns, is what makes *Pearl* the metrical gem that it is. And appropriately so, since its theme is the Kingdom of Heaven, which is of course perfect by definition.

The Pearl of the title turns out to be the toddler daughter of the speaker of the poem, and when the poem begins, he has gone to mourn her at her grave. He there falls asleep and is granted a vision of his daughter in glory, but, to his consternation, she is all grown up and high among the ranks of the redeemed. This offends the dreamer’s sense of justice. What has she done in her short life to deserve that sort of exaltation? The answer is, of course, nothing—she has been saved by grace, as she explains to her father by recourse to the parable of the vineyard. He is still unsatisfied, though, to some degree at least, and at the conclusion of the poem seeks to join her in paradise and awakens, nonetheless, consoled. Heaven isn’t fair—thank goodness.

Much of the power of the poem, though, comes from the effortless meter in which the dreamer’s complaint is enclosed. It is as if his own misgivings are already foreseen and enclosed within the providential pattern of which the poet’s metrical mastery is the poetic counterpart.

Here are a few lines to suggest the flavor, as the dreamer, suddenly in paradise, sees his daughter across a brook that he seeks to cross.

More and more, and yet wel mare,  
Me lyste to se the broke byyonde;  
For if it was fayr ther I con fare,  
Wel loveloker was the fyrrre londe.

And here is a modernized version.

More and more, and yet well more,  
I wanted to see beyond the brook;  
for it was fair where I could go,  
much lovelier was the further land.

But for the dreamer, at least, not yet.

And all of this discussion, of course, leaves for the moment out of account the greatest work of them all in this genre, and it may be, in any genre, Dante’s *Commedia*, completed about 1321.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

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1. To what extent, and in what contexts, does medieval religious literature mirror the attitude toward human emotion expressed in troubadour poetry and in the chivalric tradition?
2. What were “mystery” or “Corpus Christi” cycle plays?
3. How does the *Pearl* poet make use of metrics in the context of his poem to suggest the providential control of human life?

### Suggested Reading

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de Voragine, Jacobus. *The Golden Legend*. Trans. Christopher Stace. New York: Penguin, 1998.

### Other Books of Interest

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Beadle, Richard, and Pamela M. King, eds. *York Mystery Plays: A Selection in Modern Spelling*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Langland, William. *Piers Plowman: A New Translation of the B-Text*. Trans. A.V.C. Schmidt. New York: Oxford UP, 1992.

Luria, Maxwell S., and Richard L. Hoffman, eds. *Middle English Lyrics: Authoritative Texts, Critical Backgrounds: Perspectives on Six Poems*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974.

## Lecture 14: The Later Middle Ages

The **Suggested Reading** for this lecture is Johan Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*.

In a sense, the works of Dante (1265–1321), the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and in their way, the great Gothic cathedrals, mark what has often been seen as a high point, indeed, perhaps *the* high point of medieval culture. Thereafter—and particularly following the Black Death, the bubonic plague of the mid-fourteenth century, there is a pervasive change in cultural tone, in a sense a sort of loss of cultural confidence. The Black Death itself is clearly a factor—it is hard to imagine the impact of a plague that within a few short years killed off (authorities vary) roughly one-third of the population of Europe. All the more so since, as one sometimes forgets, no one knew when, or whether, the killing would stop. But even before the plague arrived, Europe had evidently suffered subtle changes in climate and correspondingly poor harvests.

### A Cultural Self-Confidence

Whatever the reasons may have been, the later 1300s and the years to follow seem to have seen a cultural retrenchment. The years before—the so-called High Middle Ages—seem to have been marked by a cultural self-confidence that Europe hadn't known in a thousand years, since the most prosperous days of the Roman Empire under the rule of emperors like Trajan and Hadrian. Europe once again enjoyed something like the same prosperity—Northwestern Europe, indeed, had *never* been so prosperous before, enjoying a standard of living comparable, as best I can judge, to that of modern Mexico (gross inequities and all). And this prosperity—and ensuing confidence—found expression in all sorts of ways. We have mentioned the Gothic cathedrals already, a vast and triumphant expression of exuberance, effort, and treasure. Just as remarkable, and no doubt more directly influential in contributing to material well-being, was a largely anonymous technological venturesomeness in agriculture, in shipbuilding, in navigation, in clockmaking, in business and accounting practices, in windmills, mills in general, and so forth. The same venturesomeness found expression in an enhancement of intellectual life, not only through the enthusiastic translation and assimilation of the works of Aristotle and others (most often from Arabic translations, at least in the first instance), but through the rise of universities: Paris, Bologna, Oxford, Cambridge, and others, institutions devoted to learning that had no real parallel in the world of antiquity. (The museum and library at Alexandria, and the schools in Athens founded by Plato and Aristotle, the original Academy and Lyceum, come closest, but the new universities confined as they were, were a good deal more nearly open to all [male] comers.)

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The University of Paris in its early years was preeminent in theology and philosophy, and there Aquinas worked, drawing on Aristotle to formulate his highly optimistic vision of faith and reason working in conjunction to assure human welfare and happiness in this world and the world to come. Aquinas' vision found its most radiant expression in Dante's *Commedia*, which sought to chart the whole course of human life and human history. For Dante, the world itself was a tangible expression of divine thought—God was revealed, to some extent at least, wherever one chose to turn, if one saw aright, and the divinely sanctioned end of human life was the “good of intellect,” which for Dante, at least, was tantamount to bliss.

### **A Change in the Weather**

Despite the problems of his time, Dante's own exile among them, Dante's vision is profoundly hopeful. As the century progressed, though, the weather changed. It was not only poor harvests and the Black Death. Ecclesiastical problems worsened. From 1309 to 1377 the papacy abandoned Rome for Avignon in the so-called “Babylonian captivity,” and eventually the Church suffered the “Great Schism,” with rival popes casting anathemas far and wide, a situation that was not resolved until the Council of Constance early in the fifteenth century.

The two most advanced nation-states in Europe, indeed, the first really to attain that status—England and France—engaged in protracted dynastic conflict, the 100 Years' War, which simmered intermittently from 1337 to 1453, four or five generations of chronic unrest. And there were philosophical and theological changes as well. The movement of “nominalism,” espoused William of Ockham and others, called into question the “sacramental” cosmos of Aquinas and Dante—the old quasi-Platonic conception that the world itself was a visible reflection of God's thoughts, of the divine *Logos*, and in the process, in effect, if not by design, devalued the role of reason itself in coming to grips with the world and with God.

### **A New Personalism**

One result was the rise of a whole series of religious renewal movements, of what, indeed, at the time and from a Catholic perspective seemed personalist, anti-sacramentalist heresies. If reason was an unreliable guide to religious life, then that left faith and scripture—or doubt. The first stirrings of what would become the Reformation became ever clearer in Jan Hus of Bohemia (ca. 1373–1415), executed at Constance, and in John Wycliffe (ca. 1330–1384) and the English Lollards.

This new personalism found expression in the literature of the time as well. Many, if not most, of the great works of the early Middle Ages are anonymous. Not so later on. Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), known to English speakers as Petrarch, became quite literally a poet “laureate,” self-consciously striving to match and surpass the achievements of the ancients. And the new age saw a new irony as well. Not only in the works of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375), author most famously of the *Decameron*, but in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1340–1400) as well. There are authors, Dante among them, who seem almost always to be in earnest. What they say is what they mean. There are others, Chaucer among them, who are inclined to speak

plainly almost never. Whatever else they may be, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are a masterpiece of deft and wily indirection. Chaucer assumes dozens of voices. And not one of them is reliably his own. But that is a matter worthy of a lecture series in its own right.

## FOR GREATER UNDERSTANDING



### Questions

1. Many critics have detected a striking change of outlook between the so-called “High Middle Ages” and the later Middle Ages. What factors might help to account for such a change?
2. How did Aquinas’ vision find expression in Dante’s *Commedia*?

### Suggested Reading

Huizinga, Johan. *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1949.

### Other Books of Interest

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