

Suggestions for Pandemic Summer Reading from the Middle Ages (mostly)

By Prof. Anna Wilson

Looking to broaden your literary horizons and flex your reading muscles over the summer with some medieval and early modern literature? The following reading list offers some recommendations for excellent reads from before 1500 CE for COVID-19 times, and a few modern texts inspired by the middle ages. Attached are links to free online translations and other resources, including podcast episodes and digitized manuscripts; almost all the texts should also be available in affordable translations or originals from your local bookstore (if in doubt, look for Penguin translations or editions published by Norton, Broadview, or Everyman). Texts in asterisk (*) are often included in the English department's Arrivals classes. If you have any questions about any of the texts below, if you want to discuss a text, or want further recommendations, email Professor Anna Wilson, anna_wilson@fas.harvard.edu.

SEE THE END OF THIS DOCUMENT FOR GENERAL RESOURCES, NOTES ON ACCESSING ONLINE REPOSITORIES AND WHERE YOU CAN BUY PRINT BOOKS ONLINE

Beowulf* (author unknown)

A classic of Old English literature, written down between 600 and 900CE but probably composed long before that and passed down orally for many generations. This is the only surviving complete epic poem of the Old English tradition, heavily influenced by Germanic and Scandinavian literatures (Old English, a language spoken in England before the Norman Conquest of 1066, is quite different from the Middle English of Chaucer and other later medieval poetry). The poem recounts two great deeds by the hero Beowulf: his vanquishing of the monstrous Grendel and his mother, and, many years later as an old man, his fight to the death with a dragon. Beautiful, strange, and poignant, this is a window into a different world.

Where to read it for free:

LION (translation by Seamus Heaney): <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/docview/2147693322?accountid=11311>

The Seamus Heaney translation, slightly abridged, is available in audio, read by the author, on youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AaB0trCztM0>

If purchasing:

Seamus Heaney's translation is excellent and easily findable second hand. Both the Broadview and Norton anthologies also contain a full translation of the poem.

Go deeper:

The British Library web exhibition on the Beowulf manuscript: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/beowulf>

The trailer for the 2007 movie adaptation with Angelina Jolie as Grendel's Mother (!): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaShOr5AeKA>

Judith*

The Bible provided favourite material for medieval poets, and this Old English retelling of the story of Judith and Holofernes, in which a widow seduces and then murders the king oppressing her people, is justly popular.

Read online:

<https://web.archive.org/web/20020205222339/http://www.dnaco.net/~sirbill/Judith.htm>

If purchasing:

Judith is very short, and not usually published as a standalone poem in print; it's contained in most medieval literature anthologies.

Go deeper:

The extremely graphic painting of Judith and Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi, c. 1620: <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/judith-beheading-holofernes>

(Read more about this fascinating woman painter of the Italian Renaissance and see more of her paintings of Biblical women here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artemisia_Gentileschi)

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (author unknown)

After entering into an ill-advised game of mutual decapitation with a mysterious green knight at a Christmas party, Sir Gawain leaves the court of King Arthur to plunge into the wilderness, to fulfill a promise that will mean his certain death. Finding his way to a castle in the woods, he falls into another ill-advised game, this time one of sexy one-upmanship with the gorgeous lord and lady of the castle. Caught in two impossible situations at once, Gawain must navigate the

dual codes of the upstanding Christian knight and the romantic hero of chivalric literature. A poem of rich surfaces, lush description, wit, violence, and sexuality.

Read online:

Simon Armitage translation via LION: <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/docview/2147647661?accountid=11311>

Jessie Weston introduction and translation (prose, 1898):

<https://d.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/publication/weston-sir-gawain-and-the-green-knight>

JRR Tolkien translation (verse):

http://jessicasladechms.weebly.com/uploads/5/1/7/4/51740093/sir_gawain_complete_large_text.pdf

If purchasing:

I recommend the Simon Armitage translation, which can be bought individually or is included in the Norton textbook.

Go deeper:

An introduction to the poem by British poet Simon Armitage, who translated the poem, with images from the manuscript held by the British Library: <https://www.bl.uk/medieval-literature/articles/sir-gawain-and-the-green-knight-an-introduction>

The text in the original northern dialect of Middle English, alternating with modern English translation: <https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poems/sir-gawain-and-green-knight>

The trailer of the new film adaptation, *The Green Knight*, starring Dev Patel, slated for release in 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VoJc2tH3WBw>

The trailer of the extremely awful 1984 film adaptation starring Sean Connery: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lf7hE3evy0>

Lais*, Marie de France

A woman imprisoned in a tower falls in love with a hawk-man who flies to her window; a werewolf, trapped in wolf form after his wife betrays him, exacts vengeance; a neglected knight breaks a promise to his fairy mistress; two separated lovers communicate by means of a trained swan. Marie de France's short poem narratives tell stories of romance and loss where the animal and human, natural and supernatural worlds are blurred.

Read online:

The Internet Archive (you'll have to sign up for a free account):

<https://archive.org/details/laisofmariedefra0000mari>

Four of the lais translated on Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/46234>

If purchasing:

<https://broadviewpress.com/product/the-lais-of-marie-de-france/#tab-description>

Both the Norton and Broadview anthologies include two or three stories from the Lais.

Go deeper:

The British Library digitized manuscript: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-lays-and-fables-of-marie-de-france>

Roman de Silence*, by Heldris de Cornualle

In order to get around a law that women cannot inherit, a noble couple raise their daughter as a boy; this romance follows the adventures of its protagonist, Silence, whose pronouns shift depending on their gender performance, and who is easily read from a modern perspective as a genderqueer or transgender protagonist. Silence, an excellent warrior and musician, attracts the favour of the king and the unwanted attentions of the queen, and faces increasing difficulty in keeping his secret.

Read online:

Available via Project Muse (with your Harvardkey): <https://muse-jhu-edu.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/book/30950>.

If purchasing:

I recommend the Sarah Roche-Mahdi side-by-side original French and modern English translation. Available second hand from Abebooks:

https://www.abebooks.com/servlet/BookDetailsPL?bi=30631741001&searchurl=kn%3Dsilence%2Bmahdi-roche%26sortby%3D17&cm_sp=snippet- -srp1- -title1

Further reading:

Were there transgender people in the middle ages? By Gabrielle Bychowski

<https://www.publicmedievalist.com/transgender-middle-ages/>

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer

A classic for a reason. Inspired by Boccaccio's Decameron (see below), Chaucer's witty, lively, unfinished work begins with character sketches of a group of pilgrims from different walks of life who gather in an inn in a suburb south of London to begin a pilgrimage to Canterbury, a journey of several days, and agree to take part in a storytelling competition to pass the time. The rest of the work alternates between the tales the pilgrims tell – most of which are translations or retellings of popular medieval stories – and the pilgrims' bickering. A dazzling miscellany of high romance, crude sexual humour, tragedy, and philosophical meditations on life. While it's available in modern English translations, for a really satisfying read, try the Middle English, especially read aloud – a modern English speaker can understand it without much trouble (see the resources below on reading Middle English). Like the Decameron, you can dip in and out of this one, but make sure to read each character's introduction (prologue) to their tale as well as the tale itself! For slapstick sexual comedy, try the Wife of Bath's Tale, the Miller's Tale, or the Merchant's Tale; for tragedy, adventure, or dark humour, try the Clerk's Tale, the Man of Law's Tale, or the Pardoner's Tale.*

Read online:

Original Middle English: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/22120>

Another Middle English version, broken up into sections for easier reading:
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/CT>

Side-by-side original and modern English translations on the Harvard Chaucer webpage:
<https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/pages/text-and-translations>

Modern English at the Internet Archive (sign up for a free account):
<https://archive.org/details/canterburytales000chau>

If purchasing:

In Middle English: <https://bookshop.org/books/the-canterbury-tales-second-edition-revised/9781554811069>

Several of the most popular Tales are included in the Broadview and Norton textbooks.

In modern translation: <https://bookshop.org/books/the-canterbury-tales-9781854598837/9780140424386>

Go deeper:

How to Read Chaucer, lessons in Middle English on the Harvard Chaucer website:
<https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/lesson-index>

The fully digitized 'Hengwrt' manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*, at the National Library of Wales: <https://www.library.wales/discover/digital-gallery/manuscripts/the-middle-ages/the-hengwrt-chaucer/#?c=&m=&s=&cv=5&xywh=-811%2C-23%2C5009%2C6044>

The fully digitized 'Ellesmere' manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales*, at the Huntington library in San Marino, California. This manuscript contains miniature portraits of Chaucer and of the pilgrims, which often appear on the covers of modern editions.
<https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p15150coll7/id/2838/>

British poet Patience Agbabi performs her 'remix' of The Wife of Bath's Tale, "The Wife of Bafa": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LptEFGhR7A> (If you like this, consider buying her book of poems remixing the entire *Canterbury Tales*, called *Telling Tales*)

The Global Chaucers project: <https://globalchaucers.wordpress.com/>

The Decameron, by Giovanni Boccaccio

A group of young men and women go to self-isolate together in a country villa while the bubonic plague rages through Florence, and pass the time by taking turns to tell stories, ten per day for ten days, each day with its own theme. So racy and religiously irreverent that older translations often omit several of the stories, the darkness of the Decameron's setting is in tension with the lightness and humour of most of the stories, which are full of slapstick humour and sexual comedy. An inspiration of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* – indeed, the Clerk's Tale is a retelling of the very last story of the Decameron, 10.10 (day 10, story 10). Ideal for dipping in and out of, as most of the stories are quite short and do not need to be read in order.

Read online:

A slightly archaic translation is available on Project Gutenberg:
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/23700>

On Hathitrust (log in using your Harvardkey):

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.c004871002&view=1up&seq=1>

The Internet Archive (create a free account): <https://archive.org/details/decameron00giov>

To purchase:

You should be able to find a cheap second hand copy on any online bookstore; the Musa, McWilliam, Rebhorn, or Hainsworth translations are all good.
<https://bookshop.org/books/the-decameron-revised/9780140449303>

Go deeper:

Podcast episode of “The Spouter Inn” which discusses the Decameron and reading during pandemics, with a few particular stories recommended:

<https://www.megaphonic.fm/spouter/27>

“When Not to Translate” by Tim Parks, on the challenges of translating the Decameron:

<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2016/11/07/decameron-when-not-to-translate/>

A blogger who has collected images of paintings inspired by the Decameron:

<https://eclecticlight.co/2019/01/14/the-decameron-index-to-stories-and-the-finest-paintings/>

The Consolation of Philosophy, by Boethius

Politician and statesman Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (pronounced ‘Bo-EE-thius’) wrote The Consolation of Philosophy, one of the most influential works of medieval literature, over a year while imprisoned and anticipating his own execution. An imagined dialogue in prose and verse between himself and the allegorical personification of Philosophy, The Consolation of Philosophy tries to make sense of misfortune, death, and the possibility of happiness. Written in Italy after the fall of the western Roman empire to the Ostrogoths and Visigoths in the late fifth century, this text bridges the classical and medieval, brilliantly incorporating the influence of ancient Greek philosophers into a Christian worldview.

Read online:

Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/14328>

Ebook of 2009 translation published by Harvard University Press translation: <https://doi-org.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/10.4159/9780674028456>

If purchasing:

<https://bookshop.org/books/the-consolation-of-philosophy-9780674048355/9780674048355>

Go deeper:

Image of a 970 CE English manuscript of *The Consolation of Philosophy*:

<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/boethius-in-latin>

Image of a 1390 CE French manuscript of *The Consolation of Philosophy* that shows how important this text still was, more than 700 years after its composition; only the four lines of the top right column in larger font are actually Boethius’ text, and the rest of the page is commentary and analysis of those lines. This is a typical example of the way medieval scholars gathered knowledge on the page to pass down through generations, the equivalent of a modern critical edition.

<http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/onlineex/illmanus/roymanucoll/i/011roy000015b03u00003000.html>

Illustrations from a 15th century manuscript of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, now owned by the Getty museum, including the Wheel of Fortune, an important image for medieval literature.

<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/1519/coetivy-master-henri-de-vulcop-anicius-manlius-severinus-boethius-called-boethius-jean-de-meun-miniatures-from-boethius-consolation-de-philosophie-french-about-1460-1470/>

An article about copies of Boethius' work owned by Harvard's Houghton library, with images:

https://www.ericmweaver.com/uploads/1/9/2/3/19237185/mcmullen_and_weaver_boethius_at_harvard.pdf

The Revelations of Divine Love, by Julian of Norwich

A great work of medieval Christian mystic theology, one of the few by a woman, the Revelations recounts a series of visions Julian had while critically ill, which she spent the rest of her life trying to understand. Like the Consolation of Philosophy, this is a meditation on consolation and faith in adversity, but is rooted not in Classical philosophy but in an intimate relationship between the soul and God. While Consolation was written by a classically educated statesman, Julian, who claims to be "unlettered" – illiterate (although she certainly had had a great many books read to her) – was an anchoress, a female religious recluse, and spent most of her life voluntarily locked in a single-roomed dwelling, with limited contact with the outside world. The Revelations attests to the creative freedom of the human mind, and has its own answers to the problems of living in a world where pain and fear exist.

Read online:

Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/52958>

Read in Middle English: <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/publication/crampton-shewings-of-julian-norwich>

Or on LION: <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/docview/2138594769?accountid=11311>

If purchasing:

The Penguin edition: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/261039/revelations-of-divine-love-by-julian-of-norwich/>

Go deeper:

Manuscript in the British Library: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-short-text-of-julian-of-norwichs-revelations-of-divine-love>

Church and shrine of St Julian of Norwich (including images of her reconstructed cell):
<https://www.britainexpress.com/counties/norfolk/norwich/st-julian.htm>

The Once and Future King, TH White (1958)

This great Arthurian fantasy of the twentieth century is loosely based on Le Morte d'Arthur (composed in prison by career criminal Sir Thomas Malory in 1485, and available on Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1251/1251-h/1251-h.htm>). TH White's masterpiece is sometimes faithful retelling, sometimes an entirely new take on hundreds of years of Arthurian legends. The first part, The Sword in the Stone, on which the Disney movie is based, is justly the most famous, on the young Arthur's upbringing and education by the wizard Merlin. Light and comedic, it is in contrast to the following three volumes on the peak, decline, and tragic collapse of Arthur's court and the failure of his vision for a just and better kingdom. A psychologically complex fantasy adventure, this is also, like the other great mid-twentieth-century medievalist fantasy The Lord of the Rings, a nostalgic paean to a middle ages that never was for an irrecoverably industrialized England in the aftermath of World War II.

Read online:

Project Gutenberg: <http://gutenberg.ca/ebooks/whiteth-onceandfutureking/whiteth-onceandfutureking-00-h.html>

Boston Public Library ebook (all Harvard students are eligible for a library card):
<https://bpl.bibliocommons.com/item/show/1173416980>

If purchasing:

Easily available second hand from most online bookstores (see the end of this document for non-Amazon suggestions!)

Go deeper:

Rent the Disney classic via Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LzO0cnMeVE>

Television series available through Kanopy (with your Harvardkey) about the King Arthur legend through history: <https://harvard.kanopy.com/video/king-arthur-history-and-legend-origins-king->

H is for Hawk, by Helen Macdonald (2016)

A nonfiction book that defies genre, H is for Hawk is part the author's memoir of training a goshawk to hunt from her hand through traditional falconry methods, part a meditation on grief, loss, and the isolating effects of depression after the sudden death of her father, part a history of falconry from the middle ages to Nazi Germany, and part an exploration into the life of TH White, author of The Once and Future King (see above). White was fascinated by falconry,

which he saw as symbolizing man's mastery of wild nature and also the nobility of days gone by. His account of King Arthur's childhood contains an extended section in which Arthur is transformed into a falcon (in the book this is much darker and more frightening than in the Disney version), and White also wrote another book about his own disastrous attempt to tame a goshawk. The isolation and obsession of taming a baby hawk, the strange world of modern falconry, the darker side of medieval nostalgia, and the evolving relationship between humans and nature are all explored here.

Read online:

H is for Hawk is available as an ebook via the Boston Public Library. :

<https://bpl.bibliocommons.com/item/show/2155748980>.

The Internet Archive, via your Harvardkey (you'll also need to make a free account):

https://archive.org/details/hisforhawk0000macd_s8k4/mode/2up

If purchasing:

<https://bookshop.org/books/h-is-for-hawk-9781594139314/9780802124739>

Resources for reading medieval literature:

The Middle English Texts Series (TEAMS): editions of a huge number of popular and less well known medieval English texts, all available in digital versions with introductions, notes, and glossaries of difficult words, and even some audio recordings. <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams>

The Middle English Dictionary: an online dictionary of middle English.

<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary>

Harvard's Chaucer website: includes information and resources for reading Chaucer and Middle English in general. <https://chaucer.fas.harvard.edu/>

Hollis electronic resources and databases for Middle English literature:

https://databases.hollis.harvard.edu/primo-explore/search?query=any,contains,%22middle%20english%22%20OR%20medieval%20OR%20%22middle%20ages%22&tab=everything&search_scope=default_scope&vid=HVD_DB&lang=en_US&offset=0.

Anthologies and Textbooks

If you want to read widely, and especially if you're planning to take Arrivals next year; Prof. Simpson's class uses Norton 10th edition, Prof. Wilson's class uses Broadview 3rd edition. Both textbooks are excellent and contain a great deal of supplementary material and historical information as well as translations of medieval texts.

The Broadview Anthology of British Literature Volume 1: The Medieval Period -

<https://broadviewpress.com/product/the-broadview-anthology-of-british-literature-the-medieval-period-third-edition/#tab-description>,

Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Middle Ages -

<https://wnorton.com/books/9780393603026>

Old and Middle English c.890-c.1400: An Anthology (Blackwell Anthologies), Treharne, Elaine, Published by Wiley-Blackwell (2004) – Many second hand versions are available at abebooks.com

Online repositories

Most of the texts are available digitally in modern (but early 20th century) translations from Project Gutenberg, a huge repository of ebooks of texts that are out of copyright. You can download each text in several formats for ereaders, or read them from your browser.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/>

Literature Online (LION) will give you access, through your Harvardkey, to many up-to-date translations of medieval texts. This link will take you to a list of all of the primary texts for authors who lived up until 1500: <http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/search/1753455?accountid=11311>. Or you can find a specific text by doing an Advanced Search, making sure to select the "Primary Texts search" option. The individual book recommendations below contain links to the text on LION.

The modern texts are available in ebook format to download from the Boston Public Library system (and maybe your local library system too). All Harvard students are eligible for a BPL card: <https://www.bpl.org/ecard/>

Where to buy books?

Want to avoid Amazon? Don't have a local independent bookstore who is selling online? Try: <https://www.abebooks.com/> (secondhand bookseller)

<https://bookshop.org/> (buys from independent bookstores)

Or one of these options: <https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/amazon-alternatives-buying-books/>