

Arthurian Literature and the Uses of Fantasy

Instructor: Andrew Maxwell

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Office Hours: Thursday 12pm – 2pm

Tutorial Description

For almost a thousand years, the adventures of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table have enchanted authors and readers alike, transporting generations of audiences to magical realms filled with knights, ladies, dragons, and castles. Crossing temporal, linguistic and formal boundaries, these stories have inspired innumerable retellings and reimaginings—from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s foundational *History of the Kings of Britain* to Mary Pope Osborne’s beloved *Magic Tree House* series and the award-winning *Witcher III* videogame—and they continue to exert a powerful influence on both the genre of fantasy fiction and broader societal ideals of love, friendship, courage, and honor.

Reading widely across sources medieval, modern, and contemporary, this course embarks on a quest to understand the legacy of this enduring phenomenon. We will examine how and why Arthurian literature continues to generate excitement in audiences, analyzing the particular pleasures offered to both authors and readers by the lore of the Round Table as we investigate the affordances of fantasy today and yesterday. But we will also critique the use of Arthurian literature in the construction of societal and national histories, asking serious questions about the prejudices woven into these popular stories, the ways in which the medievalist allure of Camelot continues to perpetuate racist, imperialist, and misogynist narratives in contemporary imaginations.

In doing so, this course engages with key concerns in current literary inquiry, bringing together post-critical emphases on the pleasures and enchantments of reading with critical-historical attention to the ways in which both medieval texts and modern fantasy and medievalism privilege particular identities by excluding and subjugating others. As we read across the vast corpus of Arthurian literature, focusing on medieval texts like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*, and Marie de France’s *Lanval* and modern reimaginings like T.H. White’s *The Once and Future King*, Rosemary Sutcliff’s *Sword at Sunset*, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*, and David Lowery’s *The Green Knight*, we will ultimately examine the relationships between these different modes of reading, asking how a deeper understanding of the uses of Arthurian literature today might help to shape more equitable interventions tomorrow.

Learning Goals:

- To engage deeply and comparatively with the archive of Arthurian literature in English, both medieval and modern
- To recognize the similarities and differences between medieval romance and modern fantasy
- To better analyze the ways in which different writers intervene in the narratives of particular characters, their potential reasons for doing so, and the ramifications of those changes
- To think more critically about familiar stories and characters, considering the particular affordances they offer to readers while also questioning the political, racial, and gendered narratives they perpetuate
- To write a critical paper of substantial length on a research topic of interest, which will require you to

- Design a research question
- Develop a critical bibliography around that question, including a range of methods and perspectives
- Bring existing scholarship into conversation with your own arguments
- Write with great nuance, clarity, and precision

Assignments:

- **Short Essay** (Week 4, 15%): A 5-7 page paper, an extended close reading of a primary text. This will be followed by an individual student conference to discuss the paper.
- **Prospectus & Annotated Bibliography** (Week 8, 10%) two page prospectus of the project before you begin working on it. An annotated bibliography of 8-10 sources should accompany the prospectus. The bibliography should reproduce in a few sentences the main argument of the work you intend to make use of. It should also include, in a few sentences, how you plan on engaging with the thesis of the work you have summarized.
- **Draft** (Week 11, 15%): A full draft of the final paper. This will be followed by an individual student conference to discuss revisions.
- **Final Paper** (Reading Period, 40%): 20-25 page paper on a major work read in this class.
- **Participation & Preparation** (20%): A small seminar like this one thrives only when you have read and thought about the texts before we've met.
- **Conference Presentation** (ungraded but required): a 5-minute paper on your research

Required Texts:

- Rosemary Sutcliff, *Sword at Sunset*
- Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*
- T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*
- Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*
- Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Idylls of the King*
- Anonymous, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

Other primary and secondary readings will be made available through Canvas.

Tutorial Schedule

Week 1: Uses of Fantasy

We will begin with three very different modern engagements with Arthurian lore, each of which deploys a different artistic form. Thinking comparatively across the novel, the lyrical ballad, and the power metal ballad, we will analyze the associations and expectations conjured by the term “fantasy.” We will consider how each text situates its audience in relation to specific elements of the Arthurian legend, and in conversation with Rita Felski’s *Uses of Literature*, we will also begin to examine the particular textual experiences each form offers its audience and why these experiences matter.

Primary Texts: - Rosemary Sutcliff, *Sword at Sunset*
 - Alfred, Lord Tennyson, “The Lady of Shalott”

- Symphony X, “The Accolade,” “Accolade II,” and “When All Is Lost”

Secondary Texts: - Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Introduction, Chapter 1)
- Lionel Basney, “The Scope of the Fantastic”

Unit 1: Fictional Pleasures, Real Problems

Week 2: Fantasy Fiction and Literary Enchantment

Primary Texts: - T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (Books I and II)
- Walt Disney, *The Sword in the Stone*

Secondary Texts: - Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Chapter 2)
- Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature* (Introduction)
- Ann Swinfren, *In Defence of Fantasy: A Study of the Genre in English and American Literature Since 1945* (excerpts)

Week 3: Fantasy Fiction and the Pleasures of Reading

Primary Texts: - T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (Books III and IV)

Secondary Texts: - Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*
- Andrew Hadfield, “T.H. White, Pacifism and Violence: *The Once and Future Nation*”
- “Medievalism” and “Race” in *The Routledge Companion to Medieval English Literature*

Week 4: The Dangers of Fiction

Primary Texts: - Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur* (Books I—VII)

Secondary Texts: - “Medieval Fictionalities: An NLH Forum” (selections)
- Karen Sullivan, *The Danger of Romance: Truth, Fantasy, and Arthurian Fictions* (excerpts)

Short Paper (5-7 pages) due by Friday at 5pm

Week 5: Race, Romance, and the Crusades

Primary Texts: - Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D’Arthur* (Books XIII—XXI)
- Ibn Hazm, *The Ring of the Dove* (excerpts)

- Secondary Texts:
- Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (Introduction and Chapter 1) and “An Arthurian Empire of Magic, and Its Discontents: An Afterword”
 - Peter H. Goodrich, “Saracens and Islamic Alterity in Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*”
 - Kevin Harty, “Malory and the Cowardly Cornish Knights-“The strangest races [that] dwell next door”

Unit 2: Forms and Critiques of Arthurian Power

Week 6: Violence and Memory

- Primary Texts:
- Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Buried Giant*
- Secondary Texts:
- Jonathan Brent, “Violence, Memory, and History: Geoffrey of Monmouth and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*”
 - Ivan Stacy, “Looking Out Into the Fog: Narrative, Historical Responsibility, and the Problem of Freedom of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant*”
 - Matthew Eatough, “Are They Going to Say This is Fantasy?: Kazuo Ishiguro, Untimely Genres, and the Making of Literary Prestige”

Week 7: Questioning Chivalry

- Primary Texts:
- Alfred, Lord Tennyson, from *Idylls of the King*: “Dedication,” “The Coming of Arthur,” “Gareth and Lynette,” “Merline and Vivien,” “Lancelot and Elaine,” “The Holy Grail,” “The Last Tournament,” “The Passing of Arthur,” “To the Queen”
 - John Boorman, *Excalibur*
- Secondary Texts:
- Clinton Machann, “Tennyson’s King Arthur and the Violence of Manliness”
 - Linda M. Shires, “Patriarchy, Dead Men, and Tennyson’s “Idylls of the King””
 - Stephen Ahern, “Listen to Guinevere: Female Agency and the Politics of Chivalry in Tennyson’s “Idylls””

Week 8: Arthurian Feminisms

- Primary Texts:
- Marie de France, *Lanval*
 - Matthew Arnold, *Tristram and Iseult*
- Secondary Texts:
- Jane Chance, “Marie de France versus King Arthur: Lanval’s Gender

- Inversion as Breton Subversion”
- Elizabeth Leet, “Objectification, Empowerment, and the Male Gaze in the Lanval Corpus”
 - Sharon Kinoshita, “Cherchez La Femme: Feminist Criticism and Marie de France’s “Lai de Lanval””
 - Ingrid Ranum, “A Woman’s Castle is Her Home: Matthew Arnold’s *Tristram and Iseult* as Domestic Fairy Tale

Junior Essay Proposal and Annotated Bibliography Due by Friday at 5pm

Week 9: Queering Camelot

- Primary Texts: - Anonymous, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
- Secondary Texts: - Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval* (Introduction)
 - David Boyd, “Sodomy, Misogyny, and Displacement: Occluding Queer Desire in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”
 - L.T. McClain, “Gender Anxiety in Arthurian Romance”

Unit 3: Once and Future Stories

Week 10: The Holy Grail of Unfinished Quests

- Primary Texts: - Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail* (and the Appendix on the Grail Continuations)
 - Robert Frost, “Directive”
 - Monty Python, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*
- Secondary Texts: - Roberta L. Krueger, “Chrétien de Troyes and the Invention of Arthurian Courtly Fiction”
 - Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, *Chrétien Continued: A Study of the Conte du Graal and its Verse Continuations* (Introduction)

Week 11: Unsatisfying Conclusions

- Primary Texts: - David Lowery, *The Green Knight*
- Secondary Texts: - Richard H. Godden, “Gawain and the Nick of Time: Fame, History, and the Untimely in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’”
 - Kathleen Forni, “Lowery’s *The Green Knight*: Honor Reconsidered”
 - Melissa Crofton, “You Are No Knight”: David Lowery Rivals a Medieval Poem in *The Green Knight*
 - Andrew Wahnsielder, “‘I Will Tell You a New Tale’: The Evolving Gawain Myth and Its Political Implications”

Complete Essay Draft Due by Friday at 5pm

Week 12: Telling the Story Again

Primary Texts: Guillermo del Toro, *Trollhunters* (Seasons 1-3, *Wizards of Arcadia*, *Rise of the Titans*)

Secondary Texts: - Iván Eusebio Aguirre Darancou, “There Is No ‘I’ in *Trollhunters*”: Gendered and Collective Heroism in Guillermo del Toro’s Multimedial Saga”
- Cindy Mediavilla, “From ‘Unthinking Stereotype’ to Fearless Antagonist: The Evolution of Morgan le Fay on television”

Week 13: Arthurian Adaptations Selected by Students

Junior Essay Due by Monday, April 29 at 4pm

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is the use of another person's ideas or writing without giving them proper credit. Consequences of plagiarism can range from failure on the paper to dismissal from the course to even more serious actions. You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with Harvard's Honor Code: "*Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one's own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs.*"

Collaboration: You are absolutely encouraged to talk with other students about the course and its readings, and to read each others' work. In individual assignments (which may include papers, short writing assignments, or reading questions and responses), academic collaboration and external sources should be always cited.

Attendance: Your attendance in tutorial is vital to your own success as well as to the success of the class as a whole; so is your attendance in Junior Tutorial General Meetings and at other required events. I will allow each student a "free" tutorial absence to be used in case of sickness, travel, etc: no explanation necessary. Missing more than one class will decrease your participation grade, and excessive absence could result in failing the course. Also, being late really disrupts the work we're doing together: 2 lates = 1 absence. If you have extenuating circumstances, you must communicate with me in a timely manner so that we can discuss how to deal with it.

Due Dates & Late Grades: Late assignments will be docked 1/3 letter grade per day late, except for the final paper, which must be turned in before the due date. Students failing to turn in a final paper, or turning it in late without an official excuse, will fail the tutorial. If, well in advance of an assignment, you expect you will need an extension, please talk with me.

Email: I'll use our course listserv to distribute important info throughout the semester—from emailing you handouts to adjusting assignments and deadlines. You are responsible for checking your email on a daily basis. If you have a question that you need to ask me by email, be sure to give me at least 24 hours, or you may not get a response until it's too late. Also, please let me know if you'd like to use a non-Harvard email address.

Accommodations for students with disabilities: Harvard University values inclusive excellence and providing equal educational opportunities for all students. Our goal is to remove barriers for disabled students related to inaccessible elements of instruction or design in this course. If reasonable accommodations are necessary to provide access, please contact the Disability Access Office (DAO). Accommodations do not alter fundamental requirements of the course and are not retroactive. Students should request accommodations as early as possible, since they may take time to implement. Students should notify DAO at any time during the semester if adjustments to their communicated accommodation plan are needed.