

## ***ENGL 3030: The Middle Ages*** **Readings List and Descriptions**

\*Dates are approximate, as often the time when a text was composed (usually orally) may be different (perhaps vastly) than the time the manuscript was written.

### **Time periods in English literature:**

- Anglo-Saxon/Old English (up to Norman Conquest, 1066)
- Anglo-Norman (from Norman Conquest, 1066, to approximately the late 12<sup>th</sup> century)
- Middle English (from the late 12<sup>th</sup> century to the 15<sup>th</sup> century)

### **Original languages of other readings:**

- Latin
- Old French
- Icelandic

***Many of our readings are excerpts. To get a more complete view of your chosen text(s), you may need to find an edition and read more than the excerpts in our textbook.***

<b><i>Unit 1: Stage Break</i></b>
<p>“The Chester Noah’s Flood,” 686-97</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 15<sup>th</sup> century: A Mystery play following the story of Noah and the Flood in the Bible, though diverging from the original story in several interesting ways.</li> </ul> <p>"Everyman" (PDF on Blackboard, “Course Documents”)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 15<sup>th</sup> century: A Morality play following the revelations of the titular character after he is told that he will soon die and his frantic and futile attempts to find one of a host of personified characters who would be willing to accompany him to the grave.</li> </ul> <p><i>York Crucifixion Play</i>, 726-33</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 15<sup>th</sup> century: A Miracle/Mystery play depicting the isolated events of Christ’s Crucifixion. Though focusing on the violent event, it exhibits a dark humor.</li> </ul>
<b><i>Unit 2: Holier Than Thou...or Even a Hand Grenade</i></b>
<p>Aelfric of Eynsham, “The Passion of Saint Edmund, King and Martyr,” 131-34</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century: A saint’s life that depicts a “Christian ideal of kingship” (131) in the Anglo-Saxon period, during an especially chaotic time of Viking invasions and less than ideal leaders.</li> </ul> <p>Saint Mary of Egypt, 135-48</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century (original): A saint’s life originally composed in Latin and translated into Anglo-Saxon (a common occurrence). Saint Mary of Egypt is a reformed sinner repenting “her life of sexual depravity” (135).</li> </ul> <p>“The Life of Saint Margaret,” (PDF on Blackboard, “Course Documents”)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 13<sup>th</sup> century: A saint’s life detailing the torture and martyrdom of the virgin Margaret. It is an example of hagiography that is rather graphically violent.</li> </ul> <p><i>*There are many different saints’ lives. You may want to read more than the ones assigned.</i></p> <p>Chaucer, <i>The Prioress’s Tale</i>, 531-37</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14<sup>th</sup> century: From <i>The Canterbury Tales</i>. Tale narrated by the pilgrim Prioress, a head nun, it is the story of a Christian boy in a Jewish community, who is murdered by Jews. His devotion to the Virgin Mary allows his body to perform miracles after his death.</li> </ul> <p>Margery Kempe, 604-27</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century: The autobiography (the first!) of a middle-class woman in England who decides, after living as a wife and mother, to devote her life to God and religion. It is the story of her “spiritual awakening and religious fervor” (604) while travelling throughout Christendom, facing temptations, and dialoguing with various religious persons.</li> </ul> <p>Julian of Norwich, 586-603</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> century: The mystical experiences of an anchoress, who describes the visions granted to her of Christ and God during a time of great illness.</li> </ul>

### ***Unit 3: Holding Out for a Hero***

#### *Heliland*

- 9<sup>th</sup> century: Anglo-Saxon version of Christ's life, written in the style of a heroic saga.

#### *Judith*, 93-102

- Possibly 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century: Anglo-Saxon version of the Biblical story of "a pious Hebrew widow, Judith, who rescues the people of the besieged city of Bethulia by beheading the Assyrian general Holofernes as he attempts to seduce her" (93). This text is found in the same manuscript as *Beowulf* and there are interesting parallels, given the genders of the protagonists.

#### "Battle of Maldon," 103-8

- Possibly 11<sup>th</sup> century (battle took place in 991): Remaining fragment of Anglo-Saxon poem detailing the Battle of Maldon, a fight between Viking raiders and an English army attempting to hold them off. It is known for its depictions of military loyalty and the search for honor in war.

#### Exeter Book Elegies, 24-30

- c. 10<sup>th</sup> century: A collection of Anglo-Saxon poems ranging in themes (loss, mourning, passage of time, etc.), narrators (warriors who have lost their kin groups, abandoned wives, sailors, etc.), and settings. They are called elegies because they are "serious meditative poem(s)" (24). Others have called them "wisdom poems" because they include discussions on how to live and perceive life.

#### *Beowulf*, 44-87

- c. 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century: The famous heroic poem following the exploits of Geatish warrior Beowulf as he travels to Denmark to fight the monster Grendel and his mother. It then returns to Geatland, fast-forwarding in time to the end of the life of the warrior, now king, as he fights a dragon threatening his people.

### ***Unit 4: Iceland? That's the Green One, Right?***

#### Egils Saga

- 13<sup>th</sup> century: An Icelandic saga following the life and exploits of Egil. It tells of the family of the main character and then traces Egil's history. As with most Icelandic sagas, it is an adventure, a genealogy, a law book, a legend, etc.

#### "Bolli Bollason's Tale"

- 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century: An excerpt of an Icelandic saga, the Tale details a short narrative in the life of Bolli in which a feud (always rather violent and bloody and including outlawry) begins. It follows the development, prosecution, and execution of this case.

#### "The Tale of Sarcastic Halli"

- 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century: An excerpt of an Icelandic narrative, which is tied to "Bolli Bollason's Tale" in that it depicts his death as well as that of the titular character.

#### Erik the Red's Saga

- 13<sup>th</sup> century: This saga depicts the Viking exploration and discovery of North America.

### ***Unit 5: History...or Is It?***

#### Gildas, "The Ruin of Britain," 1-8

- 6<sup>th</sup> century: Though his historical accuracy is in doubt, Gildas is one of the sources for many of the later medieval "historians." "The Ruin of Britain" mostly intends to "denounce contemporary rulers...for their greed, cruelty, and sinfulness" (1). His work does depict the time of Roman Britain.

#### Pseudo-Nennius, "The History of the Britons" (PDF on Blackboard, "Course Documents")

- 9<sup>th</sup> century: This text, like Gildas, is historically questionable. However, it is one of the few of its kind. Further, it is important as a part of Arthurian lore, particularly in telling the story of Merlin.

#### Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, 9-23

- 8<sup>th</sup> century: The *Ecclesiastical History* is "an extensive history of England which takes as its theme the conversion of the Anglo-Saxon invaders who had displaced the native Britons" and "imagines an 'English' people united not so much by culture or language or geography as by faith (Roman Christianity)" (9). These excerpts focus on the conversion of King Edwin, the Abbess Hild, and the story of the (first) English poet Caedmon, who "receives (from God) a miraculous talent for poetic composition" (10).

#### *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, 118-26

- Began in the time of Alfred the Great (9<sup>th</sup> century), continues to be added to in subsequent centuries: The *Chronicle* is a "work of propaganda, designed to inspire the English to resist the Viking invasions" (118). These excerpts deal with King Alfred, King Aethelred (and his failure to hold off the Vikings), and William the Conqueror (c. 1066).

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, 157-79

- 12<sup>th</sup> century: The *History* “recount(s) the history of the kings of Britain from before the time of Christ to the time of Cadwallader (689CE) (157). His version of the origins of Britain stretches back to Troy. He is known for shaping a great deal of the historical Arthur. These excerpts focus on King Leir (Shakespeare’s King Lear), the end of the Roman period, and the exploits/history/death of King Arthur.

Sir John Mandeville, *Travels*, 567-85

- 14<sup>th</sup> century: The *Travels* “recounts the travels of Sir John Mandeville, whom the text identifies as an English knight...Mandeville claims to have left England for a great journey in 1322, traveling first to Egypt and Palestine, and then further east to India and China” (567). It has since been revealed as a “patchwork of allusions and borrowings from other sources” (567).

#### ***Unit 6: Blame (Romances on) the French!***

Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligès*

- 12<sup>th</sup> century: French romance telling the story of the love triangle among the title character, his uncle (the king of Constantinople), and his uncle’s wife, Fenice. Not only must Cligès and Fenice find ways to be together – which raises issues of adultery and its place in the then popular courtly love tradition – but Cligès is also seeking ways to regain his rightful throne. The characters often travel to the Arthurian kingdom.

Marie de France, *Yonec*

- 12<sup>th</sup> century: Anglo-Norman romance (a lai, which is a short romance poem, often with supernatural elements) about a young wife who is imprisoned by her older husband. Longing to escape and to find a worthy lover, she is surprised when a hawk appears in her tower and transforms into a handsome knight. The husband is less than pleased upon discovering their affair.

Marie de France, *Equitan*

- 12<sup>th</sup> century: Anglo-Norman lai about a king who falls in love (lust?) with his seneschal’s wife and begins an affair. When he begins to feel the pressure to marry, they devise a plan to kill her husband. The results are surprising.

Marie de France, *Lai le Fresne*

- 12<sup>th</sup> century: Anglo-Norman lai about Le Fresne, a high-born woman abandoned as a baby and raised by an abbess. She later becomes the mistress of Lord Gurun. When he is forced to marry another more suitable woman, Le Fresne, a gentle, obedient woman, even prepares the marriage bed for the wedding night. However, her true parentage is revealed.

Chaucer, *Clerk’s Tale* (PDF on Blackboard, “Course Documents”)

- 14<sup>th</sup> century: From *The Canterbury Tales*. Tale narrated by the pilgrim Clerk, it tells the story of Walter, a wealthy lord, who decides to marry the peasant Griselda, who promises at their marriage to obey him in all matters. During their years together, Walter decides to put her through various tests, including pretending to execute their children and to annul their marriage and force her to prepare the wedding for his next bride.

Marie de France, *Lanval*, 188-202

- 12<sup>th</sup> century: Anglo-Norman lai about the titular character, a knight whose qualities and deeds are overlooked by King Arthur. He finds instead a beautiful Fairy Lady who grants him her love as well as unlimited wealth, with the only restriction that he cannot speak of her to anyone. Trouble begins when the King’s wife lusts after him and denounces him falsely to Arthur when he refuses her advances.

*Sir Launfal*, (PDF on Blackboard, “Course Documents”)

- 14<sup>th</sup> century: Written by Thomas Chestre, this is a later Middle English retelling of Marie de France’s *Lanval* with material added by the author from other romances.

#### ***Unit 7: The Once and Future King...Well, We’re Waiting...***

Chrétien de Troyes, “The Knight of the Cart”

- 12<sup>th</sup> century: French romance. This is the first appearance of the Lancelot/Guinevere affair. The story begins with the kidnapping of Queen Guinevere and Lancelot’s attempts to rescue her. This text defined much of the conventions of the courtly love genre.

Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d’Arthur*, 754-99

- 15<sup>th</sup> century: In modern times, *Le Morte d’Arthur* is the most well-known of the English Arthurian texts. An immense work, these excerpts focus on young Arthur and the Sword in the Stone, then the events leading up to King Arthur’s death, including the discovery of the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere, and the destruction of the Arthurian kingdom.