

Middle English Literature

As its name suggests, “Middle English” is not really a stable language or literature but rather a convenient name for an ongoing process of linguistic and cultural change that happens in England from about 1200 to 1500. What’s fascinating about Middle English, in fact, is the way it can seem modern and familiar one moment only to confront us with profoundly medieval forms of strangeness the next. This course introduces you to the literature and, in a more limited way, the language of Middle English. We’ll meet some of the medieval period’s usual suspects, including gallant knights and high-born ladies, but also a sheep thief named Mak, a vagabond poet, and a fifteenth-century merchant’s wife who starts her own brewery, has fourteen children, and claims to be the bride of Christ. Our aim will be to see how these very different kinds of people, and the distinct literary genres they inhabit, can be put into conversation with one another to form a cohesive picture of medieval England and its culture and, ultimately, to see how this culture has shaped our own. No previous experience reading Middle English is required, but students should be willing to practice reading and speaking the language of Chaucer and his contemporaries. Selected texts will be read in translation as the instructor deems necessary.

Core Texts

- *The Book Of Margery Kempe*, trans. and ed. Lynn Staley (Norton, 2001)
- Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Stephen A. Barney (Norton Critical Edition, 2005)
- Greenblatt, Stephen, ed. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume A: The Middle Ages*. 9th ed. (Norton, 2012).

(All other materials will be made available online via Edventure.)

Instruction: Seminar: 3 hours per week

Assessment:

Continuous Assessment:	10%
Essay (2000+ words)	40%
Final exam:	50%

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Schedule of Topics and Readings

Week	Topic	Reading
January 11	For the birds Inventing Middle English literature in <i>The Owl and the Nightingale</i>	Selected Middle English lyrics; <i>The Owl and the Nightingale</i> (provided by instructor)
January 18	Comeback Exile and return in English romance	<i>King Horn</i> ; <i>Havelok the Dane</i> ; <i>Emaré</i> (online)
January 25	Simply marvelous The Breton lays	<i>Sir Orfeo</i> ; <i>Sir Gowther</i> ; <i>Sir Amadace</i> (online)
February 1	Chaucer at court the early poems	<i>The Book of the Duchess</i> ; <i>The House of Fame</i> (online)
February 8	Chinese New Year	None
February 15	Chaucer in love <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>	Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>Troilus and Criseyde</i> (ed. Barney, "Introduction" and Bks. 1-3)
February 22	Chaucer out of love <i>Troilus</i> , continued	<i>Troilus and Criseyde</i> (ed. Barney, Bks. 4-5)
February 29	Recess	None
March 7	On letting go Mourning and Christian discipline in <i>Pearl</i>	<i>Pearl</i> (online)
March 14	The end of the world Langland and the hysteria of late-medieval complaint	William Langland, <i>Piers Plowman</i> (NAEL 331-66) plus selected passages provided by instructor
March 21	Urbanity Middle English theatres of devotion	"The Mystery Plays" and <i>The Second Shepherd's Play</i> (NAEL 406-37); <i>The York Play of the Crucifixion</i>

		(398-405); <i>Everyman</i> (463-82); <i>Mankind</i> (online)
March 28	Crybaby Female mysticism and its strategies of dissent	Margery Kempe, <i>The Book of Margery Kempe</i> (ed. Staley)
April 4	On bad examples The 15 th century reads Chaucer	Henryson, <i>Testament of Cresseid</i> (Barney 431-47)
April 11	Endings Are we modern yet?	<i>A Gest of Robyn Hode</i> (online)