Representing Society, Sexuality, Spirituality:  
Medieval History, Allegory, Romance  
English 404A, Spring 2016  
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MWF 12-12:50p  

Course narrative  
Throughout the more than eight hundred years comprising the Middle Ages in England, tales of historical personages and exploits blurred into romances of fantastic heroes and lovers, and, in turn, were layered with allegorical meanings. Populated by fearless knights in shining armor, beautiful damsels in distress, fire-breathing dragons, false clerics, true kings, happy dwarves, evil wizards, saints and sinners, these texts invite us into magical and mysterious worlds both familiar and alien. These multi-layered medieval texts functioned at once as repositories and purveyors of historical memories, as exemplary lessons, and as spiritual guideposts, uses which could not always be coordinated.

To establish or bolster their legitimate claim to rule, medieval kings traced their historical lineage back through the legendary King Arthur and further back to the mythical Brutus, a victorious Greek warrior returning from the siege of Troy. (Many Western European nations were similarly founded by a similarly eponymous warrior.) Feudal knights and churchmen—as sworn defenders of the weak and powerless, and as secular agents of divine justice here on earth—seem meant to represent the best and the brightest of Christendom in the Middle Ages, and to validate a homogenous, Church-and-king-centered culture.

Yet many medieval texts explore and interrogate the codes of Christianity, chivalry and fin amor that supposedly define and govern churchly and knightly actions and institutions, marking these seemingly-ideal enterprises and ideologies as far less certain and far more conflicted. As we will see, at all times during this lengthy period, literary and historical texts call into question the inherited traditional and monolithic view of the world as divinely divided into three estates—those who work, those who pray, and those who fight—and interrogate the structures and functions of these estates.

In our examinations of the inceptions, developments, and trajectories of the genres of history, allegory, and romance through readings, discussions, and written work, we will examine the ways these genres present and critique medieval discourses of thought regarding the bases and practices of religious/faith institutions, structures of life, and ideological systems including gender.

Modus operandi  
No background in things medieval is expected or anticipated.

We will examine and deploy ancient, medieval, modern, and post-modern methods of critical reading including philological, biographical, New Critical, historicist (both old and new), materialist, and feminist, and others this class wishes to pursue. As we deploy these methodologies we will limn each for their assumptions and their insights for our investigations.
All primary texts will be in Present Day English or heavily-glossed editions; we will supplement these with critical articles (also in Present Day English). Class time will be a mélange of lecture, student presentations, and class discussion.

**Assignments**
To provide a range of opportunities for involvement, assignments will be distributed among a variety of writing assignments including reading responses, formal essays, reviews of scholarship, and an oral component including informal and formal participation. Writing requirements will demonstrate a deliberate program of outside readings—which may be coordinated with others for purposes of discussion—through some combination of presentations (teaching option), reviews of scholarship (research option), and response essays. The number and balance among these options will be negotiated collectively and individually. The final semester product will be either two shorter or one longer, tightly-focused examination and investigation of a specific literary, cultural, theoretical, or historic issue raised by our texts. Needless to say, it will include a significant research component.

**Added bonus**
But wait, there’s more: completion of the course carries a plenary indulgence, good for remission from the venal sin of your choice (some restrictions apply, void where prohibited, results may vary, subject to taxation).

**Primary readings by genre**

**Shorter Old English works of all three genres**
- Caedmon’s “Hymn”
- “The Dream of the Rood”
- “The Battle of Maldon”

**History**
The Book of Margery Kempe (a fourteenth-century autobiography by a married laywoman turned itinerant mystic)
- Brief selections from Hidegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich’s Showings (writings by medieval female mystics)
The History of the Kings of Britain, selections (a blending of history and legend)
- “A memorable decision of the High Court of Toulouse…” by Judge Jean de Coras (a medieval legal case that spurred a modern historian’s historical novelization, a modern debate on historiography, and two films)
The Return of Martin Guerre (the historical novelization)
- Brief selections from The Peterborough Chronicle and The Great Chronicle of London (chronicles depicting the royal and the rogue)

**Allegory**
"The Land of Cockayne" (short allegorical poem on the Church)
Pearl (an allegorical exploration of death and the hereafter)
Will’s Vision of Piers Plowman by William Langland, selections (an allegorical poem of society and the Church, a presentation that consumed its author for decades)
Romance
“Lais” of Marie de France (a collection of short romances by a twelfth-century female poet)
Morte d'Arthur (Sir Thomas Malory’s “englishing” of the chivalric romance genre)
Roman de Silence (the life of Silence, a noblewoman who lived as a nobleman)
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (one of the greatest romances in Middle English)
Sir Orfeo (a medieval telling of the tale of Orpheus)
Troilus and Criseyde (Geoffrey Chaucer’s great romance)

Required texts (reiterates those introduced above)
The Lais of Marie de France, Marie de France
Troilus and Criseyde: A New Translation, Geoffrey Chaucer
Silence, Heldris de Cornuaille
Works, Sir Thomas Malory
The Book of Margery Kempe, Margery Kempe
Will's Vision of Piers Plowman, William Langland
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl, Sir Orfeo, trans. JRR Tolkein
The Return of Martin Guerre, Natalie Zemon Davis
Coursepak, or printing from course website