HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

ENGLISH LITERATURE – Postclassical Period

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Contents

Poetry	Religious (Langland/ *Piers Plowman*)	Epic (*Beowulf)*	Narrative (*Gawain*; Mallory)
Autobiography	Julian of Norwich		
Fiction	Chaucer		

Mediaeval

The Background

The literary culture of pre-conquest Britain can be said to have opened with the introduction of Christianity into Britain, and to be marked by a date like 597, when the Benedictine monk Augustine, sent by Pope Gregory, arrived in Kent, effected the conversion of King Ethelbert, and became the first Archbishop of Canterbury. From that point on access to the classical heritage of the west was made possible. When it came to the discovery of a national literary consciousness, however, the dominant tone in Britain was marked by sharp conflict, among the remaining vestiges of Roman culture and tradition, the introduction of new classical learning, the influence of religious texts reflecting Mediaeval Christianity in several forms, and Germanic influenced Old English texts, which reflected the cultural mix created by a confluence of tribes: Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and native Britons. The greatest work of the pre-conquest period, from the literary standpoint, was *Beowulf* (8th century), and precisely there we see clearly the blend of the Christian with the pagan Germanic. In fact the poetry of the time in general reflects the blending of Christianity with the pagan. The poet we call Cynewulf (750-825) wrote, in his *The Dream of the Rood*, about Christ's cross' reflection on the Crucifixion. (The felling of the cross tree, to begin with, swells with pagan implications, while the tree's power, in confronting injustice, is redolent of pre-Christian vitalism.) An even earlier poet, Caedmon (7th century), wrote religious literature of which nothing remains but nine lines of a Hymn admiring the Creator. This hymn praises the noble vault of heaven, but in terms that could ring from a pagan as well as a Christian soul. This pre-Conquest culture will serve as a reference point in the present entry on 'British literature,' but as you read the works from this early period you will experience the difference of their world from the world introduced by the Norman Conquest, to which we keep referring. That Conquest, which will bring French culture and language into Britain, will decisively link Britain to the classical world of Roman and Greek culture, a world which in earlier Britain was present only as a colonial occupation, not as a driving cultural force. Not the least of the post-conquest differences will be in language: for the blend of French (and thus Latin) with English, which was a byproduct of the Conquest, was to set the tone for a new literary culture in the British Isles; and to open the door to an evolving form of the language you speak today.

Discussion Questions

1. Does *Beowulf* belong to English literature? Does the author of the poem feel he/she is working in any national tradition, or belongs to a nation? Does the poem embody a deep relation to cultures other than British? *Are there vestiges of ancient classical learning in Beowulf*?

2. What attitudes and literary strategies does Chaucer share with the other writers considered in this Unit? Is he deeply touched by the Christian tradition you find in Julian of Norwich or *Sir Gawain?* Would he appreciate the kinds of humor and dark passion we find in *Morte Darthur*? Or is Chaucer a Humanist for the ages, who stands out and above his time?

3. Where do you find allegorical thinking in early English literature, and what do we need to know about allegory, in order to understand the way it works in this early literature? Is it possible for us to take pleasure in allegorical literature today? Do we create and consume allegory ourselves?

William Langland

Life and Work of Willam Langland. William Langland (1332-1386) comes to us virtually without personal details. He was from the West of England, and was, as we can see from his major poem, immersed in the religious and social values of his time. It seems he was an unbenched clerk in minor orders, thus an ecclesiastic. And thus, to add, he was thoroughly familiar with holy writ, and with the meanings it had both for his own religious values, and for moral and aesthetic imagination. He was also in sync with the aesthetic assumptions of contemporary serious poets—compliant in the long, talkative pentameter line, compliant in the framing of his most serious work in terms of dream and allegory. We have to imagine that Langland's own values are wrapped up in the allegorical clothing of his text, for *The Vision of Piers Plowman* is not only a history of the major events of the Christian story, but a revelation of the poet's understanding of Christ's significance. Piers, Peter, bears the weight of cosmic meaning on his shoulders, in an unfolding allegory which is at the same time a lively narrative based on alleged vision, and in which is embedded the confusion, chaos, and uncertainty of human societies in our fallen world.

A sample of the work. *Passus* (Section) 18 of *Piers Plowman,* opens on the picture of a world-trudging pilgrim dreaming of 'Christ's passion and pain' and of His people, which includes one Piers the Plowman, a slightly tweaked version of our poet himself. Through the lens of dream, Piers allows allegorical figures—Peace, Love, Mercy, Righteousness—to play through an account of the tale of Christ's sacrifice. There is a blending, here, of the Christian vision of the inherent glory of the created world with a narrative of the weariness of all things human. Even today's reader, often uncomfortable with the larger terms of this narrative argument, is likely caught up in the sharp edged energy with which Langland juxtaposes the divine and human worlds. Still in *Passus* l8, Langland goes on to dramatize the meeting and marriage of Righteousness and Peace, and to mirror, in the language used, the blending of differences required in that juxtaposition.

Thou seist (sayest) sooth (truth), said Righteousness, and reverently her kissed Peace, and Peace her per secula seculorum (till the end of time, phrase from Roman liturgy.)

Middle English and Latin are juxtaposed within a single couplet, as is done elsewhere in this *Passus.* One must be in Langland's culture, where both Latin and Middle English were vibrantly present speech forms, to grasp the almost Modernist literary play put into action here; juxtaposition and interweaving of languages as we in the twentieth century find it in the fiction of James Joyce or the poetry of T.S.Eliot. The reader of this Langland Modernism may also reflect that Langland's was a culture in which two languages—Latin and English-- were prominent, at least among the educated. We are at a transitional intersection, the mediaeval world slowly slipping away, and the Renaissance, nationally self-aware British world starting to take full control of itself, and Langland knows just how to exploit the aesthetic of the speech of his moment. The blending of Catholic theology with dramatic tale carries this aesthetic subtlety so effortlessly, that we realize we are in a setting where the Christian narrative is widely and comfortably accepted in English literature—perhaps as convincing an acceptance as we will find in later British literature.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Vision of Piers Plowman, London, l978.

Secondary source reading

Godden, Malcolm, *The Making of 'Piers Plowman*,' London, l990.

Further reading

Alford, John, ed. A *Companion to Piers Plowman,* Berkeley, l988.

Suggested paper topics

1. In many ways the Christian mediaeval imagination—allegorical, indirect, trading in symbols drawn from intense belief—is hard for us to read, harder either than ancient classical literature or even the difficult works of our own time, like James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* which requires a detailed commentary. What do you think is the reason for the choice of allegory by William Langland?

2. In *Piers Plowman* Langland creates a character in search of the best way to lead the Christian life. The social perspective, under which that search is imagined as possible, is communitarian, and in a way conservative, supporting the reigning feudal structure of the time. Is it easy to penetrate that world view, from the angle of our contemporary society?

Excerpt http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/authors/langland/pp-pro.html

N a summer season · when soft was the sun,
I clothed myself in a cloak as I shepherd were,
Habit like a hermit's · unholy in works,
And went wide in the world · wonders to hear.
But on a May morning · on Malvern hills,
A marvel befell me · of fairy, methought.
I was weary with wandering · and went me to rest
Under a broad bank · by a brook's side,
And as I lay and leaned over · and looked into the waters
I fell into a sleep · for it sounded so merry.
Then began I to dream · a marvellous dream,
That I was in a wilderness · wist I not where.
As I looked to the east · right into the sun,
I saw a tower on a toft · worthily built;
A deep dale beneath · a dungeon therein,
With deep ditches and dark · and dreadful of sight
A fair field full of folk · found I in between,
Of all manner of men · the rich and the poor,
Working and wandering · as the world asketh.
Some put them to plow · and played little enough,
At setting and sowing · they sweated right hard
And won that which wasters · by gluttony destroy.

Beowulf

Beowulf, its literary greatness. The greatest single achievement of Old English poetry, *Beowulf* ranks as one of the world's most touching and mysterious epic poems. The pagan and the Christian blend here, and do so in an atmosphere that rinses away the differences between the two cultures. This oral work was composed in Northumbria about 750 A.D., and was doubtless performed by a scop in regional mead halls, to the accompaniment of the harp.

Preservation of the poem: a product of an ancient oral tradition, *Beowulf* was probably put to writing around 1000 A.D., by a literate Anglo Saxon with significant knowledge of both pagan Germanic cultures and Christianity, and with a good feel for the rhythms of Anglo Saxon poetry. The blending of Christian with pagan themes, in the poem, belongs to the end of the first millennium: God, as in Caedmon's *Hymn* (7th century), is the supreme creator, while the beastly Grendel—a descendant of Cain, in the poem—is diabolical, and Hell her appropriate abode. It is important to note that, although the epic was created in the earliest period of the development of the English language, it slipped out of sight for the first seven centuries of its existence, and only in the eighteenth century did it become a factor in the development of English literature. Even at that—and we pause to think of the fragility of the literary tradition—the one manuscript of *Beowulf* barely survived a fire, which destroyed many of the manuscripts with which it was housed, in the country library of an English bibliophlle.

Historical setting of the poem: *Beowulf* may well have been composed in the mid 8th century, and probably, though the work is clearly a blend of legend and history, reflects both ancient Anglo Saxon events, from the sixth century at the latest, and events that transpired at the turn of the millennium in Britain, at the time the poem was written down. Those earliest events, to the extent we can plausibly place them, involved turf wars and rivalries among immigrant Anglo Saxon and Germanic tribes in Britain. The poem, therefore, serves as a precious key to the earliest period of British culture, as well as to the contemporary seafaring intersections between Scandinavian and British culture.

The tale in a nutshell: Beowulf, a hero of the Geats, is the central figure of the narrative, which he holds together by defeating three antagonists: the dreadful monster Grendel, who has been attacking the warrior residents of the mead hall of Hroðgar (the king of the Danes); Grendel's mother; and finally an unnamed dragon. After the first two victories, Beowulf goes home to Geatland in Sweden and becomes king of the Geats. The last fight, against the unknown dragon, takes place fifty years later. In this final battle, Beowulf is fatally wounded. After his death, his servants bury him in a tumulus in Geatland. And so you have it, the ingredients of either a masterpiece or a generic potboiler. The wise course is to take this epic, loose in construction when compared to the l*iiad* or the *Aeneid*, as a document in the working through of contrasting religious/cultural values. While monster slaying is of central concern, all the conquests of the untamed world can also be read as episodes in Christ's overcoming of the savage evil of the world.

Reading

Primary source reading

Beowulf: A New Translation, trans. Seamus Heaney, New York, 2000.

Secondary source reading

Irving, E.B. *Rereading 'Beowulf,'* Philadelphia, l989.

Further reading

Niles, J.D., *Beowulf: The Poem and its Tradition*, Cambridge, l983.

Suggested discussion questions

1. Do you read *Beowulf* as a pagan or as a Christian text? What elements of belief in Christian religion do you see? What is the meaning of this archaic epic poem for us today in the West?

2. *Beowulf* seem to you part of the early literature of England, or to belong to another world of values and styles? Does the language itself seem to you part of the English language of today? Does the reading of *Beowulf* throw some special light on contemporary English?

Excerpt http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16328/16328-h/16328-h.htm

In the boroughs then Beowulf, bairn of the Scyldings,
Belovèd land-prince, for long-lasting season

Was famed mid the folk (his father departed,

The prince from his dwelling), till afterward sprang

Great-minded Healfdene; the Danes in his lifetime

He graciously governed, grim-mooded, agèd.

Healfdene’s birth.

Four bairns of his body born in succession

Woke in the world, war-troopers’ leader

Heorogar, Hrothgar, and Halga the good;

Heard I that Elan was Ongentheow’s consort,

He has three sons—one of them, Hrothgar—and a daughter named Elan. Hrothgar becomes a mighty king.

The well-beloved bedmate of the War-Scylfing leader.

Then glory in battle to Hrothgar was given,

Waxing of war-fame, that willingly kinsmen

Obeyed his bidding, till the boys grew to manhood,

A numerous band. It burned in his spirit

To urge his folk to found a great building,

A mead-hall grander than men of the era

He is eager to build a great hall in which he may feast his retainers

Ever had heard of, and in it to share

With young and old all of the blessings

Geoffrey Chaucer

The Early Life of Geoffrey Chaucer. Geoffrey Chaucer was born in London about 1340, to a family of French descent who had made their fortune in the wine trade. We know that the family had grown prosperous and that it was Chaucer's fortune to have been brought up near the Wine-Trade docks of the River Thames, where he had a chance to watch foreigners at work and play, as well as to begin his observation of a wide variety of English and foreign personal types, an exposure which was to serve him well in what turned out to be a highly developed writing career. When he was ready for a career his father got him a job as a page at court, and from there, Chaucer further developed his experience of society in action. In fact the court, and the social/commercial life it fostered, was to prove a stepping stone for Chaucer into an active life of business and diplomacy.

Chaucer in Mid Life. Not only did Chaucer live from the vintner profits of the family, but, while marrying and enjoying fatherhood, he committed substantial periods of time to diplomatic service in Europe. He became acquainted, in that way, with many of Europe's literary luminaries, like Petrarch and Bpccaccio. Chaucer went on to form many fruitful personal royal connections as well, to observe life in its pageantry, especially as it played out into the separation among the three dominant classes of society: the nobility, the church and the commoners. It was this last mentioned opportunity that especially enriched Chaucer's awareness of his world, of which we need to note the sharply transitional quality in the second half of the fourteenth century. From other contemporary writers, like William Langland of *Piers Plowman*, or the author of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, we would not know that the formation of a vibrant class society was under way, and that the older feudal world, which is still amply present in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* was yielding to a pre modern Europe.

The Canterbury Tales. *The Canterbury Tales*, which draws on this broad experience of humanity, is a long poem considered by most critics to be Chaucer's greatest work. He wrote a number of smaller and less ambitious works, an extraordinary study of the Astrolabe, allegorical works of considerable charm like *The House of Fame* or *The Book of the Duchess,* but the finest work is *The Canterbury Tales*, which recounts the events of a pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Thomas à Beckett at Canterbury, and the stories told, over dinner at the Tabard Inn, by an array of fascinating pilgrims—to whom Chaucer could direct his eye for the social and his mind for the satirical. He brings his full life experience to harvest. It consists of a General Prologue and twenty-four stories told by pilgrims making their way as a group to Canterbury. While the society from which the characters were drawn was in transition, and vibrant, it was still marked by strong differences of 'degree,' and the 'classification' of his characters, by Chaucer, is marked by its attention to status. From the Knight, who naturally comes first, to those reprobates—the Reeve, the Miller, the Summoner, and the Pardoner—who come at the end of the tale, we encounter an unparalleled richness of social tapestry. It is striking, and of typical modesty, that Chaucer includes himself at the very end of the list of story tellers, as a high ranking royal official.

Reading

Primary source reading

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, New York, 2013.

Secondary source reading

Boitani, Piero, and Mann, Jill (eds.), *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, Cambridge, l986.

Ford, Boris, *Mediaeval Literature, Part One: Chaucer and the Alliterative Tradition* (Harmondsworth), l987.

Further reading

Mann, Jill, *Geoffrey Chaucer*, London, 1991.

Suggested discussion topics

1. You will be struck by Chaucer's fascination with social classes, and their typical representatives, as they gather in the Tabard Inn. Does it seem to you that Chaucer is consciously creating a portrait of his own society? If so, does that portrait spring from the narrative instinct or from the desire to portray society? In other words is Chaucer above all a story teller whose society is rich with interest for him, or is he an observer of society who has found a narrative style for characterizing that society?

2. You see from the Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales* that Chaucer is fascinated with character types—the Miller, the Pardoner, the Knight, The Wife of Bath. Does he conceive of these characters as abstractions, which sum up many traits in a generalized package, or are these fully developed characters, each one distinct as Chaucer conceives him or her?

Excerpt http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/gchaucer/bl-gchau-can-mill.htm

THE MILLER'S PROLOGUE
The Words between the Host and the Miller
Now when the knight had thus his story told,
In all the rout there was nor young nor old
But said it was a noble story, well
Worthy to be kept in mind to tell;
And specially the gentle folk, each one.
Our host, he laughed and swore, "So may I run,
But this goes well; unbuckled is the mail;
Let's see now who can tell another tale:
For certainly the game is well begun.
Now shall you tell, sir monk, if't can be done,
Something with which to pay for the knight's tale."
The miller, who with drinking was all pale,
So that unsteadily on his horse he sat,
He would not take off either hood or hat,
Nor wait for any man, in courtesy,
But all in Pilate's voice began to cry,
And by the Arms and Blood and Bones he swore,
"I have a noble story in my store,
With which I will requite the good knight's tale."
Our host saw, then, that he was drunk with ale,
And said to him: "Wait, Robin, my dear brother,
Some better man shall tell us first another:
Submit and let us work on profitably."
"Now by God's soul," cried he, "that will not I!
For I will speak, or else I'll go my way."
Our host replied: "Tell on, then, till doomsday!
You are a fool, your wit is overcome."
"Now hear me," said the miller, "all and some!
But first I make a protestation round
That I'm quite drunk, I know it by my sound:
And therefore, if I slander or mis-say,
Blame it on ale of Southwark, so I pray;
For I will tell a legend and a life
Both of a carpenter and of his wife,
And how a scholar set the good wright's cap."
The reeve replied and said: "Oh, shut your trap…

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (ca. 1375-1400)

The author of Gawain. Of the author of *Sir Gawain* we know even less than of the author of *Piers Plowman*. What conclusions we can draw are again based on linguistic evidence, and point to the area of the northwest Midlands, in the second half of the fourteenth century. From the tale the author creates here, in the alliterative verse which roots this English in the oral traditions which pre date the Norman Conquest—the dividing line (1066 A.D.) separating Anglo-Saxon from Anglo-Norman England—we see that the author is deeply engrained in the Arthurian lore traditions which ruled much of mediaeval literature. Arthur and his Knights, in their ancestral home of Camelot, maintain the twin traditions of chivalry and knighthood, under the sign of the Cross and the Holy Virgin. The author of *Gawain* is also deeply versed in Holy Scripture, like the visionary author of *Piers Plowman*.

The Gawain Tale. We have noted the sophisticated insouciance with which William Langland juxtaposes Latin and Middle English; proof enough of the high literary level of fourteenth century English poetry. The *Gawain* author—author of four interconnected texts of which *Gawain and the Green Knigh*t have received foremost attention--goes even harder for the aesthetically dramatic. The poem opens with a lead-in reference—to that line of British kings, sprung from the politically embroiled Brutus of the Roman Republic, which leads directly into the reign of King Arthur. After that intro the poet springs violence: into King Arthur's court rides a heavily armed foe/challenger, dressed in bright green, horse and armor bright green, and a holly branch in hand. (Green—this is part but only part of the literary fireworks, is the working symbol of regeneration and of the Savior who rose again.) The challenge issued by the Green Knight proves his cultural origins, in primitive Celtic—not Christian—rite: he seeks a challenger who will behead him, in return for being himself beheaded a year later, on New Year's day. King Arthur's nephew, Gawain, takes up the challenge, beheads the intruder, and is then astounded to see the headless challenger rise, take his head in his hands and ride away. The remainder of the poem introduces us to Gawain's quest to find the Green Knight, within the appointed time, and to do so while behaving himself nobly in the chivalric Christian tradition. (The pagan Celtic and the Christian perspectives co exist throughout the poem.) In the end, chivalric graciousness—we are in the magic world of Arthurian culture—wins out, and Gawan is released from his obligation to be beheaded.

The chivalric theme of the poem. Chastity, a high Feudal virtue twinned to the protection of woman, is a major virtue for Gawain, and he struggles manfully, and successfully, to maintain his purity. (An image of the Virgin Mary is embroidered onto the inside of his shield.) However he errs against the chivalric code, in the wilderness Castle at which he arrives as he sets out in search of the Green Knight. (How important and punctilious is that code we rapidly learn.) On the first night in the Castle Gawain's host stipulates that his guest must return his 'winnings' from his stay, and this is what Gawain fails to do. He has received a modest girdle—a warder off of death—from his hostess at the Castle, and fails to return it to the lady before his departure. Consequences and humiliation follow, the overcoming of which becomes in the end the true test of Gawain's chivalric valor.

Reading

Primary source reading

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, trans. Kline, 2007; online.

Secondary source reading

Brewer, Elisabeth, '*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight': Sources and Analogues*, Cambridge, l992.

Further reading

Barrron, W.R.J., '*Trawthe' and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered,* Manchester, l980.

Suggested discussion topics

1. The place of the Christian religion, in the thinking and writing of the Middle Ages, cannot be overstated. We encounter the Christian world in the Pardoner, the Nun's Priest, and the Parson of Chaucer; in all which tales there runs a thread of irony; in *Piers Plowman,* and in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. What is the particular significance of Christianity in *Sir Gawain*?

2. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* invokes what literary scholars have often called archetypal patterns; in this case, say, the patterns of the heroic chivalric quest, that of Gawain, and of the ritual beheading and survival of the

Green Knight. These patterns are typical lines of narrative, which occur in multiple texts and which seem to derive from fundamental forms of human experience. What kind of archetypal patterns do you find in *Sir Gawain?*

Excerpt http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/English/GawainAndTheGreenKnight.htm

1

Soon as the siege and assault had ceased at Troy,
the burg broken and burnt to brands and ashes,
the traitor who trammels of treason there wrought
was tried for his treachery, the foulest on earth.
It was Aeneas the noble and his high kin
who then subdued provinces, lords they became,
well-nigh of all the wealth in the Western Isles:
forth rich Romulus to Rome rapidly came,
with great business that burg he builds up first,
and names it with his name, as now it has;
Ticius to Tuscany, and townships begins;
Langobard in Lombardy lifts up homes;
and fared over the French flood Felix Brutus
on many banks all broad Britain he settles
then,
where war and wreck and wonder
betimes have worked within,
and oft both bliss and blunder
have held sway swiftly since.

2

And when this Britain was built by this baron rich,
bold men were bred therein, of battle beloved,
in many a troubled time turmoil that wrought.
More flames on this fold have fallen here oft
than any other I know of, since that same time.
But of all that here built, of Britain the kings,
ever was Arthur highest, as I have heard tell.
And so of earnest adventure I aim to show,
that astonishes sight as some men do hold it,
an outstanding action of Arthur's wonders.

Thomas Mallory

The Life of Thomas Malory. Scholars still debate the life of Thomas Mallory, for whose work there are two possible claimants. It appears that the Thomas we have here is a well attested felon and jailbird, who set his literary imagination on a time and place, the mythical Arthurian period of English history, into which he could interject his disappointments and wishes. It seems that his period of creative ferment came during a period when he was in prison on charges of extortion, rape, theft, and violence. Like the author of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* Mallory found in the roundtable world that same zone of chivalric lords and ladies which keeps Camelot alive before our thoughts even today. (Cf. for instance the legend of the Kennedy clan and their Camelot.) But the imaginative work of Mallory is far different from that of the *Gawain* poet. Where the *Gawain* poet was dramatic and allegorical, Mallory is a prose stylist recounting a precise mythical history.

Le Morte Darthur was published in 1485, thus a century later than the writings of Chaucer, Langland, and the Gawain poet. The poem was published by the brilliant printer, William Caxton (1422-1491), who had played an important role in arranging and editing Mallory's text. (To repeat: two 'Mallories' contend for the honor of authorship of this poem, but it seems plausible—although it still makes us wonder—that the criminal Mallory was indeed the author of the great poem we are considering.) Mallory was a brilliant stylist, who captured the whole extent of the haunting legend of King Arthur and his roundtable, whose history had become a cultural rallying point for the forming British nation. The England that Mallory's Arthur rules is both a mythical Christian kingdom, and a dream world of heroic myth. In recounting the realms of these diverse worlds, Mallory gives thorough accounts of the main figures in the Arthurian legend: Tristram, Gareth, Lancelot are all followed through their legendary journeys, and the Pursuit of the Holy Grail is actively highlighted. Arthur himself is tracked, in splendid prose, from his initial optimistic removal of the knife from the stone, to his despondent death, cloaked in the phrase, 'the noble felyshyp of the Rounde Table is brokyn for ever.'

The influence of Mallory's *Morte Darthur*. The brilliant pathos, with which Mallory described the exploits, passions, and ultimately demise of the Arthurian project left a great impression on later generations of British writers, who were long conscious of the power of the Arthurian theme in the formation of British culture. In the sixteenth century Edmund Spenser, the author of *The Faerie Queene*, and Sir Philip Sidney, both looked to Mallory as a fountainhead of understanding of their own literary ancestry. In the nineteenth century Alfred Lord Tennyson deepens the entire tale, making the chivalric interrelations into romance, and idealizing even the mediaeval mantle of honor which enshrouded Mallory's work.

The importance of Caxton to Mallory. Malory's own background may have been socially dubious, but his printer—in that age when printing was an individual job requiring a lot of hands on skill—was an aspiring middle class entrepreneur of the kind required to ground and distribute texts. Caxton was a product of the new economic confidence, the earlier demise of which Mallory recounts in his doleful history of the Arthurian legend.

Reading

Primary source reading

Le Morte Darthur, ed. Stephen Shepherd, New York, 2003.

Secondary source reading

Bennett, J.A.W., Middle English Literature, Oxford, l986.

Further reading

Riddy, Felicity, *Sir Thomas Malory*, Leiden, 1987.

Suggested paper topics

1. What is Mallory's attitude toward the adultery between Lancelot and Guinevere, and toward Lancelot's behavior after that adultery? This question begs attention because Lancelot is a generically noble figure in the Arthurian scene, and his relation to Arthur is defining for the whole society of the roundtable. Mallory says in an aside that he is not sure what the two lovers were doing in Guinevere's chamber. Is Arthur made a fool?

2. You might want to browse in the Troubadour poetry being composed in Southern France at the end of the Middle Ages, especially in the 13th century. You will find that poetry populated with love/death themes, in which idealized love for the noble lady leads either to dark illegitimate passion or a sublimation of love in which the lover is cancelled out. What parallels do you see between that literature and Mallory's?

Excerpt http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/mart/mart000.htm

CHAPTER I How Uther Pendragon sent for the duke of Cornwall and Igraine his wife, and of their departing suddenly again. IT befell in the days of Uther Pendragon, when he was king of all England, and so reigned, that there was a mighty duke in Cornwall that held war against him long time. And the duke was called the Duke of Tintagil. And so by means King Uther sent for this duke, charging him to bring his wife with him, for she was called a fair lady, and a passing wise, and her name was called Igraine. So when the duke and his wife were come unto the king, by the means of great lords they were accorded both. The king liked and loved this lady well, and he made them great cheer out of measure, and desired to have lain by her. But she was a passing good woman, and would not assent unto the king. And then she told the duke her husband, and said, I suppose that we were sent for that I should be dishonoured; wherefore, husband, I counsel you, that we depart from hence suddenly, that we may ride all night unto our own castle. And in like wise as she said so they departed, that neither the king nor none of his council were ware of their departing. All so soon as King Uther knew of their departing so suddenly, he was wonderly wroth. Then he called to him his privy council, and told them of the sudden departing of the duke and his wife. <2> Then they advised the king to send for the duke and his wife by a great charge; and if he will not come at your summons, then may ye do your best, then have ye cause to make mighty war upon him. So that was done, and the messengers had their answers; and that was this shortly, that neither he nor his wife would not come at him. Then was the king wonderly wroth. And then the king sent him plain word again, and bade him be ready and stuff him and garnish him, for within forty days he would fetch him out of the biggest castle that he hath.

Julian of Norwich

The Life of Julian of Norwich. How much can you know of an anchoress who cloisters herself from the world, after a ceremonial burial has ritually closed her off from the rest of society? The answer is, not much. We know that Julian, whether perhaps once married, or never, became an anchoress, at a time when the Black Plague was sweeping across Europe and England, and that, possibly, the cloister was seen as a refuge for her, from the ravages of the plague itself. Whatever the backstory, it seems evident that she acquired her name Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) from the fact that the cloistered cell where she lived shared a wall with the Cathedral Church of Norwich—which was at the time the second largest city in England. The cloister itself was in Norwich, in East Anglia, and is still standing. Beyond that we have little but conjecture about the life of Julian. Indirect evidence suggests she may have come from a privileged family. From the writings she has left us, we know that she fell mortally ill at the age of thirty—May 13, 1373—and that immediately upon her recovery she wrote down the text of her *Revelation of Divine Love* (*The Short Text*.) We know from Julian exactly the time when she received the visions that she writes of in this text, and the content of the 'showings' which were bestowed upon her. Twenty years later she composed her *Long Text,* in which she looked back on her earlier experiences, in a powerful effort to understand them better.

The visions and views of Julian of Norwich. The writings left us by Julian are relatively brief. *The Short Text*, written down in l373, consists of twenty five chapters, some 11,000 words. *The Long Text* consists of 83, 500 words; the total the size of a single mid sized volume. In that work, though, she constructs her passionate theology, the fame of which spread sufficiently, that by the time of her death she was a magnet to other writers and thinkers of high spirituality, like the brilliant Marjory Kempe, who visited her in l4l4. (Julian herself was familiar with what was already a rich mystical literature in her time—the works of Rolle, Hilton, and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.) For Julian, love is the central theological notion, and God is essentially love. (The poet T.S. Eliot, in his *Four Quartets*, made famous for our time the famed phrase of Julian: 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well,' the 'words' God spoke to Julian in her illness.) She was superbly sensitive to the power of the moment and of the precise event to suggest the totality of the creation. Thus she describes taking a small hazelnut in the palm of her hand, wondering what it is—as the German mystic Jakob Boehme had wondered, at a ray of sun transmuting a pewter mug in the daylight—and being 'told' in vision that the nut is 'all that is,' a compact image of the whole creation, as is Jesus Christ in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Julian endures potent awarenesses—that Christ is our mother, that sin leads to self-knowledge and should not be scorned, that all who express spiritual love will be saved, regardless of conceptual belief or denominational category.

Reading

Primary source reading

The Showings of Julian of Norwich, ed. Starr, Charlottesville, 2013.

Secondary source reading

Aers, David, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430,* London, l988.

Further reading

Hodgson, Phyllis, *Three Fourteenth-Century English Mystics*, London, l967.

Suggested paper topics

1. Julian of Norwich writes from the center of her visions, though surely not without literary genius as shaper. You might want to look into the portrayal of religious states *in* literature, as distinct from *as* literature. Good case studies can be found throughout the work of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, whose *The Brothers Karamazov* explores the religious sensibility, almost as if from the inside, but still as part of a narrator's portrayal: the characters of Alyosha, of Father Zosima, and of the Grand Inquisitor are perfect examples of the portrayal of the religious sensibility from *within* literature.

2. With William Langland we asked whether we are able to access the allegorical style today, and whether the dream vision is a captivating literary form for us. We were of course raising the issue of reading Christian literature in an age when narratives of other kinds may be more familiar or attractive to us. With Julian the problem is keener. The physical of the created world—whether Christ's bleeding head or a simple hazelnut—is infused with its

spiritual meaning and presence, and yet retains a totally absorbing hereness and nowness. Question: *is this a type of imagination which you are at home with? Do you understand it? Can you live with this Vision?*

Excerpt

http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/mart/mart000.htm

These Revelations were shewed to a simple creature that cowde no letter the yeere of our Lord 1373, the eighth day of May, which creature desired afore three gifts of God. The first was mende of His passion. The second was bodily sekenesse in youth at thirty yeeres of age. The third was to have of Gods gift three wounds. As in the first methought I had sume feleing in the passion of Christe, but yet I desired more be the grace of God. Methought I would have beene that time with Mary Magdalen and with other that were Crists lovers, and therefore I desired a bodily sight wherein I might have more knowledge of the bodily peynes of our Saviour, and of the compassion our Lady and of all His trew lovers that seene that time His peynes, for I would be one of them and suffer with Him. Other sight ner sheweing of God desired I never none till the soule was departid fro the body. The cause of this petition was that after the sheweing I should have the more trew minde in the passion of Christe.

The second came to my mynde with contrition frely desireing that sekenesse so herde as to deth that I might in that sekeness underfongyn alle my rites of Holy Church, myselfe weneing that I should dye, and that all creatures might suppose the same that seyen me, for I would have no manner comfort of eardtly life. In this sekenesse I desired to have all manier peynes bodily and ghostly that I should have if I should dye, with all the dreds and tempests of the fends, except the outpassing of the soule. And this I ment for I would be purged be the mercy of God and after lyven more to the worshippe of God because of that sekenesse; and that for the more speede in my deth, for I desired to be soone with my God.

These two desires of the passion and the sekenesse I desired with a condition, seying thus: "Lord, thou wotith what I would, if it be Thy will that I have it, and if it be not Thy will, good Lord, be not displeased, for I will nought, but as Thou wilt." For the third, by the grace of God and teachyng of Holy Church, I conceived a mighty desire to receive three wounds in my life; that is to sey, the wound of very contrition, the wound of kinde compassion, and the wound of willfull longing to God. And all this last petition I asked without any condition. These two desires foresaid passid fro my minde, and the third dwelled with me continually.