

Life & Literature in The Medieval Period



*What was
it like to
live in the
Middle
Ages?*



The 3 Estates in the Middle Ages

- The idea of estates, or orders, was encouraged during the Middle Ages:
 - Clergy
 - Latin chiefly spoken, *those who pray*, purpose was to save everyone's soul
 - Nobles
 - French chiefly spoken, *those who fight*, purpose was to protect—allow for all to work in peace—and provide justice
 - Commoners
 - English spoken, *those who work*, purpose was to feed and clothe all above them



feudalism

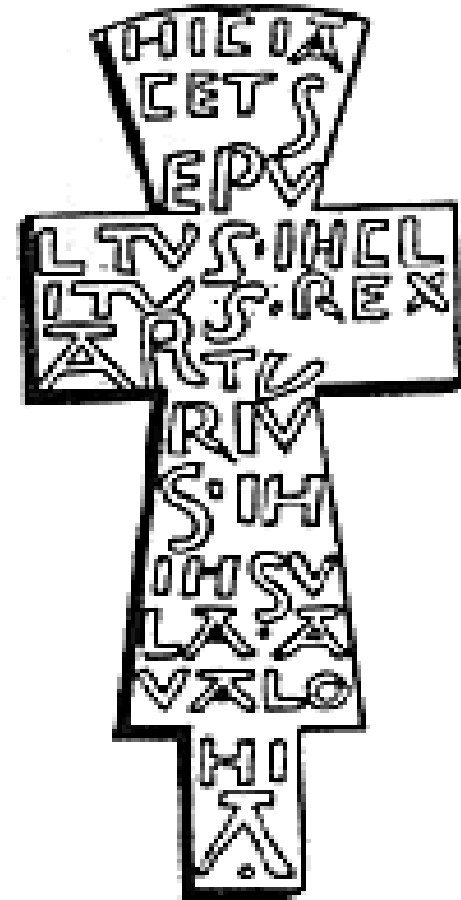


A tenant (vassal) renews his oath of fealty to his lord

- **The economic system of much of the Middle Ages (800-1100) was called feudalism.**
- **Commoners (peasants) lived on a feudal manor. The lord of the manor gave his vassals (the peasants) land to farm.**
- **In return, the vassals received protection from roving bandits. Yet they were taxed and had to surrender a portion of their crops to the lord.**
 - it was better to be a lord than a vassal!
- **Feudalism is important as it created ties of obedience and fostered a sense of loyalty between the vassals and their lord.**

The Church

- Provided guidance through well known precepts..
 - *Seven Deadly Sins*
 - Pride
 - Greed
 - Wrath
 - Envy
 - Gluttony
 - Sloth
 - Lust



The High Middle Ages

(begin 1095)

Begin with the **First Crusade** (1095)--reclaim Jerusalem from the infidels

Open trade routes

Peasants (the vassals) are liberated from their lords to fight, and die, in the Holy Lands

Cities spring up along the crusade routes

Feudalism dies out

the transition to the Renaissance begins

The High Middle Ages

Before, in the Dark Ages, the Church provided structure to society, not only with religion, but by providing education, as well.

Sadly, with the Crusades, the **Church becomes incredibly corrupt.**

Popes fight for political power

Greed is rampant

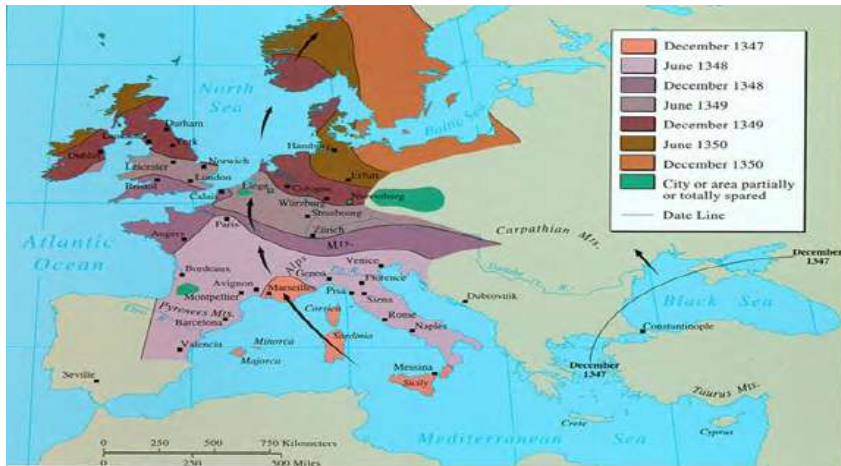
selling of indulgences

Crusades for \$

look for this in the

Tales

With the Crusades comes The Black Death



- spreads along trade routes
- kills much of the population
- the plague outbreaks occur through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance

Paradoxically, the Plague provides for continued growth in cities
Afterwards, hundreds of new jobs available
Many debts “died off” with creditors
also contributed to society’s culture



Enough already!

I thought this was an *English* class!



Literature During the Medieval Period



Languages

- Latin was the language of the Roman Catholic Church, which dominated Europe
- The Church was the only source of education
- Thus, Latin was a common language for Medieval writings. [*The commoners couldn't read anyway – they'd have heard the stories passed down orally.*]



A great amount of medieval literature is anonymous. Medieval authors often tended to retell and embellish stories they heard or read rather than invent new stories.

Writings

Catholic clerics were the intellectual center of society in the Middle Ages, and it is their literature that was produced in the greatest quantity.



Characteristics of Medieval Literature

- Romance
 - A narrative in prose or verse that tells of the high adventures and heroic exploits of chivalric heroes
 - Tells of exploits of knights
 - often a supernatural element involved
- Christian message
 - concern with salvation and the world to come
 - no interest in social change, only spiritual change
 - This was true until the late 14th century
 - Geoffrey Chaucer and Dante Alighieri signal new thinking, try up-ending social order

Characteristics of Medieval Literature

- Heroism

- from both Germanic and Christian traditions, sometimes mingled
 - *Beowulf*
 - *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*
 - *Song of Roland*
 - *The Nieblungenlied*

- Presentations of idealized behavior

- literature as moral lesson
 - loyalty to king
 - chivalry

- use of *kennings*

- A figurative, usually compound expression used in place of a name or noun. Example, *storm of swords* is a kenning for *battle*.

Characteristics of Medieval Literature – Use of Allegory

- An **allegory** is a figurative mode of representation conveying a meaning other than the literal.
- Much of medieval literature relied on allegory to convey the morals the author had in mind while writing--representations of abstract qualities, events, and institutions are thick in much of the literature of this time.
- We'll read Dante's *Inferno* this quarter – a classic example of medieval allegory!

Conventions of Medieval Romance

We'll focus first on reading three Medieval Romance texts. The influence of Medieval romance, with its roots in epic poetry, winds through English literature: through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, in the literary Romantic movement, and, of course, in modern takes on romance from T.H. White, and of course, Monty Python!*



GULLIVER KISSES THE QUEEN OF BROBDINGNAGIA'S HAND

Conventions of Medieval Romance



Medieval Romances:

- Often have unprovoked and violent fighting!
- Are set in a mystical place and time (the Dark Ages)
- Present supernatural elements, and magical powers from the pagan world
- Have a hero who is on a noble adventure or quest
- Have a loose, episode-like structure
- Include elements of courtly love
- Embody ideals of chivalry
- Time frame of a year and a day

Chivalric Code and Introduction to Courtly Love

- *Chivalry* is from the French word, *chevalier*, meaning horseman, or knight. *
- The Code of Chivalry influenced the formation of religious military orders during the period of the Crusades. The now famous Knights Templar and the Hospitalers are among the most noted knights of this period.
- During the later middle ages, chivalry had become largely as system of manners for the knights and a source of entertainment during tournaments – which themselves gradually became less threatening to the participants than live battle.”

Chivalric Code and Introduction to Courtly Love



The chivalric code combined
Christian virtues with
military virtues:

- Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice
- Faith, Hope, Charity
- Valor and strength in battle
- Loyalty to God and King
- Courtesy towards enemies
- Generosity towards the sick, women, widows and the oppressed
- Courtly Love*

The Ideal of Courtly Love

- **This relationship was modeled on the feudal relationship between a knight and his liege lord.**
- **The knight serves his courtly lady with the same obedience and loyalty which he owes to his liege lord.**
- **She is in complete control; he owes her obedience and submission**

The knight's love for the lady *inspires* him to do great deeds, in order to be worthy of her love or to win her favor.



- **“Courtly love” *was not between husband and wife* because it was an idealized sort of relationship that could not exist within the context of “real life” medieval marriages.**
- **In the middle ages, marriages amongst the nobility were typically based on practical and dynastic concerns rather than on love.**



- **“Courtly love” provided a model of behavior for a class of unmarried young men who might otherwise have threatened social stability.**
- **Knights were typically younger brothers without land of their own (hence unable to support a wife).**
- **They became members of the household of the feudal lords whom they served.**

The lady is typically older, married, and of higher social status than the knight because she was modeled on the wife of the feudal lord, who might naturally become the focus of the young, unmarried knights' desire.



**The literary model of courtly love
may have been invented to
provide young men with a model
for appropriate behavior.**

**It taught bored young knights to
control their baser desires and to
channel their energy into socially
useful behavior (*love service
rather than wandering around
the countryside, stealing or
raping women*).**

**The "symptoms" of love were described
as as if it were a sickness.**

**The "lovesick" knight's typical
symptoms: sighing, turning pale,
turning red, fever, inability to sleep,
eat or drink.**



The Quest

- In addition to the theme of Courtly Love, the Quest was highly important to medieval romance:
 - ✓ the code of conduct observed by a knight errant who is wandering in search of deeds of chivalry. This knight is bound by a code of behavior - a set of conventional principles and expectations



The Quest, cont'd

- A **quest** is a hero's journey towards a goal. The objects of quests require great exertion on the part of the hero, and the overcoming of many obstacles (think Hero's Journey archetype!).
- The hero's must obtain something, or someone, by the quest and with this object return home.

The Quest, cont'd

- Usually, an inner and outer problem for the character is set.
- The hero is introduced; audience identifies with them
- The hero lacks something, has a tragic flaw, or a deep wound
- The call often produces disorientation and discomfort for the hero
- The call is often in the form of a dire warning

- Excuses are used to avoid the call
- This hesitation illustrates the formidability of the challenge ahead
- Resistance creates change and strength, allowing the hero to grow
- A physical or metaphorical crossing is made
- The crossing is an irrevocable leap of faith, from which there's no turning back

- The hero faces his greatest fear
- The hero “dies,” so he can be reborn
- The hero gains new perception
- This new perception may create a moment of clarity
- The moment may be of great self-realization for the hero
- It may also be an epiphany for the hero’s companions

The Medieval Hero

Is often of divine descent endowed with great strength and ability" or "a man admired for his achievements and noble qualities"

(Sound familiar?!?!?)

The Song of Roland

(La Chanson de Roland)



The oldest surviving French medieval romance epic, *The Song of Roland* will be the first medieval text that we explore together in class this quarter. It was written down between 1140 and 1170 AD, but tells of actual events that occurred on August 15, 778 AD.

The Song of Roland

(La Chanson de Roland)



The story told in the poem is based on a historical incident, the Battle of Roncevaux Pass on 15 August 778, in which the rear guard of Charlemagne's withdrawing Franks (French forces), escorting a rich collection of plunder gathered during a campaign in Spain, was attacked by pagans (non-Christians/Muslims). In this battle, recorded by historian and biographer Einhard (Eginhard) in his *Life of Charlemagne* (written around 830), every one of the trapped soldiers were slaughtered, including Roland.

The Song of Roland

(La Chanson de Roland)



But before his honorable death in battle, Roland shows the reader the stages of the Hero's Journey and many heroic archetypes. He demonstrates what it means to be a chivalrous knight – loyal to his king and country to the very end, overcoming his own character flaw and sacrificing himself for the greater good in the end. His story is the embodiment of the greatest Medieval romance ever written.