Arthurian Legend: Arthur and the Celts
FYSEM-UA 717
Instructor: Dr. Sarah Waidler
Spring 2019
Thursday, 2.00–4.30
Cohort Meeting Friday, 12.30-1.45
Room TBA
Office hours: Monday 4.30-5.30, Thursday 4.45-5.45 in Silver 618

Merlin and Vortigern from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s ‘Prophetiae Merlini (Prophecies of Merlin)’ in BL Cotton MS Claudius B VII (1250), f. 224r

Course description: The legend of King Arthur has continued to fascinate audiences from the early medieval period until the modern day. But was there a real Arthur? How did his story begin and how did it grow? Why did he become such an iconic hero? This seminar will search for the roots of the legend of the famous king as a hero in medieval Wales and look at its development, plotting the many depictions of its main character from villain to tragic hero. We will also explore the origins of his companions, with particular emphasis on the origins of the wizard Merlin. From there, we will travel across the sea to Ireland and examine how the legend developed, to what extent it took on elements of Irish mythology and how the Celtic Arthur compared with that of the continental Romances. Students will be encouraged to investigate such elements as the legend’s interpretation of Christianity and the pagan past, the depiction of ‘magic’ and ‘miracles’ within the story and the role of gender in medieval writing. In assessing the creation of the Arthurian legend, this course will delve into medieval understandings of history, the
construction of identity and the concept of the ‘hero’ in Celtic literature and give students a grounding in critical thinking and how to approach historical texts.

**Assignments and Grading Scheme:**
Assessment will be based on the following:

Critical responses to reading/primary source critiques: 20% (your three best will be used to produce the final grade) – due weeks 2–8, 1–2 pages long
Mid-term essay: 20%  - due at the end of week 6, 4–6 pages long
Oral presentation and responses to presentations: 15% - each student will present once during weeks 9–13 and will write down questions and comments on their peers’ presentations based on the readings; both your presentation and responses make up the combined mark
Annotated bibliography for final research paper: 10% – due at the end of week 11
Final research paper: 25%  - due at the end of week 14, 8–10 pages long
Participation in class: 10%

During weeks 2–8 you are expected to write 1–2 pages in response to the reading assigned for that week. These should be emailed to me the by 5.00 pm the day before each class in which that reading will be discussed. In some weeks, particularly in the first 6 weeks of the course, prompts will be given or particular passages from primary sources will be highlighted for you to analyze in these critical responses. The three best pieces that you produce over the course of these weeks will be selected and used in calculating your final grade.

A 10-minute oral presentation on the readings, the challenges that primary sources present to scholars of the field and your opinions on the secondary literature will be expected of each student in weeks 9–13. Topics for these presentations and a sign-up sheet for presentation times during the last five weeks will be handed out and discussed in week 7. All students listening to the presentations will be expected to fill out a form provided in which they write down one question and one observation for the speaker based on their own reading of the sources prior to the class. You will also be expected to ask questions in class and contribute to discussion after each presentation. Each presenter will be handed back all of their comments from their peers in subsequent weeks for their own benefit.

A mid-term essay on any topic from the first 5 weeks will be due at the end of week 6 and specific essay questions will be handed out in the first week of the course. You will also need to complete a final research paper, which can be on any topic discussed throughout the course provided it is not the same one that you wrote about in your mid-term essay. You are encouraged to choose your own topics for this, which must be approved by me by week 10 at the latest. An annotated bibliography consisting of the sources you plan to use for this paper and one or two sentences regarding the relevance of each to your topic should be submitted in week 11 and will be returned to you in week 12 with comments. I am happy to read drafts of both your mid-term and final papers but these must be submitted to me one full week before the final deadline.
All complete assignments must be emailed to me by the due date as a PDF and must include your full name, the date and the assignment title. Late submission can have a negative impact on your grade for that assignment, so please do submit material on time. If for any reason an extension is required, you must make a request to me via email in advance of the due date for the assignment and this will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Class participation is based on your ability to make meaningful contributions based on your reading throughout each class. This is expected to be aided by both your written critical responses and how you use the reading to engage with other students’ presentations and comments.

**Attendance:**
Attendance at all class sessions is compulsory. Your mark for participation in class will be affected adversely if your absence is not excused. Any requests for excused absence should be submitted by email to me as far in advance as possible. An excuse that is submitted after the class takes place will only be accepted in exceptional cases. Even if your absence is excused (and indeed, if it is not), you still are expected to complete all the reading for the missed class and all other assignments required.

**Reading:**
It is not required to buy any books for this course as all primary sources, chapters and articles will be available on NYU Classes for you to read. However, you may find it easier to have your own copy of some of the books that we will use frequently. These are listed below and will also be available in the library.


Bibliographies will also be handed out each week with additional relevant material that will help you for your papers. If you are interested in any of the sources on these bibliographies and they are not available in the library (I will note anything that the library does not actually have on these handouts), please email me and I will send you the relevant article, etc.
For each class, I will give you primary sources written during the period under study as well as secondary sources that concern them. You must read these BEFORE the start of each class and use them for your critical responses. For the primary medieval sources, I will in the majority of cases supply the entire text but will give you specific page numbers concerning what we will primarily focus on for that week’s class. Where manageable, it is fantastic if you can read as much of the entire text as possible, particularly when it is a narrative prose tale or poem, as it gives you context and helps you to develop a better feel for the sources. And much of medieval Welsh and Irish literature is highly entertaining so you don’t want to miss out!

All sources will be provided in English translation. Some titles remain in the original if that has become the customary way of referring to the source, but I will always explain this title and provide English translations on the handouts for each class.

**Office hours:** I will be available Mondays 4.30-5.30 and Thursdays 4.45-5.45 in Silver conference room 618 for students to come see me with questions, concerns and additional help. I am also happy to arrange ad hoc meetings upon request. Please send me an email if you would like to arrange such a meeting.

**Disability Disclosure Statement:** Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosecsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

**Week 1 Introduction: The Arthur of History?: The Worlds of Arthur**

i) Introduction to the course and discussion of the objectives
ii) Overview of the geography and languages of the medieval Celtic world and its neighbors

**Week 2 The Arthur of History?: Legend and History in Sub-Roman Britain**

**Primary sources**
pp. 35–6 and 76.

- Extract from the *Gododdin*, verse 102 (whole poem can be accessed online at http://www.maryjones.us/ctexts/a01b.html)

**Secondary sources**

**Week 3** Arthur of the Welsh: *Culhwch and Olwen* and ‘Pa gur yv y Porthaur? (Who is the Gatekeeper?)’

**Primary sources**

**Secondary sources**
- D. Edel, ‘The Arthur of *Culhwch ac Olwen* as a Figure of Epic-Heroic Tradition’, *Reading Medieval Studies* 9 (1983), pp. 3–15

**Week 4** Arthur the Villain? Arthur and the Saints

**Primary sources**
- Caradog of Llancarfan, ‘Life of Gildas’ in *Two Lives of Gildas by a Monk of Ruys and Caradoc of Llancarfan*, trans. H. Williams, Cymmrodorion Record Series (Felinfach, 1899, repr. 1990); accessible online at http://www.maryjones.us/ctexts/gildas06.html

**Secondary sources**

**Week 5** Enter Geoffrey of Monmouth: Contentions and Approaches  

**Primary sources**  

**Secondary sources**  
- K. Jankulak, *Geoffrey of Monmouth, Writers of Wales Series* (Cardiff, 2010), see especially Chapter 2: ‘*Historia Regum Britanniae* and its Sources’ pp. 13–21;  
  Chapter 7: ‘The Arthurian Section of *Historia Regum Britanniae*’, pp. 67–77  

**Week 6** Praise, Prophecy and Poets  

**Primary sources:**  

**Secondary sources:**  
- J. K. Bollard ‘Arthur in the Early Welsh Tradition’ in *The Romance of Arthur: An Anthology of Medieval Texts in Translation*, ed. N. J. Lacy and J. J. Wilhelm, 3rd ed. (Abingdon, 2013), pp. 9–27 (some extracts of primary texts are included in this chapter which you will have already read, but this is helpful for additional context)  
- M. Haycock, “‘Preiddeu Annwn” and the Figure of Taliesin’, *Studia Celtica*, 18–19 (1983–84), pp. 52–78.  

*MID-TERM ESSAY DUE*
**Week 7** ‘I am Preparing to Sing the Madness of the Prophet Bard’: Myrddin, Merlin and Lailoken

**Primary sources:**
- Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The Life of Merlin/Vita Merlina*: J. Parry (ed. and trans.), *The Vita Merlina* (Urbana, 1925), pp. 30–117 [don't worry, it isn't as long as it looks as this includes the Latin, which you don't have to read!]; also accessible online at http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/eng/vm/index.htm
- ‘Lailoken and Kentigern’, ‘Meldred and Lailoken’ (unpublished translations will be made available online on NYU Classes)
- ‘Afallennau’ (‘Apple-trees’) (translation will be made available online on NYU Classes)

**Secondary sources:**

**Week 8** Tristan and Arthur: Sources, Attachments and the Celtic Love Triangle

**Primary sources:**

**Secondary sources:**

**Week 9** Owain and Geraint: Further into the World of the Romance

**Primary sources:**
- Extracts from: Chrétien de Troyes's, ‘Yvain, the Knight of the Lion’ in *Four Arthurian Romances*, trans. W. W. Comfort, whole text available online at http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/831
Secondary sources

ORAL PRESENTATIONS

Week 10 Peredur, the Grail and the Celtic World
Primary sources

Secondary sources

ORAL PRESENTATIONS

Week 11 Guinevere and the Women of the Celtic Arthurian Tradition
Primary sources

Secondary sources

ORAL PRESENTATIONS
*ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR FINAL RESEARCH PAPER DUE

Week 12 Gawain and the Beheading Game: Shadows of the Arthur of the Irish?
Primary sources
- Summary of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

**Secondary sources**

**ORAL PRESENTATIONS**

**Week 13** Of Dreams and Bygone Ages: The Image of Arthur and the Arthurian Age

**Primary sources**

**Secondary sources**

**ORAL PRESENTATIONS**

**Week 14** Review: The Celtic Legend of Arthur in the Middle Ages?

*FINAL RESEARCH PAPER DUE*