

Medieval Studies 200/ English 214 Topics in Medieval Studies
/History 232: Special Topics in Medieval History

Fall and Spring, 2007-2008:

Exploring Medieval Texts and Contexts:

*Tres infelices in mundo dicimus esse:
Infelix qui pauca sapit spernitque docer;
Infelix qui multa sapit spernitque docere;
Infelix qui sancta docet si vivat inique.*

(We say there are three [kinds of] unfruitful [people] in the world:/
[He is] unfruitful, who knows little and refuses to be taught; /
[He is] unfruitful who knows much and refuses to teach;/
[He is] unfruitful who teaches holiness but lives wickedly)

---Ms Ashmole 61

Carolyn Collette
ccollett@mtholyoke.edu
Office, and Office Hours

Harold Garrett-Goodyear
hgarrett@mtholyoke.edu
Skinner 209, x2451
Office Hrs: Tu 10:30-12, W 11-12

[The ELLA site for this course has been identified as HIST 232 01 FA07. All registered members of the course should find it under this label in your ELLA browser.]

Course Description

A full-year course, 2 credits for each semester, designed to give students with curiosity about and some familiarity with history and literature of late medieval England an opportunity to think about and explore the relationship among texts from late medieval European culture with two instructors preparing a sourcebook on the English literature of the period 1350 to 1530. In the first semester discovery and exploration of published evidence will be primary; in the second semester students will focus on textual analysis and contextual framing of documents. Throughout the year, participants will balance attention to major writers such as Chaucer, Gower, and Malory against analysis of less familiar writings and documents. Major themes that will inform investigation, selection and interpretation of texts include the languages of late medieval England, Textual

production, scribes and book culture; Violence and the work of chivalry; Producing and exchanging: the worlds of manors and guilds; Polity, gender and governance; Spiritual affirmations and anxieties; Uses of the past; Science in late medieval European culture.

Objectives and Organization

Some months ago Carolyn Collette and Harold Garrett-Goodyear contracted with Palgrave publishers for a volume of sources to contextualize literature from the period 1350-1530 for their "Sourcebooks in English Studies" Series. We set out our general objectives for such a volume as follows:

"This volume will offer students and readers generally interested in late medieval culture in England insight into the broad outlines of shared culture as well as into the more specialized and limited *sociolects* of the particular intellectual affinities and of the political and spiritual communities which constitute the intellectual context for the richly varied literary works of the period. We will bring together texts representing a variety of voices across the spectrum of late medieval English society. Bearing in mind its general audience, the authors of this volume propose nine categories through which to present texts representing the social, religious, political and scientific knowledge that constituted the common and specialized knowledge of late medieval English culture."

Having won approval from Palgrave to proceed towards this goal, we now face. We are now engaged in the exciting challenge of finding and presenting documents "representing the social, religious, political and scientific knowledge" within which English women and men wrote, acted, and imagined themselves between 1350 and 1530. This course invites MHC students with some knowledge of medieval England and considerable interest in interdisciplinary research to share in the search and interpretation of materials with which the conscious world of late medieval English people can be, in some part, re-constructed—or more precisely, can be constructed.

Organizing our foray into what people late medieval England wrote, and into why they produced written documents (or for that matter, images of various sorts), is not a simple matter. We know that the approach must be interdisciplinary, and we know that our job is to recover the semantic and intellectual webs of memory and practice that will enlarge twenty-first century understanding of the rich complexity of medieval texts. But what tactics are likely to be most effective?

We could simply choose some original sources-- texts, records or collection of records, collections of poems or stories--and tease them apart, bringing to bear on each all that we already know in order to interpret their contents, and using them to interrogate and reconsider what we think know already about, in this case, late medieval England, but largely encouraging the sources themselves to tell us what we can then say about the period.

Or we could, given what we already know and don't know, ask questions about the period for which we then seek sources that might offer answers. We could, that is, start from a problem for which we would like an answer, letting our questions direct our search for sources that might yield information about or insight into the topic that interests us.

Historians and new historicist literary critics are seldom able simply to choose one route or the other; ordinarily, we end up mixing the two approaches, not always in a very systematic way. We cannot answer questions for which no evidence exists; but a document from the middle ages does not become evidence about the middle ages until we pose a question, until we ask what it means about something, something we want to know and understand.

In this course we shall somewhat arbitrarily separate the two approaches in order first to gain a common sense of what sources for the period 1350-1530 (apart from "literature") are accessible to scholars today (classes from Sept. 12 through Sept. 26), and then to explore some of the major lines of inquiry that scholars have followed--or, we might say instead, to examine some major themes, topics, or issues in late medieval history and literature (classes from Oct. 3 to through Dec. 5).

So, during our first month together, you will have the challenge of surveying printed and on-line sources, constructing from your survey annotated bibliographies for future students of the period, but also choosing one source, or type of source, for continued investigation and exploration throughout the semester. For one of the classes on Sept. 12, 19, and 26, you are expected to select a short document or excerpt from a document and make it available, prior to class, via the course ELLA site. You should also plan to report on "your" source or sources in one of the first three classes, ideally after discussing it with colleagues who are working on the same broad category of sources (see titles of classes on Sept. 12, 19, and 26.) During the first month, we hope that each of you will identify a source, or collection of records, or type of record, that you can mine more deeply and thoroughly as the semester continues, using it or them to address some of the nine topics or themes your instructors have tentatively proposed for organizing the materials that will comprise the Palgrave volume for late medieval England. And at the end of the semester, you will be asked to submit a collection of documents and excerpts from whatever source or sources you chose to explore, along with commentary on the relevance of these excerpts to some, perhaps even all, of the themes used to organize the Palgrave collection.

Once all of us have achieved a clearer vision of types of documents, records, and evidence from late medieval England that are available to us (and anyone curious about people between 1350 and 1530), the class will turn to the nine themes or topics proposed by your instructors as the basic structure of the Palgrave volume. Each class participant will be assigned, more or less randomly, three of these themes; and for each of the three themes assigned a participant. she should select prior to class a (short) document for discussion, prepare a brief introduction (possibly more a set of questions than an interpretative essay), and make both available, via the course ELLA site, to her

colleagues. (And we hope that, also prior to class, all participants responsible for a particular theme will meet, perhaps over supper or breakfast immediately preceding the class session, to identify particular issues, questions, or problems that deserve attention from and discussion by all of us.) We, your instructors that is, will be active participants in class discussion, but we are counting on you to lead, and lead actively, the class's common investigation and interpretation of sources, confident that strong curiosity and a willingness to ask questions may prove as useful to the achievement of insight and understanding as "expert" knowledge.

If you have kept count of assignments described above, you will have seen that each participant will have leadership responsibility in four classes, one on types of sources for understanding late medieval literature, but more importantly, late medieval culture, society, and politics, and on three classes devoted to themes; that each will post documents or documentary excerpts to the course ELLA site on four occasions; that on three occasions, each will also write and submit via ELLA introductory observations, commentary, and questions for consideration, exploration and interpretation; and that at the end of the course, each will provide a collection of documents and excerpts (some or most of which may already have been posted to ELLA), with an introduction that relates the contents of the collection to themes explored during the semester. In addition, as the course proceeds, we shall encourage each of you to contribute to a common bibliography of published or online sources and scholarship that others curious about this period might find of interest, along with what you think others might find interesting about each item included in the bibliography. And finally, we shall ask each of you to submit a self-evaluation of your learning this semester—which will be the principal basis for your semester grade—along with a revision, in light of the what you learn this semester, of your initial essay, "on the most significant changes between 1350 to 1530 in England."

Books (available at the Odyssey Bookshop)

You should purchase, or share the purchase of, three books:

Derek Pearsall, ed., Chaucer to Spenser. An Anthology (Blackwell, 1999), will likely prove more useful next semester than this, but from time to time this fall, CC and HGG may ask you to look at one of the works of "literature" in this collection.

Miri Rubin, The Hollow Crown. A History of Britain in the Late Middle Ages, (Penguin, 2005), is a book that we recommend, not as the definitive "history" of the period, but as one very able and imaginative scholar's attempt to organize into a coherent narrative the major happenings in England between 1350 and 1530. It is, in short, a textbook, to be used as all textbooks, cautiously. But having a narrative is comforting, and it can be, when understood to be a narrative, not "the" narrative, useful in locating both documents and issues within larger frameworks of description and explanation. You may want to read the whole of this book, during the first month or so of the semester, if you find yourself desperately craving a chronological account of happenings and developments. On the other hand, you may want to use it primarily as a reference, to be consulted as

your discovery and interpretation of documents leads you to look up particular people or moments.

Social History is not more important than political and cultural history, but it may be more directly pertinent to developing some, perhaps most, of the themes that CC and HGG identified for structuring a collection of documents and sources intended to illuminate late medieval “literature.” For that reason, they have suggested, in the schedule of classes below, chapters from Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod, *A Social History of England, 1200-1500* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), crudely appropriate to particular themes in some cases, more remotely connected to the theme of the class on others. You are urged at least to scan these suggested readings; but you should treat this work as primarily for reference, to be consulted when your engagement with a document or a theme makes such a consultation look useful.

Schedule of classes

Sept. 7. Prior to this class, please prepare an informal essay, no more than 750 words, on the most significant changes between 1350 and 1530 in England. Please, no research is either expected or desired for this assignment; it is simply an opportunity for self-reflection, to articulate what each participant imagines was the direction and character of change in the late middle ages, in order to see what assumptions, myths, and preconceptions we may need to challenge, or to allow sources from the period to challenge this semester. What you already know will provide valuable background, insight, and illumination during our search for and interpretation of sources this semester; but knowledge is neither static nor secure, and laying out in brief your views of the period at the outset may allow us more readily to distinguish what we can securely assert from what we would like to say about the period.

If at all possible before today’s class, read ch. 1, “Introduction: Social Structure and Economic Change in Late Medieval England,” Horrox and Ormrod, eds., *A Social History of England 1200-1500*—but only *after* you have written the essay requested above,

I. The Sources—or at least some of them

Sept. 12. The Records of Worldly Authorities, Royal, Seignorial, Civic, and Familial (e.g., records and reports of common law courts, manorial court rolls, municipal and civic records including Records of Early English Drama, and letters of aristocratic families.)

Suggested reading: Horrox and Ormrod, ch. 4, “Order and Law”

Sept. 19 The Records of Spiritual Authorities and God’s Spokespeople (e.g., canon law records, sermons, devotional books, mystical treatises, saint’s lives.)

Suggested reading: Horrox and Ormrod, ch. 11, “Religious Belief”

Sept. 26. Descriptions of and Reflections on God, Nature, and History. (e.g., treatises and writings on philosophy, morality, history, science, and magic, addressing in some fashion the questions: how does the world work, how does God work in the world, and how should human beings behave in such a world?)

Suggested reading: Horrox and Ormrod, ch. 12, “A Magic Universe”

II. Issues, Topics, Themes—or, possible chapters for a source book.

(Please note that the paragraphs below explaining each of the nine themes are more or less how we--CC and HGG--described major divisions of the proposed source book when negotiating with Palgrave Publishing about the shape and content of the eventual published volume. The order of the topics is not identical to our proposal, and the three categories into which the nine have been grouped below reflect organizational convenience more than substantive content, designed largely to make it easier to allocate assignments for writing and leadership of discussions equitably among participants. As discovery, collection and annotation of sources proceeds this year, the descriptions are likely to undergo some change, and the divisions themselves may need to be revised. Please note also that we may, from time to time below, have further suggestions for sources to read under various topics below.)

Social Context and Material Infrastructure

Oct. 3. Violence and the Work of Chivalry:

This category focuses on the social elite, emphasizing an aristocracy-- nobles and gentlemen--which justified itself conceptually, and defended itself practically, through violence, even as the military importance of the aristocracy became less prominent and feudal lordship lost its practical significance.

Suggested reading: Horrox and Ormrod, ch. 2, “An Age of Deference”;
ch. 3, “The Enterprise of War”; and ch. 5, “Social Mobility”

Oct. 10. Producing and Exchanging. The Worlds of Manors and Guilds:

Category five deliberately merges two arenas of production and consumption frequently contrasted, town and countryside, in the conviction that such a contrast conforms poorly to the integrity and complexity of relations between agrarian and urban production at the time. The documents in both of these categories should reinforce readers’ awareness of the hierarchical structure of late medieval society, while encouraging them to see and appreciate the frequent challenges to that structure, and the constant negotiation of the terms on which hierarchy survived and renewed itself.

Suggested reading: Horrox and Ormrod, ch. 6, “Town Life”; ch. 7, “The Land”;

and ch.8, “A Consumer Economy”
“

Oct. 17. Polity and Governance, Unity and Disunity:

This category offers opportunity to include political and social theory, as well as a variety of conduct texts; all these examples should pertain directly to the question of what is a smoothly functioning polity and how that kind of ideal can best be achieved by the individuals who comprise it. This is a large category which bridges visions of social order on the one hand, practices and tactics of political control on the other. Documents should include not only works immediately recognizable to modern readers as political theory and social criticism, but also works of advice, conduct and “etiquette” books, that may initially strike a reader today as more relevant to domestic and private life than affairs of state. Selections on this topic are intended to show how misleading the distinctions, for example, between “public” and “private” may be when reading works of the late middle ages, and how unsatisfactory modern notions of individual autonomy prove when applied to late medieval literature, despite repeated emphasis on the moral accountability of individuals.

Other documents likely to illuminate this category originated in overt conflicts, and articulated the goals of those obligated to support existing hierarchies. The documents should make clear how ideas about unity accommodated to the realities of division and faction; they should also illuminate ways in which ideals of unity and harmony could be deployed by those challenging their superiors. Here as in other categories, emphasis falls on change occurring within structures and concepts that affirmed continuity and stability.

Suggested reading: Horrox and Ormrod, ch. 9, “Moving Around,” and ch. 10, “Work and Leisure,” and review chs. 2, 4 and 5

The Language, Production, and Reception of Texts

Oct. 24. English Languages:

For a literature so dependent on a body of well-known cultural traditions, and a literature whose language is recognized as a romance-Germanic hybrid, the degree to which English in this period has been isolated from its French cultural and linguistic roots is indeed surprising. Because of its linguistic hybridity, late medieval English literature is a layered, complex expression of interwoven cultures produced over more than a thousand years of European language and history. English literature of the period 1350-1530 is written in a newly invigorated vernacular by authors conscious of shaping a vernacular language to poetic, exemplary and political purposes. Although English has understandably been regarded as a language of emergent self-conscious nationality in this period, it is also equally true that it is still closely tied to continental language, especially French, whose vocabulary provides much of the abstract terminology necessary to formulate social and political ideas in this period. To capture some of the immense energy and productive instability of this matter, and to signal its importance in reading the literature of the period, the volume begins with a category simply titled “English

Languages.” The schematic list of potential texts indicates the dual Anglo-French and dialectal focus on this category which will be introduced by references to self-conscious references to language in the major authors of the period.

Suggested reading: Horrox and Ormrod, ch. 18, “Writing and Reading”

Oct. 31. Performance, Audience, Reception:

Our second category focuses attention on the reception of literature. Late medieval English literature is acutely aware of the limitations and instability of language in respect to conveying authorial intention and directing audience reception. This category will bring together a variety of texts that demonstrate authorial attempts to control the terms of reception of their work, as well as examples of how individuals appropriate, emend, and recombine literary texts independent of authorial control.

Suggested reading: Horrox and Ormrod, ch. 15, “Identities” and ch. 16, “Life and Death”

Nov. 7. Textual Production/Scribal Culture/Book Culture:

The third category follows naturally from the preceding topic. It addresses more technical, formal matter such as the construction of books, various scribal practices, scripts, hands, illumination, and the flourishing book trade in London in the fifteenth century, both manuscript and print.

Conceptual and Perceptual Frames of Discourse

Nov. 14. Spiritual Affirmations, Oppositions and Anxieties:

This topic will draw on the large body of religious material from the period to outline the major trends and strains in religious doctrine and practice during the period. Chief among these will be attention to the cult of the Virgin in late Medieval England, as well as to cults of local saints and the popularity of hagiographical materials. We will also include the emergence of new religious organizations and the foundation of new houses often through the not entirely disinterested generosity of the monarchy and highest levels of nobility. In addition, we will devote attention to opposition to established doctrine and practice within the framework of “Lollard” thinking that challenged *realist* assumptions about language, categories and even the sacraments in philosophy and theology, as well as the challenge of mysticism in its singular focus on the individual’s relationship to God; materials illustrating mid-fourteenth century theological thinking about will and grace will be complemented by early Reformation documents. Our emphasis in all cases will be on the interplay between the secular and the sacred, high orthodoxy and lay spirituality.

Suggested reading: Horrox and Ormrod, ch. 13, “Renunciation” and ch.14, “Ritual Construction of Society”

Nov. 28. *Scientia*:

The popularity of artifacts like *mappae mundi* and of travel stories like Mandeville's adventures, as well as growing interest in optics, alchemy, time-keeping, and the study of the skies are categorized under the heading *Scientia*. Knowledge of the material world, and its relation to the invisible world of spirit is central to thinking about the individual in this period and to the work of salvation. In this category the volume will present documents that reflect major philosophical issues of the time, and some of the major neo-Aristotelian commonplaces that shaped people's thinking about sex, gender, the body and the body politic.

Dec. 5. Uses of the Past: Authorizing the Present and Shaping the Future:

Because the late medieval period in England overlaps the *quattrocento* with its humanist interest in the past and its storehouse of exemplary stories, and because many of these stories appear in the writing of Chaucer and Gower, as well as in the books published by Caxton, we have constructed this category to represent some of the "backmatter" of late medieval literature which is not generally accessible to students. Attention to the way the past is used in literature invites consideration of how the idea of the past is used in court proceedings, especially in narratives of how pleas of custom are adjudicated.

III. Reflections, Second Thoughts, and Ideas for Next Semester.

Dec. 12. Review of essays submitted for the first class, and discussion of how documents discovered, interpreted, and discussed this semester have re-shaped your understanding of what changed, and how it changed, and why it changed, in the lives of folk who lived in what is today England, between 1350 and 1530, more or less.