

Period I. Medieval British Literature

Recommended Reading

OLD ENGLISH POETRY

Anon. (c. 725): *Beowulf*. Seamus Heaney's translation in the *Norton Anthology* (9th ed.), is acceptable, but E.T. Donaldson's prose translation is closer to the original text and preserves the tone of the original. Get the *Norton Critical Edition* that contains this translation as well as some useful critical essays on *Beowulf*.

Elegiac Poetry (c. 10th century): *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Wife's Lament*, *Deor*, *The Ruin*

Dream Vision: *The Dream of the Rood*

Battle Poetry, *The Battle of Maldon*

Religious Poetry: *Judith*

NOTE: Most but not all of these poems are in the *Norton Anthology*. For the rest, look in Kennedy's or Raffel's translations. Copies available in the library.

MIDDLE ENGLISH POETRY

Chaucer, Geoffrey (c. 1343-1400): *The Canterbury Tales* (including the *General Prologue*, *Knight's Tale*, *Miller's Tale*, *Reeves Tale*, *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*, *Clerk's Tale*, *Franklin's Tale*, *Pardoner's Prologue and Tale*, *Prioress's Tale*, *Nun's Priest's Tale*, *The Canon's Yeoman's Prologue and Tale*, *Chaucer's Retraction*). The best edition is Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Canterbury Tales* (Houghton-Mifflin). If you don't read middle English easily, I recommend Peter Beidler's Bantam edition, which is facing page—middle English/modern English. For the tales not in Beidler, try Neville Coghill's translation, also in paperback.

The Gawain-Poet (late 14th century): *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*. Simon Armitage's translation in the *Norton Anthology* (9th ed.) is reliable, but so is Marie Borroff's, which appeared in earlier editions of the Norton. Borroff's Norton paperback translation also includes *Pearl*.

Anon. *Sir Orfeo*. In the Norton Anthology. This is an example of the middle English metrical (that is, not alliterative) romances. It is a version of the Orpheus myth.

Langland, William (c. 1330-1387): *Piers Plowman (The "B" Text)*. George Economou did a good translation of the "B" text, but Schmidt's Oxford paperback translation is also pretty good. This is a long work with an indistinct plot, but it clearly demonstrates the richness and complexity of 14th-century religious experience. Reading Passus (parts) 1-7 will give you a good idea of what Langland is doing.

Julian of Norwich (1342-c. 1416): *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich*. Use the selections in the *Norton Anthology*.

Margery Kempe (c. 1373-1438): *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Use the selections in the *Norton Anthology*.

Anon. (late 15th century): *The Wakefield Second Shepherds' Play*. In the *Norton Anthology*.

Anon. (late 15th century): *Everyman*. In the *Norton Anthology*.

Sir Thomas Malory (1405-1471): *Morte Darthur* (at least *Merlin*, *The Knight of the Cart*, *The Holy Grail*, *The Most Piteous Tale of the Morte Arthur Saunz Guerdon* [i.e. *The Death of Arthur*]). Here,

you would do better to use Vinaver's Oxford paperback, *King Arthur and His Knights: Selected Tales*.

CRITICISM (a few suggestions to get you started)

Old English Literature

J.R.R. Tolkien's essay, "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics" is still useful, and is probably the first criticism you should read on the poem.

Also on *Beowulf*, see the *Norton Critical Edition*, to which some helpful essays are appended. Stanley B. Greenfield, *New Critical History of Old English Literature* (1986) is sensible and reliable.

Chaucer

Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse* (Indiana UP, 1976). Sensitive, readable commentary on the major *Canterbury Tales*.

Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (UWisconsinP, 1991). Patterson is clear and extremely informative. Any of his books on Chaucer (all in the library) would be helpful, but *Chaucer and the Subject of History* is the best known.

Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guide to The Canterbury Tales* (1996). Comprehensive, but it is a backup, and not the only book you should read.

Jill Mann has also written some very helpful books on Chaucer.

Middle English Literature

Larry D. Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1965). Still the one indispensable book on SGGK.

John A. Burrow has a good book on SGGK, another on Middle English Literature, and still others you might want to sample. He is accessible and authoritative, though you will want to consult more recent authors as well.

A.C. Spearing is an accessible and worthwhile critic. He has written several helpful books on middle English literature.

NOTE: You would be foolish to take the M.A. comps without reading any criticism, but the worst mistake would be to read the criticism instead of the literature. If you read, **and reread**, and become familiar with the literary works in the above list, you will at least be able to discuss them in an exam essay. But if you then ask questions of these works, read some commentary about them, and then **rethink** your understanding of each of them, you will be ready to write a clear, focused argument in response to any question we can ask.