Old English literature:
- Beowulf
- The Ruin
Medieval British literature:
- Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

LITERATURA BRYTYJSKA i AMERYKAŃSKA

1

The Beginnings of British Literature and Culture

900 000 BC

First human activity

Happisburgh footprints, flint tools

British prehistory

Hunters and gatherers → First farmers → Sacred Landscapes → Bronze Age → Iron Age

9500 BC – 50 AD

c. 43 AD – 410 AD

Roman Britain

Julius Cesar's ivasion of Britain and the **first written records** of life on the island come from 55 – 54 BC.

If **Y**ou're Interested:

1. *Dawn of Man* (game)
2. The Bronze Age Collapse:
https://youtu.be/B965f8AcNbw
3. Roman Britain:
https://youtu.be/dvtVLa4uOYc
https://youtu.be/glKe9njOB24

Anglo-Saxon Britain

c. 700 – 1000 AD

Beowulf

Written in Old English

The Great Heathen Army invades Britain

For the next ~ 200 years Vikings would occupy much of the north and east of England.

865 AD

copied c. 975 AD

The Exeter Book

Anthology of Old English literature

If You're Interested:

1. Who were the last Vikings?
https://youtu.be/ZHLsU-8A8iE

3. Strange Medieval Art
https://youtu.be/f50T9CGV4Ns
https://youtu.be/j7SE0HwhfTM

Culture in the British isles has been developing for almost a **MILLION** years before it produced *Beowulf!*

Britain 400 – 500
Anglo-Saxon Homelands and Settlements
Primarily based on Higham's *Rome, Britain and the Anglo-Saxons*, Jones & Mattingly's *Atlas of Roman Britain*, and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*

0   km   250
0   mi   125   2010-11-20

Picts
Britons
Jutes
Angles
Saxons
Angles, Saxons, Jutes (from the early 400's)
Britons
English Angles
Frisians
English
Britons
? Saxons
Franks
Romano-Britons
Before 500

Mid ⁵ᵗʰ-Early 7ᵗʰ c. AD
Anglo-Saxon Settlement of Britain

The transformation that altered both the language and culture in a significant portion of what would later become England was the shift from Romano-British to Germanic influences. The Germanic-speaking groups residing in Britain, originating from various backgrounds, ultimately forged a shared cultural identity as the Anglo-Saxons. This transformation predominantly unfolded during the period spanning from the mid-fifth century to the early seventh century, coinciding with the cessation of Roman governance in Britain around 410 AD.
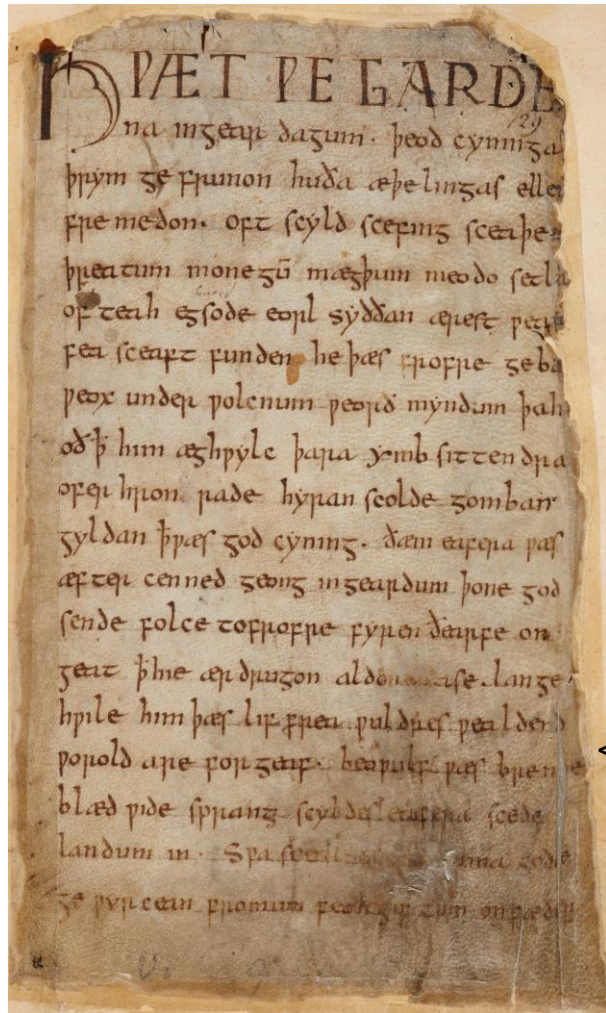
7TH cent. AD

Sutton Hoo Ship Burial

IYI: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/death-and-memory/anglo-saxon-ship-burial-sutton-hoo

7TH cent. AD

Sutton Hoo Ship Burial

6ᵗʰ–8ᵗʰ c. AD

Beowulf

< THE SINGLE SURVIVING COPY OF THE POEM IN THE NOWELL CODEX, A MANUSCRIPT HOUSED IN THE BRITISH LIBRARY

https://youtu.be/0zorjJzrrvA?si=0BINgJvPJhwKqFso

Epic

Long, narrative **poem** that elebrates the deeds of a legendary hero or heroes;

01

The hero is usually protected by or even descended from gods;

02

The hero performs superhuman exploits in battle or marvelous voyages, often saving or founding a nation or the human race itself;

03

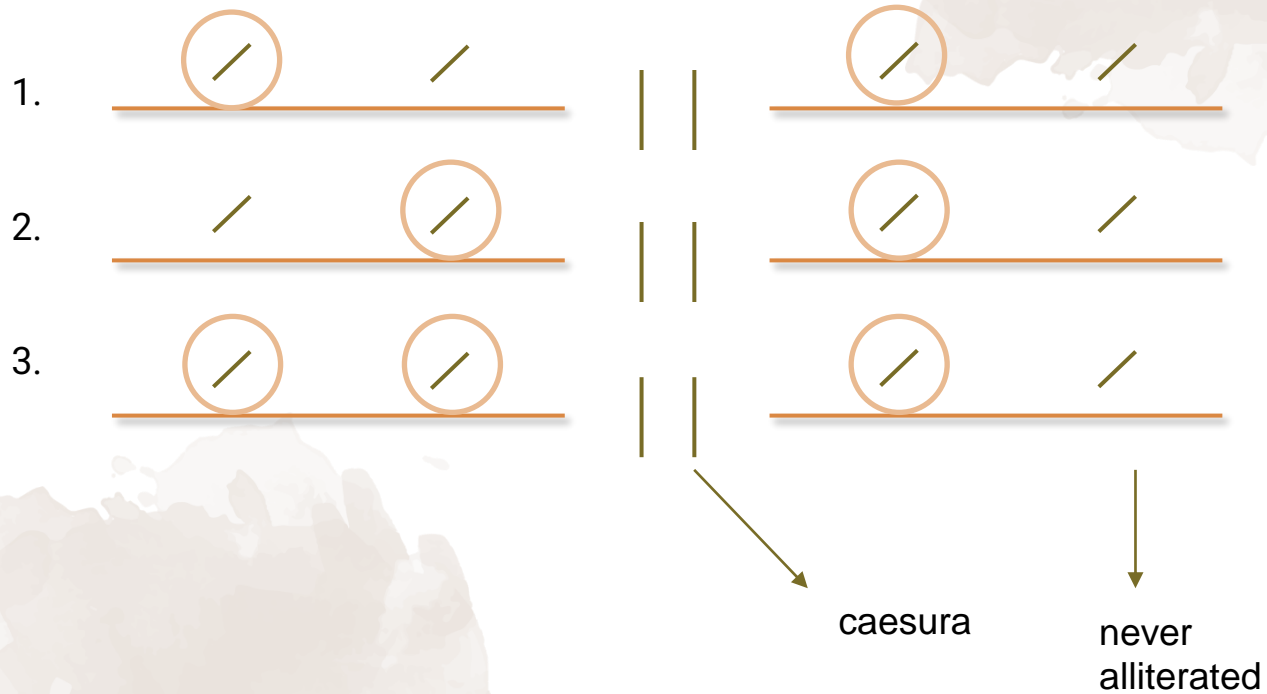*The Epic of Gilgamesh, Mahabharata, Iliad, Oddysey, Beowulf, Pan Tadeusz...*

04

Old English Literature

- Poetry and prose written in Old English in the early medieval period (c. 700 AD – c. 1066+ AD)

- Sermons and saints' lives; biblical translations; translated Latin works of the early Church Fathers; chronicles and narrative history works; laws, wills and other legal works; practical works on grammar, medicine, and geography; and poetry.

- Characteristic poetic devices:

  - Kennings: sea – "whale road" (*Beowulf),* battle – "storm of spears" (*The Wanderer*);
  - Alliteration: "Hwaet! We **G**ar-**D**ena | in **g**ear-**d**agum"
  - Caesura: "Hwaet! We Gar-Dena | in gear-dagum„
  - **Very few** similes (compare with the Greek heroic tradition – *Iliad, Oddyssey*)

Alliteration

1.

2.

3.

caesura

never
alliterated

The Exeter Book

- The largest surviving collection of Old English poetry.

- Contains religious allegories, dream visions, elegies, riddles, gnomic verses, a heroic narrative about a fictitious bard and other short texts, probably copied from earlier collections.

Anglo-Saxon Riddles

Short poems, describing the familiar (everyday objects, natural phenomena, plants, animals, body parts, etc.) in a way that makes guessing an intellectual game. They often use personification. One type of riddle is where an object describes itself. In a "transformation riddle" an object presents various uses of itself.

IYI: https://www.bl.uk/medieval-literature/articles/the-exeter-book-riddles-in-context

RIDDLE - a type of question that describes something in a difficult and confusing way and has a clever or funny answer, often asked as a game. Old English *rǣdels, rǣdelse* "opinion, conjecture, riddle".

Riddle 5, the *Exeter Book*

I am a lone-dweller, wounded by iron,
savaged by a sword, worn out by war-deeds,
battered by blades. Often I see battle,
fraught fighting. I do not expect succour,

5   that relief from war might come to me,
before I perish utterly among men,
but the leavings of hammers lash me,
hard-edged and sword-sharp, handiwork of smiths,
they bite me in strongholds; I must wait for

10   the more hateful encounter. Never am I able
to find medic-kin in the dwelling-place,
those who might heal my wound with herbs,
but the scars of swords become wider on me
through a death-blow by day and by night.

Ic eom anhaga   iserne wund,
bille gebennad,   beadoweorca sæd,
ecgum werig.   Oft ic wig seo,
frecne feohtan.   Frofre ne wene,

5   þæt me geoc cyme   guðgewinnes,
ær ic mid ældum   eal forwurðe,
ac mec hnossiað   homera lafe,
heardecg heoroscearp,   hondweorc smiþa,
bitað in burgum;   ic abidan sceal

10   laþran gemotes.   Næfre læcecynn
on folcstede   findan meahte,
þara þe mid wyrtum   wunde gehælde,
ac me ecga dolg   eacen weorðað
þurh deaðslege   dagum ond nihtum.

Riddle 44, the *Exeter Book*

A wondrous thing hangs by a man's thigh,
under its lord's clothing. In front there is a hole.
It stands stiff and hard. It has a good home.
When the servant raises his own garment
5   up over his knee, he wants to greet
with his dangling head that well-known hole,
of equal length, which he has often filled before.

Wrætlic hongað   bi weres þeo,
frean under sceate.   Foran is þyrel.
Bið stiþ ond heard.   Stede hafað godne.
Þonne se esne   his agen hrægl
5   ofer cneo hefeð,   wile þæt cuþe hol
mid his hangellan   heafde gretan
þæt he efenlang ær   oft gefylde.

Anglo-Saxon Elegies

A group of short poems in the *Exeter Book*, whose subject is the transience* of life, e.g. "The Wanderer", "The Seafarer", "The Ruin", "Deor's Lament".

* /ˈtræn.zi.əns/ - the quality of being temporary.

ELEGY - a sad poem or song, especially remembering someone who has died or something in the past.

"The Ruin"

One of the elegies included in *The Exeter Book*. The speaker is an Anglo-Saxon trying to make sense of the ruins of a Roman city, probably Bath.

Dream Vision

An important and widely used **literary device** in Anglo-Saxon Literature.

e.g. "The Dream of the Rood".
https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/ruthwell-cross-4227085477004f04aadb6b3082b41eb2

PROSOPOPEIA – the author communicates with the audience as another person or object.

ROOD - a cross or crucifix symbolizing the cross on which Jesus Christ died. Specifically, a large crucifix on a beam or screen at the entrance to the chancel of a church. "Speaking crosses" were huge stone crosses that carried verses from the bible or poems. "The Dream of the Rood" was carved into one such cross at ruthwell in Scotland.
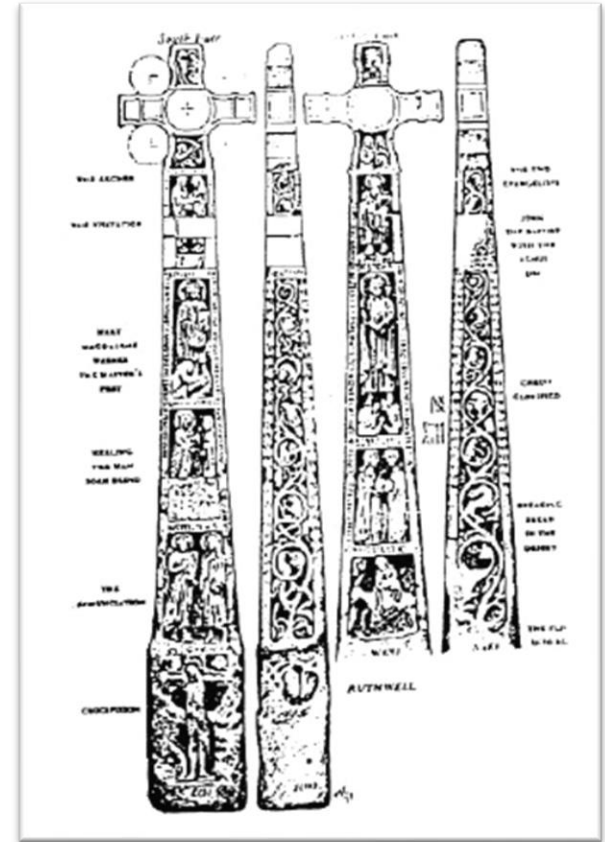
Medieval Britain

1066

Battle of Hastings

William the Conqueror defeats Harold Godwinson
https://youtu.be/LtGoBZ4D4_E

Domesday Book

By far the most complete record of pre-industrial society to survive anywhere in the world.

1086

Late 14ᵗʰ cent.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

Middle English alliterative poem

IYI:
1. *Pillars of the Earth* (game/interactive novel)
https://youtu.be/CewTYloQSt0

2. What was life in Dark Age Britain really like?
https://youtu.be/TqDusYEXwD0

3. Adaptations of "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight".
https://youtu.be/yzws7thOGII

11th century

The Bayeux Tapestry

MEDIEVAL EMBROIDERY DEPICTING THE NORMAN CONQUEST OF ENGLAND IN 1066, REMARKABLE AS A WORK OF ART AND IMPORTANT AS A SOURCE FOR 11TH-CENTURY HISTORY.

1086

The Domesday Book

DOMESDAY IS BRITAIN'S EARLIEST PUBLIC RECORD. IT IS BY THE FAR THE MOST COMPLETE RECORD OF PRE-INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY TO SURVIVE ANYWHERE IN THE WORLD AND PROVIDES A UNIQUE WINDOW ON THE MEDIEVAL WORLD.

Legacy of William the Conqueror:

- the old English aristocracy destroyed and replaced by people Wiliam I was indebted to;

- *Domesday Book;*

- Norman architecture;

- England's relationship with France;

- French became the language of the court, government and the upper class and stayed that way for almost 300 years.

Some popular genres in medieval literature

01

ROMANCE

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

02

FABLIAU

03

FABLE

04

BALLAD
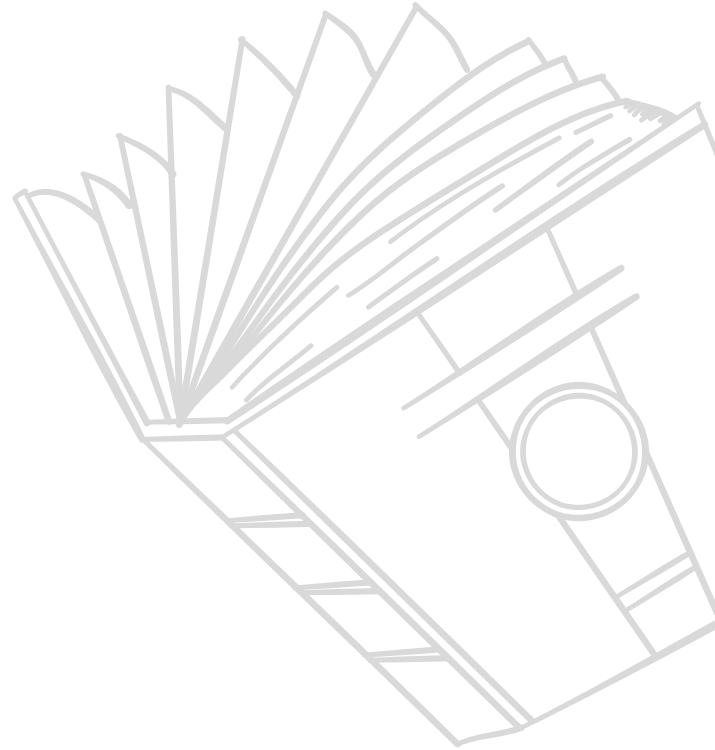
Chansons de geste

(French: "songs of deeds") any of the Old French epic poems forming the core of the Charlemagne legends. More than 80 chansons, most of them thousands of lines long, have survived in manuscripts dating from the 12th to the 15th century. They mark the **transition** between **heroic poetry** and **medieval romance.**

01. Romance

- Old legends retold;
- Chivalric tradition;
- Courtly romance;
- Around 60 English medieval romances remain to this day, most of which are in fact rewritten French romances;
- *e.g. The Arthurian Cycle*

02. Fabliau

- A short, narrative poem;
- Realistic, humorous (often coarse);
- Originated in Northern France;
- E.g. "The Miller's Tale" in *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer.

03. Fable

- A short story in which **animals,** acting more or less like human beings, behave in such a way as to illustrate a simple moral (e.g. „The Nun's Priest Tale" in *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer).

04. Ballad

- Meant to be sung;
- Typically has a consistent metre and a particular rhyme scheme;
- Typically deals with a single situation involving revenge or jealousy; somebody's return from the grave or the finality of loss.
- Ballads tend to emphasise violence, tragedy or horror or deal with deception, the testing of love, betrayed lovers, the supernatural, etc.

01. Romance

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Medieval romances

Matter of France

a body of medieval literature and legendary material associated with the history of France, in particular involving Charlemagne

Matter of Britain

the body of medieval literature and legendary material associated with Great Britain and Brittany, and the legendary kings and heroes associated with it, particularly King Arthur.
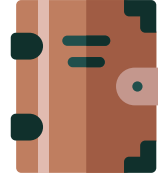
Matter of Rome

also included what is referred to as the Matter of Troy, consisting of romances and other texts based on the Trojan War and its after-effects, including the adventures of Aeneas.

* There is a fourth category of medieval romances, not mentioned by Jean Bodel – *the Matter of England* that celebrates popular British heroes other than King Arthur, e.g. Athelstan, Offa, Earl Godwin, Eadric the Wild, Hereward the Wake.

Sir Gawain and
the Green Knight

The anonymous poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is considered one of the masterpieces of **Middle English literature**. It was composed in the West Midlands region of Britain at the end of the 14th century, but was copied out at the beginning of the 15th. The poem only survives in this single manuscript at the British Library – Cotton MS Nero A X.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

1.1 Context

1.2 Summary

1.3 Themes, motifs

1.4 The Green Man, Jack in the Green

BACKGROUND

1.1

- Alliterative poem in 4 parts;
- Author anonymous;
- Middle English;
- Old English meter;
- Rhymes;
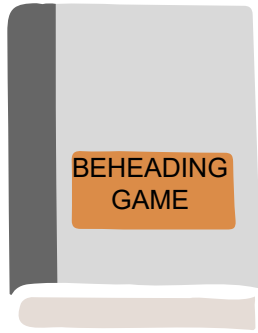- „Bob and wheel"*
- Morgan le Faye;
- Troy → Britain.

* Bob and wheel – a word or phrase containing two syllables and a quatrain (a piece of verse complete in four rhymed lines).

Alliteration

1.

2.

3.

caesura

never
alliterated
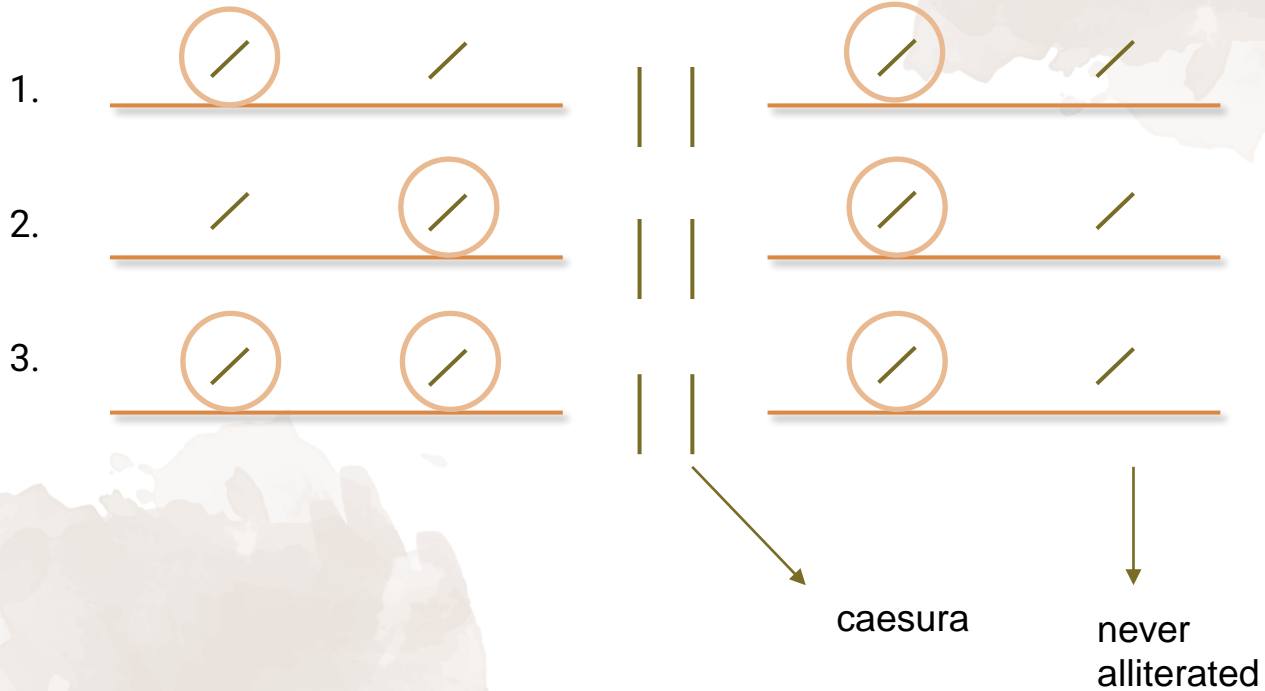
Common medieval narratives in *Sir Gawain...*

BEHEADING GAME

EXCHANGE OF WINNINGS

HERO'S TEMPTATION

Beheading

May derive from pagan myths related to planting and harvesting.

Exchange of winnings & hero's temptation

Both of these plots derive from medieval romances and dramatize tests of the hero's loyalty, honesty and chastity.

Morgan le Faye vs King Arthur

Not until the last one hundred lines do we discover that Morgan le Faye has controlled the poem's entire action from beginning to end. As she often does in Arthurian literature, Morgan appears as an enemy of Camelot, one who aims to cause as much trouble for her half brother and his followers as she can.

Brutus as the legendary founder of Britain

Brutus of Troy was a legendary Trojan exile who **some medieval chroniclers claimed** was responsible for the founding of Britain. The story of Brutus of Troy first appears in the work *Historia Britonum* or *The History of Britons* (ca AD 829), which is often attributed to the medieval chronicler Nennius. He is also mentioned later in more detail in *Historia Regum Britanniae* or History of the Kings of Britain, written in about 1136 by Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
SUMMARY & ANALYSIS OF PART 1

1.2

- Opens with a mythological account of Britain's founding;
- Yuletide celebrations in Camelot;
- The Green Knight & his beheading game;
- Supernatural elements.
- The feast continues.

* Bob and wheel – a word or phrase containing two syllables and a quatrain (a piece of verse complete in four rhymed lines).

1.2

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
SUMMARY & ANALYSIS OF PART 2

- Begins with a summary of the feast in part 1, where the beheading game is referred to as King Arthur's New Year's Gift.
- Sir Gawain dresses for the quest (shield with a gold pentangle on red background and the face of Mary, Mother of Christ on the inside).
- Gawain departs to search for the mysterious Green Chapel.
- On Christmas Eve he comes upon a castle.
- The host proposes **another game.**

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
SUMMARY & ANALYSIS OF PART 3

1.3

- The Lady of the castle tries to seduce Gawain on 3 consecutive days, while her husband is out hunting.
- Day 1: venison → kiss
- Day 2: wild boar's head → 2 kisses
- Day 3: fox → 3 kisses (Gawain fails to mention the supposedly magical green girdle that he also received from the Lady)

1.4

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
SUMMARY & ANALYSIS OF PART 4

- On New Year's morning (2nd in the story) Gawain leaves the mysterious castle for his meeting with the Green Knight in the Green Chapel.
- The Beheading Game continues.
- Gawain receives 3 blows.
- Ending.

1.5

Themes and motifs:

- The Code of Chivalry

- The Letter of the Law

- The Seasons

- Games

1.6

Symbols:

- The Pentangle

- The Green Girdle
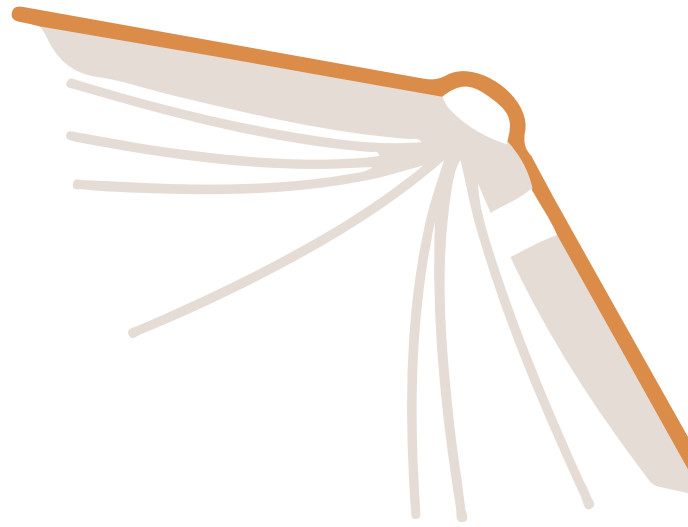
Adaptations

Sword of the Valiant (1984)
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (2002)
The Green Knight (2021)

The Green Man

legendary being primarily interpreted as a symbol of rebirth, representing the cycle of new growth that occurs every spring. The Green Man is most commonly depicted in a sculpture, or other representation of a face which is made of, or completely surrounded by, leaves.

https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20190104-the-surprising-roots-of-the-mysterious-green-man

Jack in the Green

The Jack-in-the-Green was (and indeed is) a traditional participant in May celebrations and May Day parades in the UK. A large framework is covered in combinations of foliage and flowers and is often topped with an intricate crown of flowers. The Jack then parades or dances, often accompanied by attendants as well as Morris Dancers, musicians, and assorted unusual characters.

IYI:
https://folklorethursday.com/folklife/the-traditional-jack-in-the-green/

The Canterbury Tales
by Geoffrey Chaucer

written in <u>Middle English</u> in 1387–1400.

Medievel Drama

01 Miracle Plays

02 Mystery Plays

03 Morality Plays

Everyman – summary.

European Theatre in the early Middle Ages

- Frowned upon by religious and secular authority;

- Women performers;

- Mumming (also: Mummer's) plays;

- Religious drama that sought to educate "the flock", usually staged on religious holidays.

Vernacular* Drama of the European Middle Ages

Miracle Plays

Lifes of Saints.

e.g. *St. John the Hairy, Le Jeu de Saint Nicholas.*

Mystery Plays

Other Biblical stories.

e.g. *The Acts of the Apostles*
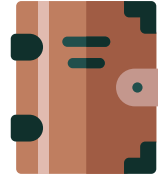
Morality Plays

Allegorical dramas.

e.g. *Everyman, The Castle of Perseverance.*

* Vernacular - the form of a language that a particular group of speakers use naturally, especially in informal situations. In the Middle Ages, vernacular languages were used alongside Latin and Greek.

** Allegory - a story or visual image with a second distinct meaning partially hidden behind its literal or visible meaning. In written narrative, allegory involves a continuous parallel between two (or more) levels of meaning in a story, so that its persons and events correspond to their equivalents in a system of ideas or a chain of events external to the tale.

Everyman

A famous **morality play** called *The Somonynge of Every Man*, first written in the late medieval

It is usually just called *Everyman,* after the central character – an ordinary, flawed human being representing all mankind. He struggles to achieve salvation on his journey towards death.
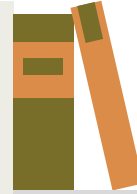

FULL AUDIO VERSION: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crn7UqlxO40
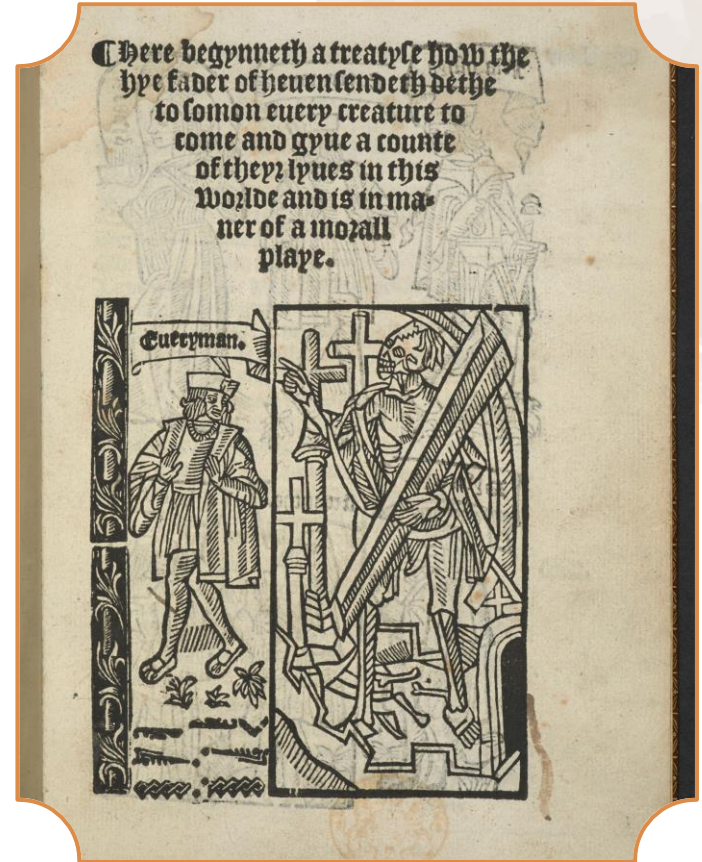
If You're Interested:

Prehistory

What Happened to Britain's Last Hunter-Gatherers?
https://youtu.be/vTyojqbW6lM?si=kA7jutQeq950dH6s

Roman Britain – The Work of Giants Crumbled
https://youtu.be/glKe9njOB24?si=5k9_aagC2QH49Ml0

How the Roman Invasion Helped Build Medieval England
https://youtu.be/MsDhondVyW0?si=qF9ddiObBxP2PTSO
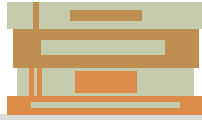
Roman Britain

Middle Ages

A Field Guide to Bizarre Medieval Monsters
https://youtu.be/f50T9CGV4Ns?si=_pl7xcEWIsk-i6KJ

Strange Christian Art
https://youtu.be/j7SE0HwhfTM?si=C44dHL6CXeuzyY5I