

Online Course: Medieval Women Writers

Dates	Mondays: 13, 20, 27 January and 3, 10, 17 February 2025
Times	18.00 – 19.30
Location	Microsoft Teams
Level	All levels

Course description

There are persistent misconceptions that there were few medieval women writers in the Middle Ages, that women were generally illiterate and that the only women who could read – let alone write – were nuns. This six week online course aims to put those misconceptions to rest, focusing on the literature produced by women in medieval Britain.

Ranging across texts from the 8th to the 15th century in a variety of languages – Old English, Latin, Anglo-Norman, Middle English and Medieval Welsh – go on a tour of some of the medieval era's most startling and exciting literary works. From the 8th-century English woman who hid her name in code, to the medieval Welsh poet who wrote about love, sex and sexual violence. You'll get to know well-known figures like Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, as well as lesser-known authors whose work is finally getting the attention they deserve.

No prior knowledge is required, and all texts will be read in translation. However, we will be working with the originals to give students a sense of the sounds and rhythms of these haunting and timeless works.

This course takes place online on Microsoft Teams. Sessions are recorded and will be available to bookers for a limited time after the session. Live-closed captions are provided. If you have any further access requirements please email adultlearning@bl.uk.

Tutors

Dr Mary Wellesley (Weeks 1, 3, 4, 5)

Dr Mary Wellesley is an Associate Fellow of the Institute of Historical Research and an Associate Member of Oxford University's English Faculty. After completing her PhD, she worked in the British Library's department of Ancient, Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts. Her first book, *Hidden Hands: the Lives of Manuscripts and Their Makers* was published by Quercus in the UK in October 2021, and by Basic Books in the US as *The Gilded Page: The Secret Lives of Manuscripts* at the same time. It was chosen as one of the history books of the year by the *Sunday Times* and *BBC History Magazine*. Alongside her academic publications, Mary writes widely for a general audience and is a regular contributor to the *London Review of Books* and the *New York Review of Books*, amongst others. She is the co-host of three hit podcast series on medieval literature produced by the *London Review of Books*.

Dr Victoria Symons (Week 2)

Dr Victoria Symons is a medievalist specialising in Old English literature, medical practices and runic writing. She holds an honorary lectureship at University College London, having taught Old and Middle English language and literature for more than a decade at a variety of institutions. She is the author and editor of books including *The Tale of Beowulf* (2022), *Runes and Roman Letters in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* (2017) and *Stasis in the Medieval West* (2017). Her wider publications include numerous articles, chapters, translations and blogposts for both

academic and general audiences, with notable ventures ranging from co-editing *The Riddle Ages* blog to working on a *Beowulf*-inspired videogame project. Although her first love will always be runes, her current research centres on childbirth and domestic remedies in both Old and Middle English contexts.

Dr Cathryn Charnell-White (Week 6)

Dr Cathryn Charnell-White is a Reader in the Department of Welsh and Celtic Studies at the University of Aberystwyth. Her publications include the first comprehensive anthology of Welsh-language women's poetry up to 1800, *Beirdd Ceridwen* (2005) and new editions of forgotten works by women in Honno's Welsh Classics series, e.g. *Pererinion & Storiâu Hen Ferch* (2008). She has published extensively on women's literature and literary culture, literary negotiations of gender, self-identity, regional and national identity, and Britishness in a 'four nations' context, as well as literary networks in Wales and beyond.

Programme

Week 1 – Monday 13 January

Hunting for Women Authors in the Literary Remains of the Past

Tutor: Mary Wellesley

This first week will give an overview of how and why the contributions of medieval women writers have so long been obscured. In following weeks, there will be a focus on particular authors and texts from Britain, but this first session takes a wider European view, looking at authors who wrote in Dutch, Latin, French, Occitan, Spanish, and German. It will include the 9th-century Frankish noblewoman Dhuoda, who wrote a work of advice for the son she was separated from; Marguerite Porete, who was burnt at the stake in 1310; the 15th-century Hungarian courtier Helen Kottanner who engineered a coup in time of political crisis; and the enigmatic early 13th-century female troubadour, Beatritz, Comtessa de Dia. It will show how the complex ways in which texts were copied and subsequently studied has led to many being forgotten or obscured.

Week 2 – Monday 20 January

Imprisoned, Grieving and Homesick: Early Medieval English Women's Lives and Letters

Tutor: Dr Victoria Symons

The second week will look at two enigmatic texts from the famous 10th-century *Exeter Book* of Anglo-Saxon poetry. They are both female-voiced and debate continues to rage about whether they are also female-authored. They describe women in desperate and difficult circumstances, in unforgiving landscapes. But who are these women: are they prisoners, outcasts, ghosts or wives (as 19th-century scholars thought)? The poems ask us to think about what authorship might mean in the early medieval period. We will be reading these alongside a group of letters written by English missionary women in Germany in the late 7th and early 8th century. They are full of learned allusion and show an impressive degree of scholarship; some contain poetry. But more than that, they offer us glimpses of the hopes and terrors, as well as some of the prosaic daily realities, of women in 8th-century Europe.

Week 3 – Monday 27 January

Playful, Enigmatic, Anarchic: The Work of Marie de France

Tutor: Dr Mary Wellesley

Who was Marie de France? This is a question that has fascinated scholars for centuries. She was the author of three very different works – *The Life of Saint Audrey*, the *Lays* and the *Fables*. They were all written in late 12th/early 13th century, in Anglo-Norman – the language of the courtly elite in England after the Norman Conquest. They explore courtly romance, mythical beasts and strange events. The *Lays* are predominantly about love and loss – passion, devotion, treachery, self-sacrifice, revenge, and forgiveness. The *Fables* (which are based on Aesop's work) are pithy and drily witty, with flashes of cynicism. Marie has only left us her name, nothing else of her biography remains. Various historical Maries have been proposed as the author of her work, including the illegitimate daughter of Geoffrey Plantagenet and half-sister of Henry II, the eighth child of a Norman nobleman, the countess of Boulogne, and the Abbess of Barking, but she remains a shadowy figure. What is clear, however, is that the works are joyful, anarchic and strange.

Week 4 – Monday 3 February
Hope and Love: The *Revelations* of Julian of Norwich
Tutor: Dr Mary Wellesley

'Just because I am a woman, must I therefore believe that I should not tell you about the goodness of God?', so asks Julian of Norwich, in her *Revelations of Divine Love*. The *Revelations* is the first text in English that we can be sure was authored by a woman. This fact alone makes it significant, but it is also a hugely important text in its own right – a work of clarity, empathy, and rhetorical finesse, produced by one of the finest minds of her generation. Julian was an anchoress – a woman who walled herself inside a cell in late 14th-century Norwich, to live a life of prayer and contemplation. It was a life of extreme restriction, of sensory deprivation and minimal social contact, yet her work is one of boundless, almost radical optimism.

Week 5 – Monday 10 February
Trials and Travels: *The Book of Margery Kempe*
Tutor: Mary Wellesley

The *Book of Margery Kempe* was written by an ordinary, middle-class woman in the 15th century. Kempe (c. 1373–1438) was an East Anglian woman who worked variously as a horse-mill operator and a brewer. She was also the mother of fourteen children. Her *Book*, which is the first piece of autobiographical writing in English, is a work of openness and honesty which gives us a rare glimpse into the experiences of a non-elite women in the period. It describes her extensive travels, in England and overseas, her relationship with her husband and her attempts to live a good Christian life, in the face of ecclesiastical censure, financial hardship and mental illness. Hidden from view until the 1930s, when it was discovered by people in search of ping-pong balls, it is a book for now and always.

Week 6 – Monday 17 February
Poetic Feats, Stinging Rebukes and Joyous Paeans: Gwerful Mechain
Tutor: Dr Cathryn Charnel-White

The Welsh poet Gwerful Mechain (c. 1460–1502) wrote some of the most unusual poetry to survive from the Middle Ages. She wrote the kind of religious verse common to her era – the late 15th century – but she also wrote about topics that few, if any, medieval women writers discussed: unambiguous sexual desire, bodily functions, domestic violence. Her work circulated in manuscript form for centuries, but upon being rediscovered in the 20th century, it was long dismissed as profane and excluded from poetry anthologies and textbooks.

Previous skills, knowledge or experience

None required.

Course preparation and materials

Some course materials will be shared in advance of the first session.

Joining the sessions

A joining link will be emailed to you prior to the first session.

Accessibility

Online courses are live-captioned by Microsoft Teams. Please email adultlearning@bl.uk to discuss your accessibility requirements.
