ENGLISH READING LISTS
MICHAELMAS TERM 2023

Welcome aboard—we’re very much looking forward to seeing you again in October!

As you might have seen when you were applying, there are four first-year English papers at Oxford: Paper 1 is Introduction to English Language and Literature (studied across the full year); Paper 2 is Early Medieval Literature (studied across the autumn [‘Michaelmas’] and spring [‘Hilary’] terms); Paper 3 is Victorian and Edwardian Literature (Michaelmas Term only); Paper 4 is Modern and Contemporary Literature (Hilary Term only). If you are reading single-honours English, you take all four papers. If you are studying English with another subject, you take Paper 1 and one of the other English papers.

Because the reading for Paper 1 is light compared to the others, it doesn’t require preparation over the summer. Paper 4 is taught in the spring term, so students receive the reading list for that paper just before the Christmas vacation. However, Paper 2 requires some introductory reading, and your medieval literature tutor, Jasmine Jones, has included a list of recommendations for summer preparation at the end of this document.

Paper 3 has a very demanding reading list—the full list is here—so you should get going on that now.

Prof. Marina MacKay
marina.mackay@ell.ox.ac.uk

Paper 3: Literature in English 1830-1910

Quick things to note about preparing for this paper:

(1) Some Victorian novels are enormous, so you need to read as many as possible of the primary texts (listed as the ‘required reading’ below) before you arrive in Oxford. Give priority to the books with asterisks* beside their titles, and especially to *Middlemarch* and *Our Mutual Friend*, because these will not be manageable during term-time.

(2) You may not be able to read these works more than once, so take detailed notes as you go on anything that strikes you as interesting.

(3) When a week says ‘tutorial’, you will have an essay due the day before we meet. When it says ‘class’, you don’t write an essay that week but must come ready to discuss the texts. The prompts for tutorial essays and class discussions are included below so that you can organise your thoughts as you read.

(4) It doesn’t matter which editions you use, but Penguin Classics, Oxford World’s Classics, and the critical editions from Norton and Broadview all have good explanatory notes.

(5) Once you’ve got the hang of the library search engine (‘SOLO’), you’ll find more specialised criticism for your essay topics, but there are suggestions below to get you started.

**Week 1: The Scope of Victorian Literature (tutorial)**

Required reading:

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Recommended secondary reading:

Amanda Anderson and Harry E Shaw, *A Companion to George Eliot* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). (Not for reading all the way through, but Section IV is useful on Eliot’s contexts.)

Kate Flint, ed., *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012). [Another not for reading all the way through; consult the chapters most relevant to the specific theme of your essay, and make a note of those that might be useful later.]


Noa Reich, ‘Victorian Inheritance, Speculation, and *Middlemarch*’s “Dead Hand”, *Law and Literature* 35, 1 (2023): 115-34. (Especially useful if you’re writing on money/property/inheritance, but of surprisingly wide application.)

**Essay prompt:**

Please write an essay on the representation in *Middlemarch* of one of the following characteristically nineteenth-century concerns, *demonstrating along the way how Eliot’s formal/narrative choices affect and/or complicate her treatment of that topic*: (1) education and/or vocation; (2) community and/or place; (3) social class and/or class conflict; (4) duty and/or obligation; (5) public life and/or institutions; (6) money and/or property; (7) domestic life and/or marriage; (8) religious belief and/or doubt; (9) inheritance and/or the past; (10) exposure and/or disgrace. If you like, you could pick two of these ten and base your argument on how they intersect with each other.

**Week 2: The Subjection of Women (class)**

**Required reading:**

Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* *

Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* *

John Stuart Mill, Chapter 2 (on marriage) of *The Subjection of Women* (you can read the chapter online at: https://www.gutenberg.org/files/27083/27083-h/27083-h.htm)

**Recommended secondary reading:**


Isabelle Hervouet, ‘Gothic Fault-Lines in Anne Brontë’s Social Fiction: The Case of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall***, *Cahiers victoriens & édwardiens* 97 (Spring 2023). (Useful on the ‘authority’ question.)


**Discussion prompts:**

Here are another two novels about unhappy marriages, but was anything gained or lost by using melodrama and sensationalism rather than the realist mode of *Middlemarch* to write about what Mill characterises as the abject civic and legal status of nineteenth-century women?

In both *The Woman in White* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, fictional male narrators generate the ‘frame’ narratives for the writings of women characters. Perhaps you could see this technique as an
effort to reinstate masculine authority over stories about women’s experiences, or perhaps the novels’ structures encourage us instead to doubt the authority of their male narrators. Which perspective is more convincing, or is there another way of thinking about the forms these novels take?

**Week 3: Poetry and Selfhood (tutorial)**

**Required reading:**

*Alfred, Lord Tennyson*, *Maud: A Monodrama*


**Recommended secondary reading:**


Matthew Campbell, *Rhythm and Will in Victorian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). [Chapter 4 is on Browning’s monologues; chapter 5 is on Tennyson’s.]


**Essay prompts:**

How do these poets use lyric form and/or the dramatic monologue (or ‘monodrama’) to represent psychological phenomena? Feel free to focus on a specific emotion that all three poets write about—guilt, for instance, or longing, or exhilaration—and consider any important points of difference or similarity among their treatments.

‘Give us no more of body than shows soul!’, Browning’s Prior orders Fra Lippo Lippi. What do you make of the fact that these poems, often concerned with extreme mental states and moments of crisis, are so preoccupied by images of and ideas about the physical body? Is there anything significant or interesting about how they think about the relationship between the body and the mind?

**Week 4: Culture and Industry (class)**

**Required reading:**

*Matthew Arnold*, *Culture and Anarchy* * (Skip the preface for now, read Chapters 1 to 4 inclusive [‘Sweetness and Light’ to ‘Hebraism and Hellenism’], and then go back to the rest if you’ve time.)

*Elizabeth Gaskell*, *North and South* *

*John Ruskin*, ‘The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century’. (http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20204/20204-h/20204-h.htm)

**Recommended secondary reading:**

Jill Matus, Shock, Memory, and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 61-82. (Wide-ranging chapter on social/class trauma in North and South.)

Discussion prompts:

One familiar idea in ‘secularisation’ narratives about Britain in the nineteenth century is that ‘culture’ begins to replace Christianity as a spiritualising force, both for individuals and society at large. What does ‘culture’ mean to Arnold and Gaskell? Are there any important differences?

Going by their literature, it feels as though many Victorians believed that they were living through a period of unprecedented crisis—in Ruskin’s essay, even the clouds augur catastrophe. What do their works suggest was generating that sense of crisis, and how do they imagine it might (if at all) be mitigated?

Week 5: The Making of Americans (tutorial)

Required reading:

Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave *

Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Self-Reliance’ (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16643/16643-h/16643-h.htm#SELF-RELIANCE)

Herman Melville, ‘Benito Cereno’

Recommended secondary reading:


Essay prompts:

‘Liberty must either cut the throat of Slavery or have its own throat cut by Slavery’ (Frederick Douglass). Or, as Douglass asked in a famous speech, ‘What to the slave is the fourth of July?’ How do these writers address the political and cultural contradictions of American ‘liberty’?

‘At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed’ (Frederick Douglass, discussing abolitionist discourse). To what uses do Douglass and Melville put ‘scorching irony’? Do their different genres—one an autobiographical narrative; the other a work of fiction based on historical events—allow them to put different types of irony to work?

Week 6: Urban Poverty and Wealth (class)

Required reading:
Recommended secondary reading:

J Hillis Miller, Others (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2021), 43-64. (Chapter on Our Mutual Friend.)

Discussion prompts:

How far are Dickens’s and Mayhew’s treatments of ‘the poor’—as individuals, as a demographic category—continuous with each other and/or with those of the other nineteenth-century British writers you have read?

Mayhew was a journalist and obviously Dickens was primarily a novelist, but what can be described as literary about Mayhew's work and, conversely, what do you think is or definitely isn’t journalistic or documentary about Our Mutual Friend?

Week 7: Turn-of-the-Century Performances (tutorial)

Required reading:

George Bernard Shaw, Arms and the Man
John Millington Synge, The Playboy of the Western World
Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest

Recommended secondary reading:

Nicholas Grene, The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 77-109. [Chapter on Synge.]
Declan Kiberd, Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995). [Chapters 2, 3, and 10 are on Wilde, Shaw, and Synge respectively.]
Shaun Richards, The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Irish Drama (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006). [Chapters 6, 8, and 9 are on Synge, Shaw, and Wilde respectively.]

Essay prompts:

Why might it be significant that these male-authored plays are all concerned with women's fantasies about men and/or men's fictions about themselves?
Identify a problem or concept that the theatre enabled these texts to explore more successfully than non-dramatic narrative fiction (a novella, say, or a short story) might have allowed. In other words, why did these works have to be *plays*?

**Week 8: Late Imperial Formation (class)**

Required reading:

*Rudyard Kipling*, *Kim* *

*Robert Baden-Powell*, *Scouting for Boys* [This is a revelation on the wider context, but it doesn’t need close concentration – just take a quick look through at https://www.gutenberg.org/files/65993/65993-h/65993-h.htm]

Recommended secondary reading:


Discussion prompts:

‘Once a Sahib, always a Sahib’, declares a character in *Kim*—but *Kim* is an Indian-born Irish orphan. How does *Kim* treat ideas of cultural ‘purity’ and hybridity, and how far does Baden-Powell, who turns the novel into an educational text for juveniles, follow Kipling in this?

‘Inobtrusively [*sic*] supplying the place of the police in places where the police cannot be, the mechanisms of discipline seem to entail a relative relaxation of policing power. No doubt this manner of passing off the regulation of everyday life is the best manner of passing it on’ (D. A. Miller, discussing the omniscient narrator of the Victorian novel). How does *Kim* treat surveillance at the level of theme and narrative style?
This paper will introduce you to the very roots of English Literature. You will read the earliest surviving writings in the English language, from Old English alliterative poetry in the 600s to the emergence of new genres such as romance, beast fable and lyric after the Norman Conquest. We call the language spoken in England between the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in the fifth century and the Norman Conquest ‘Old English’. After 1066, this language comes into contact with ‘Anglo-Norman’, producing the phase in the language that we call ‘Early Middle English’. As we move through this first period of English literary history, we will encounter epics and romances, dream visions and hymns, riddles and charms, chronicles and battle poems, laments and lyrics.

This paper will be taught across all three terms. In Michaelmas and Hilary terms, we will focus mainly on the Old English period (650-c. 1100). Then, in Trinity Term we will look at some Early Middle English texts. The set texts we will translate are the Old English poems known as The Wanderer, The Dream of the Rood, The Battle of Maldon and an extract from Beowulf (the fight with Grendel). All of these texts are included in this edition, which you must get hold of before Michaelmas:


You will probably find the section on Old English language challenging. A more user-friendly book on the same topic is:


Before you come to Oxford for Michaelmas Term you should read a selection of Old English texts in translation. In particular, you MUST read a translation of Beowulf before you get to
Oxford, as this is the best introduction to the themes and styles of Old English verse. For a good verse translation, try this:


You could also read the excellent, but very different, translations by Seamus Heaney and J. R. R. Tolkien.

Please also buy a copy of this book, which provides Old and Early Middle English texts with facing-page, prose translation:


Further recommendations include:


- *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*, transl. Robert Hamer (Faber, 2006) (facing page verse translations of major short poems; very cheap on Amazon)


In order to get a sense of what Old English literature is like, please have a look at some of these books:


If you have any questions about the course, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

We look forward to meeting you all in October!

Jasmine Jones
jasmine.jones@ell.ox.ac.uk