Who was King Arthur? Does historical evidence for such a king exist, or is his story pure legend? When and where do the narratives about him first appear? Is he a conquering hero, someone who works for peace at home and abroad, or a tragic victim of internal conflict? What do tales of King Arthur have to do with the quest for the Holy Grail? What mythological, literary, and political forces have shaped representations of King Arthur in the past and in our own times?

This course examines major narratives about King Arthur from earlier centuries and compares them to some of the representations of King Arthur in the literature and films of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. Readings will include the medieval Welsh tale "How Culhwch Won Olwen," selections from the medieval Latin chronicle The History of the Kings of Britain, the medieval French tale The Knight of the Cart, selections from the medieval German tale Parzival, the medieval English tale Morte D'Arthur, Tennyson's nineteenth-century poem "Idylls of the King," and the twentieth-century English novel The Once and Future King. Films studied will be Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1974), Excalibur (1981), and King Arthur (2004).