The Invention of Adventure in German and French Novels

About this course

“What is adventure?” a knight is asked by a wild figure who crosses his path while riding through a wood. This exemplary situation – an insider explaining to an outsider what he aims to make of his life – brings forth an exemplary definition both of the risks medieval men took and the possible outcomes with which they reckoned. The first courtly novels in French and German reveal the knights’ upbringing, their values and motivations and allow a critical assessment of their function within their social and cultural context. These texts provide fertile ground for the development of the first Western concept of adventure, a field in which modern ideologies of adventure, fulfilment, self-realization and risk-management are staked out.

In this course, we will read some of the most famous novels of the Middle Ages by Chrétien de Troyes, Hartmann of Aue, but also the most important heroic epic, the Nibelungenlied. We also have a close look at manuscripts, wall-paintings, as well as castles of the time and ways of life within the different layers of society. Students will learn not only to interpret a medieval tale, but also to identify artistic, intellectual and religious themes that are closely linked to present-day visions of individual and collective life.

Required books

- Erec et Enide / The Knight with the Lion/Perceval: Chrétien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances. Translated with an Introduction and Notes by William W. Kibler (Erec and Enide translated by Carleton W. Carroll). London 2004 (Penguin Classics) ISBN 978-0-14-044521-3 (will be also available on the website of this course).
- Erec / Iwein: Hartmann von Aue: Arthurian romances, tales, and lyric poetry: the complete works of Hartmann von Aue. Translated with commentary by Frank Tobin, Kim Vivian, Richard H. Lawson (University Park, Pa., 2001). ISBN 0-271-02112-8 (will be also available on the website of this course)
- The Nibelungenlied: Prose Translation by A. T. Hatto. New York 1965 (Penguin Classics) (any edition) (will be also available on the website of this course)

Shorter print materials will be available on Oncourse.

Participation, attendance, grading

Participation is the life-blood of any seminar. Your oral contributions and your attendance but also acting as a discussion leader will count substantially towards your final grade. You are also expected to write 2-3 short essays, one of them in combination with a creative assignment. The final grade will be determined by these weighted factors (this is an approximation): Active participation and leading discussion in class 30%; short essays 50%; creative assignment 20%.