

Romantic lessons from the Middle Ages

February 14 2012



Le Roman de Troie, from a 15th-century manuscript. (c) University of Oxford.

Love is in the air at the Bodleian Library this Valentine's Day, as the stories of epic medieval romances from King Arthur and Guinevere to Tristan and Isolde are on display.

From the Knights of the Round Table to the Knights that say 'Ni!', the ongoing exhibition tells the story of medieval [romance](#) across the ages.

The 'Romance of the Middle Ages' exhibition at the Bodleian Library celebrates the stories of medieval romance and how they have influenced culture, literature and art over the last thousand years. It includes medieval manuscript illustrations alongside works of art and draft papers

by J.R.R. Tolkien, Philip Pullman – and Monty Python.

Some of the items are lavishly illustrated, some are fragments only saved by chance. Alongside the collection items are works of art from across Europe that illustrate romance legends; these include ivory carvings, jewellery and caskets, on loan from national museums and collections.

Some highlights from the exhibition include the earliest copy of the 12th-century French national epic *The Song of Roland*; a draft illustrated page from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* from 1946; and one of the most precious manuscripts of Middle English poetry, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which has been loaned from the British Library. Sceptics of traditional romance might prefer a more contemporary adaptation of the Arthurian epic by the Monty Python team. Terry Jones's own working copy of the screenplay for *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* from 1973 will be on public display for the first time.

Dr. Nicholas Perkins, exhibition curator said: "It's a great pleasure to open up the Bodleian's wonderful collections for this exhibition. They are of huge importance in telling the story of romance, and include some of the most spectacular books from medieval Europe. They have also offered inspiration to those captivated by the Middle Ages as a time of romance and wonder.

"From the young William Morris and Edward Burne-Jones beguiled by the Arthurian legends as Oxford students, to providing a working base for J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, the Library has nourished both scholarly and imaginative engagement with the medieval for centuries."

Romance writing developed in Britain after the Norman Conquest and flourished as a form of storytelling right through to the [middle ages](#), forming the basis for many kinds of later drama, poetry and prose fiction.

The Bodleian exhibition shows how these medieval stories have inspired writers and artists across the centuries. In the the early modern period this included Shakespeare, Ariosto and Cervantes, while medievalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a feature of writers including Walter Scott, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris. Manuscripts and drafts by J.R.R. Tolkien, Philip Pullman and the Monty Python team show some contemporary versions and adaptations.

An [online exhibition](#) has also been launched featuring nearly all the items on display in the exhibition room, along with many additional items. Events accompanying the exhibition include lunchtime talks, special school activities and a show inspired by the [exhibition](#) to be held on 20 April.

Provided by Oxford University

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