

CLASSIC LITERATURE

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern

Genji, Dante, Chaucer, the Sundiata epic, Journey to the West, Shakespeare, Cervantes, the rise of the European novel, and Voltaire — closing with a capstone comparing three genuinely independent inventions of long-form prose fiction across cultures with no contact at all.

10 Chapters

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Generated with Claude

CHAPTER 1: THE TALE OF GENJI

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern

Course 2 · Chapter 1 · The Tale of Genji

Course 1 closed around 1000 CE. Course 2 picks up at almost exactly the same moment, on the opposite side of the world from every civilization covered so far — an imperial court in Japan, where a noblewoman whose real name history never recorded wrote what many readers still call the first novel.

Murasaki Shikibu: A Name We Don't Actually Know

A SOBRIQUET, NOT A BIRTH NAME

Murasaki Shikibu is how history remembers her, but it isn't the name she was born with. "Shikibu" nods to her father's post at the Ministry of Ceremonials; "Murasaki" — meaning violet, or wisteria — most likely echoes the name she herself gave her novel's own heroine. Her actual personal name is genuinely unknown. She lived roughly **c. 973 – c. 1014**, though even that range is debated among historians, and around 1005–1006 she was brought into the imperial court to serve **Empress Shoshi**, very likely for her literary reputation.

One speculative candidate, not a settled answer — a court diary from 1007 records a name, Fujiwara no Kaoruko, that some historians have speculated might be hers. It's an interesting lead, not a confirmed identification. The author of one of the world's most enduringly read works of prose fiction is, by her real name, simply lost.

The Tale of Genji: Structure and Story

The *Tale of Genji* (*Genji Monogatari*) runs to **54 chapters**. A 1008 diary entry confirms substantial parts of it already existed by then; a separate court memoir, the *Sarashina Nikki*,

confirms the complete 54-chapter work was already being read as a classic by 1022.

Hikaru Genji's Own Story

Most of the novel follows **Hikaru Genji** ("Shining Genji"), the son of an emperor by a low-ranking consort, demoted from imperial succession to commoner status — freeing the story to follow his romantic and political life across the Heian court in unusually close psychological detail.

The Uji Chapters: After Genji

The novel's final roughly dozen chapters shift focus entirely, following two of Genji's descendants, Niou and Kaoru, after his death — a genuine structural pivot most epics from Course 1 never attempt, continuing a story past its own central hero's own lifetime.

"The World's First Novel"? A Claim Worth Examining Carefully

Widely repeated, genuinely contested — Genji is popularly called "the world's first novel," but this isn't settled scholarly consensus. Earlier candidates for sustained fictional prose exist, including the Sanskrit prose romance *Kadambari* (composed roughly four centuries earlier) and classical Greco-Roman prose fiction written even earlier still. Many scholars sidestep the "first novel" dispute entirely and instead call Genji the **first psychological novel** — a genuine qualitative leap in sustained fictional prose, deep character interiority, and narrative unity, well beyond the shorter, more episodic tale literature that came before it in Japan itself.

WORK	APPROX. DATE	TRADITION
Kadambari	c. 7th century CE	India (Sanskrit)
Petronius's Satyricon	c. 1st century CE	Rome
Apuleius's The Golden Ass	c. 2nd century CE	Rome
The Tale of Genji	c. 1008 CE	Japan

Writing in Kana: Why a Woman's Language Became a Classic

In Heian-era Japan, classical Chinese — *kanbun* — was the prestige language of serious, formal writing, reserved almost entirely for aristocratic men. Women were generally denied that same education, and wrote instead in the native Japanese **kana** syllabary. *Genji* was written in kana — as was Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*, another towering work of the same era.

An exclusion that shaped a golden age — both Murasaki and Sei Shonagon reportedly did know classical Chinese, but reportedly had to conceal that knowledge to avoid social disapproval. The very exclusion that pushed women toward the "lesser" vernacular language is now widely credited with driving the development of the era's most celebrated and enduring literature.

Chinese Prestige, Felt Even in Japan

Chapter 7 of Course 1 covered how classical Chinese texts and canon-building shaped centuries of Chinese literary and educational life. That same prestige reached beyond China's own borders — in Heian Japan, Chinese literacy itself was a gendered marker of formal education, quietly shaping which language Japan's own greatest literary work ended up being written in.

A Text With No Original Copy

No autograph manuscript of the Tale of Genji survives — only roughly 300 later copies, with real textual variation between them. The earliest surviving illustrated manuscript, the *Genji Monogatari Emaki*, dates to only around 1120–1140, over a century after the novel was written. The most authoritative early complete text is generally traced to the poet and scholar **Fujiwara no Teika's** *Abyoshi-bon*, compiled from 1224 during the Kamakura period — though it wasn't even recognized as the superior version among competing early editions until the 15th century.

A Familiar Kind of Survival

Beowulf survived Course 1 in exactly one damaged manuscript (Chapter 8). Genji survives in none of its own original form at all — only later copies, assembled and re-assembled by later editors long after Murasaki herself was gone. A classic's own textual history keeps turning out to be as uncertain, in its own way, as the question of who actually wrote it.

Mono No Aware: The Pathos of Things

Running through the entire novel is an aesthetic sensibility later named **mono no aware** — literally "the pathos of things," a bittersweet, gentle awareness of the impermanence of beauty, love, and life itself. Genji is widely credited with crystallizing this sensibility into its most enduring literary form — an emotional register readers still recognize immediately, a thousand years later.

How long is Genji, really? — you'll often see claims that Genji rivals or exceeds *War and Peace* in length. Word-count estimates for Genji vary enormously by translation — anywhere from roughly 330,000 to 750,000 words — against War and Peace's own roughly 560,000–580,000. The comparison is plausible, but genuinely translation-dependent rather than a single fixed fact worth quoting confidently either way.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Murasaki Shikibu's real name is lost, yet her work has survived a thousand years. What does it mean for an author's actual identity to matter less, over time, than the work itself?

REFLECTION 2

The exclusion of women from formal Chinese education in Heian Japan arguably helped produce the era's greatest literature in the "lesser" vernacular instead. Can you think of another case — in this course or elsewhere — where a real constraint or exclusion ended up shaping something genuinely great?

REFLECTION 3

Calling Genji "the world's first novel" is a popular claim more than a settled one. Why do you think that particular framing has stuck so firmly in popular culture, even though scholars themselves are far more cautious about it?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 1

- Murasaki Shikibu — a sobriquet, not her real name (c. 973 – c. 1014, dates debated); lady-in-waiting to Empress Shoshi from c. 1005–1006
- The Tale of Genji — 54 chapters; substantially existing by 1008 CE, complete and already a classic by 1022 CE
- Follows Hikaru Genji, then pivots in its final chapters (the "Uji chapters") to his descendants after his death
- "World's first novel" is a popular, genuinely contested claim — Kadambari and Greco-Roman prose fiction are both centuries older; "first psychological novel" is the more careful framing
- Written in kana, the vernacular Japanese women were generally directed toward, while classical Chinese (kanbun) was reserved for men's formal writing
- No original manuscript survives — the earliest illustrated fragment dates to c. 1120–1140; the most authoritative early text is Fujiwara no Teika's 1224 Aobyoshi-bon
- Mono no aware — "the pathos of things" — the bittersweet awareness of impermanence running through the entire novel

What's Next

Chapter 2: **Dante's Divine Comedy.**

CHAPTER 2: DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern

Course 2 · Chapter 2 · Dante's Divine Comedy

Chapter 5 of Course 1 introduced Virgil as a poet writing epic to order for an emperor. Roughly 1,300 years later, Virgil himself walks back onto the page — not as an author this time, but as a character, guiding another poet through Hell and Purgatory in a poem written largely in exile.

Dante Alighieri: A Poet in Exile

FLORENCE, 1302

Dante Alighieri (c. 1265–1321) was a Florentine poet caught up in the bitter conflict between the White and Black Guelph factions. Dante belonged to the White Guelphs; while he was away on a diplomatic mission to Rome in 1302, the Black Guelphs seized power in Florence with papal and French backing. Dante was condemned in absentia — sentenced to death by burning if he ever returned. He later refused a conditional amnesty rather than accept its terms, and never set foot in Florence again. He died in Ravenna on 14 September 1321, likely of malaria, having settled there only in 1318.

Written largely in exile — Dante composed most, if not all, of the Divine Comedy while living away from the city he'd been permanently banished from — a poem about ultimate justice, judgment, and salvation, written by a man his own home city had formally condemned to death.

From "Comedia" to "The Divine Comedy"

Dante himself titled the poem simply *Comedia* — a "comedy" in the classical sense of a story that moves from hardship toward a happy ending, not in the sense of being funny. The

adjective "Divine" was never his own: it was first applied by **Giovanni Boccaccio**, in his biographical sketch of Dante written around 1351–55, and the title *Divina Comedia* didn't actually appear in print until a 1555 edition. Dante composed the poem across roughly **1308 to 1320**, finishing it only a year before his death.

Written for Everyone, Not Just Scholars

Latin was the prestige language of serious literary and scholarly work in Dante's own era. He wrote the Comedy instead in the vernacular **Tuscan** dialect of Italian — a deliberate choice that widened its audience enormously, and one genuinely credited with establishing Tuscan as the basis of standard modern Italian.

Two Vernacular Choices, Two National Literatures

Chapter 1 of this course covered Murasaki Shikibu writing *Genji* in Japanese kana rather than the prestige-language classical Chinese reserved largely for men. Dante's choice of Tuscan over Latin is a genuine structural parallel — a major medieval work choosing the "lesser" vernacular language over its culture's own prestige literary standard, and going on to help define that vernacular's own future as a national written language for centuries afterward.

Structure: Three Realms, One Hundred Cantos

The poem is divided into three canticles — **Inferno**, **Purgatorio**, and **Paradiso** — each made up of 33 cantos. *Inferno* carries one additional introductory canto, bringing the total across the whole work to exactly **100 cantos**. Every canto is written in **terza rima**, an interlocking three-line rhyme scheme (ABA BCB CDC, and so on) in eleven-syllable lines.

Invented by Dante, or adapted by him? — terza rima is often described as Dante's own invention, but this is genuinely contested. Some scholars credit him outright; others argue he adapted the form from earlier Italian or Provençal poetic traditions rather than inventing it from nothing. Treat the "Dante invented terza rima" claim as widely repeated, not fully settled.

Inferno — 9 Circles

Hell is structured as nine concentric circles, each punishing a category of sin, growing more severe the deeper Dante descends.

Purgatorio — Ante-Purgatory, 7 Terraces, Earthly Paradise

Purgatory is structured around an Ante-Purgatory, seven terraces corresponding to the seven deadly sins, and the Earthly Paradise at its summit.

Paradiso — 9 Celestial Spheres

Heaven is structured as nine celestial spheres. The number three — and its multiples, nine and one hundred — recurs deliberately throughout the poem, tied directly to the Christian Trinity.

The Journey and Its Guides

Dante himself appears as the poem's pilgrim-narrator. Through Inferno and Purgatorio, he's guided by **Virgil** — the very author of the Aeneid, covered in Course 1. In Paradiso, Virgil steps aside for **Beatrice**, since as a virtuous pagan who lived and died before Christianity, Virgil cannot himself enter Heaven.

Virgil Returns — As a Character, Not an Author

Course 1's Chapter 5 covered Virgil composing the Aeneid at Augustus's own request, deliberately structured to echo Homer. Here, roughly thirteen centuries later, Virgil himself becomes a character inside someone else's epic — a striking act of literary inheritance, with a medieval Italian poet placing the author of Rome's own national epic directly into his poem as a guide.

Beatrice is based on a real historical woman, **Beatrice Portinari** (c. 1265–1290), whom Dante loved from a distance and who died young, in 1290. She had already become an idealized, semi-allegorical figure in his earlier work, *La Vita Nuova* (c. 1293), well before taking on her role guiding Dante through Paradise.

Real People, Real Grudges

Dante genuinely populated Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven with real historical and contemporary figures — including personal and political enemies from Florence's own turbulent politics. Filippo Argenti, a fellow Florentine from the rival Black Guelph faction, appears in Hell; Farinata degli Uberti, an admired but doctrinally opposed Ghibelline leader, appears among the Heretics. Even popes appear condemned in Hell. This is genuinely understood by scholars as political commentary and personal score-settling, carried out through the medium of an epic poem about divine judgment.

"Abandon all hope" — a translator's flourish, not Dante's own word order — the famous inscription over the Gate of Hell reads, in Dante's own Italian, "Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate" — literally, "Abandon all hope, you who enter here." The familiar inverted English phrasing, "All hope abandon, ye who enter here," comes specifically from translator Henry Francis Cary's 1814 English translation, not a literal rendering of Dante's own line.

The Three Canticles, Side by Side

	INFERNO	PURGATORIO	PARADISO
Structure	9 circles	Ante-Purgatory + 7 terraces + Earthly Paradise	9 celestial spheres
Guide	Virgil	Virgil	Beatrice
Cantos	34 (including the introductory canto)	33	33

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Dante wrote a poem about divine judgment while living under a real, unrevoked death sentence from his own city. How much do you think that specific circumstance shaped the poem's own obsession with justice and punishment?

REFLECTION 2

Dante placed real political enemies into specific circles of Hell. Is that a legitimate use of great literature, or does it compromise the poem's own claim to be about universal justice rather than personal vengeance? Where would you draw that line?

REFLECTION 3

Both *Genji* and the *Divine Comedy* chose a vernacular language over their culture's own literary prestige standard, and both ended up shaping their national language for centuries. Can you think of a more recent example of a vernacular or "lower-status" form of language or media achieving something similar?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 2

- Dante Alighieri (c. 1265–1321) — exiled from Florence in 1302 amid Guelph factional conflict; condemned to death in absentia; died in Ravenna, 1321
- Originally titled "*Comedia*"; "*Divine*" added later by Boccaccio (c. 1351–55), first printed in the title only in 1555
- Composed c. 1308–1320, largely in exile; written in Tuscan vernacular rather than Latin, shaping standard modern Italian
- 100 cantos total (33 + 33 + 34) in terza rima; the terza rima "invention" claim for Dante is genuinely contested
- Structure — *Inferno*'s 9 circles, *Purgatorio*'s Ante-Purgatory/7 terraces/*Earthly Paradise*, *Paradiso*'s 9 celestial spheres
- Virgil (author of the *Aeneid*, Course 1) guides Dante through Hell and Purgatory; Beatrice, based on the real Beatrice Portinari, guides him through Paradise
- Real political enemies appear throughout as a genuine act of political commentary and personal score-settling

What's Next

Chapter 3: **Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.**

CHAPTER 3: CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern

Course 2 · Chapter 3 · Chaucer's Canterbury Tales

Dante wrote his epic in Tuscan while Latin still dominated serious literature. Roughly a lifetime later, in a very different country, an English civil servant made the same kind of choice — and built an entire story collection around something Dante's poem never had: a live, ongoing contest between its own storytellers.

Geoffrey Chaucer: Poet and Civil Servant

NOT A PROFESSIONAL POET BY TRADE

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340–1344 to 1400) is often called the "Father of English literature" — but poetry was never his day job. He held real, documented civil-service positions: Controller of Customs on Wool and Hides from 1374, a Member of Parliament for Kent, and multiple diplomatic missions carried out on behalf of the English crown across his career.

A Story Collection Left Unfinished

Chaucer composed *The Canterbury Tales* roughly between **1387 and 1400**. Of a planned **120 tales** — around thirty pilgrims, each meant to tell two tales on the journey out and two on the way back — Chaucer actually completed only **24** before his death in 1400, several of them themselves unfinished.

Unfinished by accident, or closed on purpose? — most scholars treat the work as genuinely incomplete, cut short by Chaucer's own death. A minority view holds that the ending — the sober Parson's Tale followed by Chaucer's own "Retraction," in which he apologizes for his more worldly

writing — suggests a deliberate, if abrupt, act of closure rather than pure incompleteness. Worth flagging as a live, minor scholarly disagreement rather than a settled fact either way.

The Frame: A Pilgrimage and a Storytelling Contest

The collection is held together by a frame narrative: a diverse group of pilgrims gathers at the **Tabard Inn** in Southwark, near London, before setting out together to **Canterbury Cathedral** — the shrine of **St. Thomas Becket**, murdered inside the cathedral itself on 29 December 1170 and canonized just three years later, in 1173. His shrine became one of medieval England's most popular pilgrimage destinations, with over 700 healing miracles reportedly recorded at the site within its first decade.

A shrine that didn't survive either — Becket's own shrine was destroyed in 1540, on the order of Henry VIII, during the dissolution of England's monasteries — a real historical postscript to the very place Chaucer's pilgrims are traveling toward.

The innkeeper, **Harry Bailey**, proposes a storytelling contest to pass the journey: each pilgrim is to tell two tales each way, with the best storyteller winning a free meal at the Tabard, funded by the rest of the group.

A real innkeeper, probably — Harry Bailey appears to be based on an actual historical figure: a Southwark man of the same name is named across more than twenty surviving documents from 1375–1398, served twice as an MP, and is recorded as an innkeeper in the 1380–81 Southwark Subsidy Rolls. He isn't explicitly documented as the Tabard Inn's own specific proprietor — a small but honest gap in an otherwise strong real-world match.

The Pilgrims: A Cross-Section of Medieval England

The General Prologue introduces roughly thirty pilgrims, spanning a genuinely wide social range.

The Knight

The Wife of Bath

An idealized figure of chivalry and nobility, opening the storytelling with a courtly romance.

A wealthy, outspoken tradeswoman on her fifth marriage — one of the collection's most famous and debated characters, covered in more depth below.

The Pardoner

A religious figure who openly admits to selling fake relics and indulgences for profit — a sharp, cynical portrait embedded inside an otherwise devout pilgrimage.

Middle English: Chaucer's Own Vernacular Choice

Since the Norman Conquest of 1066, French had carried real prestige in English aristocratic and court circles, while Latin dominated church and scholarly writing. Chaucer chose to write his major work in **Middle English** instead — a choice genuinely credited with helping legitimize English as a serious literary language.

A Pattern Worth Naming

This is the third vernacular choice this course has covered in three chapters — Murasaki's kana over kanbun, Dante's Tuscan over Latin, and now Chaucer's English over French and Latin. No source claims these three writers were directly responding to one another; this is the course's own pattern to notice, not a documented influence chain. But across three unconnected cultures, within roughly three centuries of each other, three major writers each chose their culture's "lesser" language over its prestige one — and each time, that choice helped shape what that language's own literature became for centuries afterward.

The Wife of Bath

A PROLOGUE LONGER THAN HER TALE

The Wife of Bath's own Prologue — in which she discusses her five marriages and argues openly for female authority within marriage — is the longest in the entire collection, roughly twice the length of her actual Tale.

A genuinely contested modern reading — the Wife of Bath is widely discussed in proto-feminist terms by modern scholars (Carolyn Dinshaw's readings are a well-known example). Other scholars, including Elaine Tuttle Hansen, argue she's better understood as a male author's construction reflecting the misogynist discourse of Chaucer's own era, not a genuinely feminist voice. This remains a real, live scholarly debate — not a settled modern consensus either way.

No Original Copy, Again

No autograph manuscript of the Canterbury Tales survives. The two most authoritative early copies — the **Hengwrt** and **Ellesmere** manuscripts — both date from the early 15th century, after Chaucer's own death, and both are believed to have been copied by the same scribe, tentatively identified in 2004 as Adam Pinkhurst. Hengwrt is considered the earlier of the two, and closest to Chaucer's own spelling practices.

A Third Text With No Original

Genji (Chapter 1) and Beowulf (Course 1, Chapter 8) both survive with no original manuscript in the author's own hand. Chaucer's Tales makes a third — a genuinely recurring pattern across this course: some of literature's most enduring works exist for us today only through later copies, made by scribes we can barely, if at all, identify.

Three Vernacular Classics, Side by Side

	THE TALE OF GENJI	THE DIVINE COMEDY	THE CANTERBURY TALES
Prestige language displaced	Classical Chinese (kanbun)	Latin	French and Latin

	THE TALE OF GENJI	THE DIVINE COMEDY	THE CANTERBURY TALES
Vernacular used	Japanese kana	Tuscan Italian	Middle English
Structure	A single continuous narrative	A structured three-part journey	A frame narrative of independent tales
Original manuscript survives?	No	No	No

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

The Canterbury Tales was left unfinished — 24 of a planned 120 tales. Does an incomplete masterpiece lose something essential compared to a finished one, or can the surviving fragment stand entirely on its own terms?

REFLECTION 2

Scholars genuinely disagree about whether the Wife of Bath is a proto-feminist voice or a misogynist construction dressed up as one. How do you personally weigh a modern reading of an old text against what its original author may actually have intended?

REFLECTION 3

Three vernacular choices in three chapters — Japanese, Tuscan, and English — each shaped their own language's literary future. What do you think makes a single work powerful enough to help decide the future shape of an entire language?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 3

- Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340–1400) — "Father of English literature," also a real customs official, MP, and diplomat

- The Canterbury Tales — composed c. 1387–1400; 24 of a planned 120 tales completed; genuinely unfinished at his death (with a minor scholarly debate over whether the ending suggests deliberate closure)
- Frame narrative — pilgrims from the Tabard Inn, Southwark, traveling to Thomas Becket's shrine at Canterbury Cathedral; a storytelling contest proposed by the innkeeper, Harry Bailey, likely based on a real historical figure
- ~30 pilgrims span medieval English society, from the Knight to the Wife of Bath to the corrupt Pardoner
- Written in Middle English rather than prestige French or Latin — a vernacular choice paralleling Genji's kana and Dante's Tuscan
- The Wife of Bath's Prologue is the collection's longest, and genuinely contested between proto-feminist and misogynist-construction readings
- No autograph manuscript survives; the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts (early 15th century) are the two most authoritative early copies

What's Next

Chapter 4: **The Sundiata Epic and West African Oral Tradition.**

CHAPTER 4: THE SUNDIATA EPIC AND WEST AFRICAN ORAL TRADITION

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern

Course 2 · Chapter 4 · The Sundiata Epic and West African Oral Tradition

The first three chapters of this course each centered on a named author and a text eventually fixed in writing. This chapter breaks that pattern deliberately — its central "text" is a living performance tradition, still practiced today, that never needed to be written down to survive.

Sundiata Keita: Founder of an Empire

A REAL HISTORICAL FOUNDER

Sundiata Keita is the historically accepted founder of the **Mali Empire**, with his reign generally placed roughly **1235–1255 CE**. At the **Battle of Kirina**, commonly dated to 1235, Sundiata led a coalition of Malinke chiefdoms to victory over **Sumanguru Kanté**, ruler of the rival Sosso kingdom — ending Sosso dominance in the region and launching Mali as an empire from his capital at Niani.

The Epic: From Disabled Youth to Founding King

The **Epic of Sundiata** tells his story in genuinely legendary terms. As a boy, Sundiata is unable to walk and is mocked by a rival wife of his father's; encouraged by Balla Fasséké, who becomes his own griot, he miraculously rises and walks. Driven into roughly seven years of exile with his family, he eventually returns to defeat Sumanguru at Kirina and found Mali. It's worth being honest about what kind of story this is: a legendary narrative shape built around a real historical figure, not a verified biography.

Griots: A Living Oral Tradition

JELIW — HEREDITARY KEEPERS OF HISTORY

Griots (also called *jeliw* or *jeli*) are a hereditary caste of oral historians, genealogists, musicians, and praise-singers among Mande-speaking peoples of West Africa — traditionally the exclusive performers and transmitters of the Sundiata epic across generations.

Still alive today — unlike Homer's or Beowulf's oral traditions, which were eventually fixed in writing while the living performance practice itself faded, the griot tradition remains genuinely active today. Griots continue performing across West Africa, with a newer generation even adapting the tradition to YouTube and podcasts.

The Theory, Observed Directly

Course 1's Chapter 3 introduced Milman Parry and Albert Lord's oral-formulaic theory — reconstructed by studying living oral poets, since Homer himself was long dead and unobservable. Griots make that same kind of oral composition and transmission directly observable, ongoing, in the present — not a theory reconstructed after the fact, but a tradition that never stopped.

Written Down, At Last: Niane's 1960 Transcription

The most influential written version of the epic is **Djibril Tamsir Niane's** 1960 French-language transcription, *Soundjata, ou l'épopée mandingue*, based on the recitation of griot **Mamadou (Djeli Mamoudou) Kouyaté**, recorded in Guinea in the 1950s. The Kouyaté lineage itself claims descent from Balla Fasséké — the very griot who appears inside the epic as Sundiata's own companion.

Multiformity is the norm, not a problem — genuinely different versions of the Sundiata epic exist across different griot lineages and regions. Unlike the earlier "which version is the real one"

puzzles this course has raised for written texts, oral tradition doesn't treat this variation as an error to be resolved — a living tradition is expected to keep being retold slightly differently, generation to generation, performer to performer.

The Kouroukan Fouga: A Charter, Real but Reconstructed

Tradition holds that after the Battle of Kirina, Sundiata and his companions proclaimed a charter known as the **Kouroukan Fouga** (the Manden Charter) — popularly described as one of the world's oldest constitutions, or an early human-rights-related declaration. UNESCO inscribed it on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009.

Reconstructed in 1998, not preserved from 1235 — the specific version of the charter now widely circulated (commonly described as 44 edicts across four sections) was assembled from oral tradition at a workshop held in Kankan, Guinea, in 1998. Its precise thirteenth-century wording and content should be understood as a traditional attribution, carried by oral memory across roughly seven centuries and then reconstructed in the modern era — not a preserved original document.

Corroborating the Legend

The epic's own narrative details — Sundiata's childhood disability, the magical duel at Kirina — remain legendary rather than verifiable history. But Mali's real existence and ruling lineage receive genuine external corroboration: the Arab traveler **Ibn Battuta** personally visited Mali in 1352–1353, under Mansa Sulayman, decades after Sundiata's own reign, leaving a firsthand eyewitness account of the empire's functioning court. The historian **Ibn Khaldun**, writing later without visiting Mali himself, compiled chronicles based on interviews that further corroborate the empire's early consolidation and ruling dynasty.

The Same History, a Different Lens

This site's own World History II course already covered Sundiata's victory at Kirina and Mali's later peak under Mansa Musa from a political and economic angle. This chapter covers the same

history's literary and oral-tradition side — the epic itself, and the griots who still carry it.

A Living Performance vs. a Fixed Text

	CHAPTERS 1–3 (GENJI, DANTE, CHAUCER)	THE SUNDIATA EPIC
Core form	A written text, later copied	A living oral performance
Variation between versions	Treated as a textual problem to investigate	Expected and normal
Is the tradition still practiced today?	No — read, not performed	Yes — actively performed by griots

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

The griot tradition never needed to be written down to survive for over seven centuries. What does this suggest about which forms of "preservation" actually work best for a culture's own history and literature?

REFLECTION 2

The Kouroukan Fouga's specific wording was only reconstructed in 1998, yet it's now treated as a genuine historical document from 1235. Where do you think the line should sit between honoring a real oral tradition and overstating how precisely it's been preserved?

REFLECTION 3

This chapter treats multiple griot versions of the same epic as equally valid rather than as a problem to solve. Does that openness to variation change how you think about the "correct" version question this course has raised for other texts, like Homer's own epics?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 4

- Sundiata Keita — historical founder of the Mali Empire; victory at the Battle of Kirina, c. 1235, over Sumanguru Kanté
- The Sundiata epic — a legendary narrative of childhood disability, exile, and triumphant return, built around a real historical figure
- Griots (jeliw) — a hereditary Mande caste of oral historians and performers, still actively practiced today, not a dead tradition
- Djibril Tamsir Niane's 1960 transcription, based on griot Mamadou Kouyaté's recitation, is the epic's most influential written version
- Genuine multiformity exists across griot lineages — expected variation, not a textual problem to resolve
- The Kouroukan Fouga is a real, UNESCO-recognized tradition, but its widely circulated specific wording was reconstructed from oral tradition only in 1998, not preserved from 1235
- Ibn Battuta (1352–53) and Ibn Khaldun provide real external corroboration of Mali's existence and ruling lineage, even though the epic's own legendary details remain unverifiable

What's Next

Chapter 5: **Journey to the West and the Rise of the Chinese Vernacular Novel.**

CHAPTER 5: JOURNEY TO THE WEST AND THE RISE OF THE CHINESE VERNACULAR NOVEL

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern

Course 2 · Chapter 5 · Journey to the West and the Rise of the Chinese Vernacular Novel

Course 1's Chapter 7 covered classical Chinese literature at its most formal and canonical — the Book of Songs, the Five Classics, the Analects. Roughly six centuries later, a genuinely different kind of Chinese literature was gaining real legitimacy of its own: long, popular, vernacular-inflected fiction, written for a much wider readership than any Confucian classic ever was.

A Landmark of Ming Fiction

PUBLISHED ANONYMOUSLY, 1592

Journey to the West (Xiyou Ji) was published anonymously in 1592, during the Ming dynasty's Wanli period, in **100 chapters**. It's counted among China's "**Four Great Classical Novels**," alongside *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin* (also known as *Outlaws of the Marsh*), and *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Attributed, not confirmed — the novel is traditionally credited to **Wu Cheng'en**, but this attribution is genuinely still debated. A rival Qing-era theory credited a Daoist priest, Qiu Chuji, based on a mix-up with an entirely different, unrelated travel record that happened to share the same title. It wasn't until the 20th century that scholars Lu Xun and Hu Shi, working from Ming-era documents, established Wu Cheng'en as the most probable author — and more recent scholarship has cast renewed doubt even on that conclusion. Treat "Wu Cheng'en wrote Journey to the West" as a traditional, reasonably well-supported attribution, not a settled fact.

The Real Journey Behind the Legend

The novel fictionalizes a genuine historical pilgrimage: the Buddhist monk **Xuanzang** (called Tang Sanzang in the novel) traveled roughly 10,000 miles from China to India, over approximately **629–645 CE**, to obtain Buddhist scriptures. Xuanzang's own account of the journey was compiled by his disciple Bianji in 646 CE as the *Great Tang Records on the Western Regions* (*Da Tang Xiyu Ji*) — a genuine historical and geographical document describing around 100 countries Xuanzang visited directly and 28 more he described secondhand.

Two very different texts, nine centuries apart — Xuanzang's own 7th-century travel record is real history, written by the traveler himself. *Journey to the West* is a 16th-century fictionalization, written by an unknown or uncertainly-identified author centuries after Xuanzang's death. They're easy to confuse by name alone, but they belong to entirely different genres and eras.

The Companions: Fiction Added to History

The novel adds a set of fictional, mythological companions to Xuanzang's real journey.

Zhu Bajie (Piggy)

A former celestial general demoted for misconduct, reborn part-pig, providing much of the novel's comic relief.

Sha Wujing (Sandy)

A former celestial general similarly demoted, the quieter and most dutiful of the three disciples.

The White Dragon Horse

A dragon prince transformed into Xuanzang's own steed, carrying him for the length of the journey.

SUN WUKONG — THE MONKEY KING

The most famous companion by far. Born from a magic stone on the Mountain of Flowers and Fruit, Sun Wukong becomes King of the Monkeys, seeks immortality under Patriarch Subodhi, and gains extraordinary powers he uses to cause genuine

chaos in Heaven itself. The Buddha imprisons him under a mountain for **500 years** as punishment, before freeing him to escort Xuanzang as an act of penance — a journey that ultimately earns him Buddhahood by its end.

Vernacular Fiction Gains Legitimacy

Journey to the West is genuinely representative of a real shift in Chinese literary history: long, popular fiction blending vernacular, colloquial **baihua** with more classical prose, gaining real literary legitimacy during the Ming dynasty, helped along by expanding printing technology and a wider reading public — a real departure from the formal **wenyan** classical register long reserved for "serious" scholarly and literary writing.

The Same Pattern, Inside One Tradition

Course 1's Chapter 7 covered the Book of Songs, the Five Classics, and the Analects — all composed in formal classical Chinese. This chapter's own vernacular-leaning novel shows the exact same prestige-language-versus-vernacular tension this course has traced across Genji, Dante, and Chaucer, playing out a second time within a single tradition — not between different cultures this time, but across a vast span of centuries inside Chinese literature itself.

Three Teachings, One Story

The novel genuinely blends Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian elements throughout its cast of gods, demons, and moral lessons — not artistic license, but a real reflection of the Ming-era cultural trend often called "Three Teachings Are One" (*sanjiao heyi*), which treated the three traditions as fundamentally compatible rather than competing.

A Legacy Still Being Adapted

One of the most adapted works in East Asia — Journey to the West has been reworked across Chinese television and film, most famously as the influential 1978–80 Japanese NHK series *Saiyuki*

(released in the West as *Monkey* or *Monkey Magic*), and continues to be adapted into operas, video games, and new film and television productions today — a genuine, ongoing cross-media legacy few classic novels can match.

History and Legend, Side by Side

	GREAT TANG RECORDS ON THE WESTERN REGIONS	JOURNEY TO THE WEST
Genre	Historical/geographical travel record	Fictionalized mythological novel
Date	Compiled 646 CE	Published 1592 CE
Author	Xuanzang himself (via his disciple Bianji)	Traditionally Wu Cheng'en, genuinely uncertain
Companions	None — a real solo pilgrimage	Sun Wukong, Zhu Bajie, Sha Wujing, the White Dragon Horse

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

A real, historically documented pilgrimage became the basis for a wildly fictionalized adventure novel nine centuries later. What do you think is lost, and what's gained, when a real historical event is transformed this dramatically into legend?

REFLECTION 2

This is now the fourth or fifth time this course has encountered a "vernacular versus prestige language" tension — but this time it happened within a single culture across centuries, not between different cultures. Does that change how you think about the pattern?

REFLECTION 3

Journey to the West genuinely blends Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian ideas rather than picking one. What do you think a culture gains — or risks — by deliberately treating its major belief systems as compatible rather than competing?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 5

- Journey to the West — published anonymously in 1592, 100 chapters, one of China's Four Great Classical Novels
- Traditionally attributed to Wu Cheng'en, but genuinely still debated by scholars
- Fictionalizes the real 7th-century pilgrimage of Xuanzang (c. 629–645 CE), whose own genuine travel record is a distinct historical document
- Adds fictional companions — Sun Wukong (the Monkey King), Zhu Bajie, Sha Wujing, and the White Dragon Horse
- Written in a vernacular-inflected blend of baihua and classical prose, part of a real Ming-era rise in vernacular fiction's literary legitimacy
- Genuinely blends Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian elements, reflecting the real "Three Teachings Are One" cultural trend
- One of the most adapted literary works in East Asia, from Chinese television to Japan's 1978–80 *Saiyuki*

What's Next

Chapter 6: **Shakespeare: Tragedy, Comedy, and History.**

CHAPTER 6: SHAKESPEARE: TRAGEDY, COMEDY, AND HISTORY

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern

Course 2 · Chapter 6 · Shakespeare: Tragedy, Comedy, and History

This course has raised genuine, scholarship-documented authorship questions again and again — Homer, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, Beowulf, Journey to the West. Shakespeare offers something different: a famous "authorship question" of his own that turns out, on close inspection, to be a genuinely different kind of doubt entirely.

William Shakespeare: A Life in Stratford and London

1564–1616

William Shakespeare was born and, by tradition, died in **Stratford-upon-Avon**, both dates traditionally given as 23 April, in 1564 and 1616 respectively. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, and they had three children — Susanna, and twins Hamnet and Judith. His son **Hamnet** died in 1596, at age eleven.

Hamnet and Hamlet: A Real Question, Genuinely Unresolved

In Elizabethan parish records, "Hamnet" and "Hamlet" were genuinely interchangeable variant forms of the same name — that part is solid historical fact.

A serious case, but still a speculative one — the claim that Hamnet's death directly inspired *Hamlet* is popular but not settled scholarship. Shakespeare left no letters or diaries confirming any such connection, and *Hamlet* was written roughly four years later, drawing on pre-existing sources (an earlier, now-lost play often called the "Ur-Hamlet," and the medieval chronicler Saxo Grammaticus). Scholars including Stephen Greenblatt have made a genuinely serious case for the

connection — pointing, among other evidence, to a strikingly relevant grieving-mother speech in *King John*, written around the same time as Hamnet's death — but it remains circumstantial and actively debated, not proven.

The First Folio: Saved From Being Lost

1623 — PUBLISHED BY FELLOW ACTORS

The **First Folio** was published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, by his fellow actors in the King's Men, **John Heminges** and **Henry Condell**. It organized his plays into three categories — **Comedies**, **Histories**, and **Tragedies** — the same three-way division this chapter itself borrows.

Eighteen plays that would very likely be lost otherwise — around eighteen of Shakespeare's plays, including *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *The Tempest*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, had never been printed before the First Folio and survive today only because of it.

Shakespeare's total output is commonly cited as roughly **39 plays**, 154 sonnets, and a small number of narrative poems — though the exact play count is genuinely debated, since some works are collaborative or disputed.

The "Authorship Question": A Different Kind of Doubt

🧐 Not the Same Shape of Question

Popular theories claim Francis Bacon, Edward de Vere, or Christopher Marlowe secretly wrote Shakespeare's works. This is genuinely fringe — not an open scholarly debate the way this course's own real authorship questions have been. The distinction matters: Shakespeare's authorship was never seriously questioned during his own lifetime or for roughly a century and a half afterward; the doubt first emerged in the 18th century, largely from modern assumptions about class and education rather than any actual gap in the documentary record. Real

contemporary evidence — legal records, the First Folio itself, direct testimony from colleagues — supports Shakespeare as author, with no comparable evidence for any alternative candidate. That's genuinely different in kind from Beowulf's anonymous poet or the Mahabharata's composite, orally transmitted authorship, where no single name was ever attached to the work in the first place.

Comedy, History, Tragedy: Shakespeare's Own Three Categories

Comedies

Plays built around romantic entanglement, mistaken identity, and resolution — *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Histories

Plays dramatizing English royal history — *Richard III*, *Henry V*, the two parts of *Henry IV*.

Tragedies

Plays built around a central downfall — *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, *Othello*.

Did Shakespeare Really Invent All Those Words?

Overstated, honestly — Shakespeare is popularly credited with inventing well over a thousand English words and phrases. The real explanation is more modest: the Oxford English Dictionary's editors recorded his works as the *earliest surviving written citation* for many words and phrases — which reflects what happened to survive in writing and get indexed by OED volunteers who searched his works disproportionately, not proof that he personally coined every one of them from nothing. Many were likely already in informal spoken use. "Earliest surviving written record" is the accurate framing, not "invention."

The Globe, and Richard III as Political Theatre

The **Globe Theatre** was built in 1599. It burned down on 29 June 1613, during a performance of *Henry VIII*, when a theatrical cannon effect ignited its own thatched roof — it was rebuilt by early 1614, this time with a tiled roof.

Richard III as documented political propaganda — Shakespeare's Elizabeth I was the granddaughter of Henry VII, who defeated Richard III at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485. Shakespeare's *Richard III*, written under Elizabeth's own Tudor dynasty around 1593, portrays Richard as a villainous, physically deformed usurper — genuinely understood by historians as reflecting and reinforcing the "Tudor myth," a narrative built on earlier Tudor-era historians like Thomas More, casting Henry VII's victory as a providential rescue from tyranny rather than a neutral account of events.

 A Second Case of Literature as Politics

Chapter 2 of this course covered Dante placing real political enemies directly into Hell. Shakespeare's Richard III does something structurally similar with an entire historical reign — using the stage, rather than an eternal afterlife, to shape how an audience remembers a real ruler on behalf of the dynasty currently in power.

Two Authorship Questions, Compared

	THIS COURSE'S GENUINE AUTHORSHIP QUESTIONS	SHAKESPEARE'S "AUTHORSHIP QUESTION"
When did doubt first arise?	Often from the moment of composition, or ancient tradition itself	Not until the 18th century, over a century after his death
Contemporary documentation?	Frequently absent or minimal	Substantial — legal records, colleagues' direct testimony, the First Folio

	THIS COURSE'S GENUINE AUTHORSHIP QUESTIONS	SHAKESPEARE'S "AUTHORSHIP QUESTION"
Scholarly status today	Genuinely open or actively debated	Settled consensus; the doubt is popular, not academic

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

This chapter draws a sharp line between "genuine open scholarly authorship questions" and Shakespeare's own fringe one. Do you find that distinction persuasive, or does it feel like drawing a convenient line to protect one author's reputation over others'?

REFLECTION 2

The Hamnet/Hamlet connection is emotionally compelling but genuinely unproven. Why do you think readers are so drawn to biographical explanations for great art, even when the actual evidence is thin?

REFLECTION 3

Richard III shaped popular memory of a real king for centuries, in service of the dynasty that defeated him. What responsibility, if any, do you think a writer has when dramatizing real historical figures under a living political power?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 6

- William Shakespeare (1564–1616) — born and died in Stratford-upon-Avon; married Anne Hathaway; son Hamnet died in 1596 at age 11
- The Hamnet/Hamlet connection is a serious but genuinely unproven scholarly hypothesis, not settled fact

- The First Folio (1623) preserved 18 plays that would very likely otherwise be lost; organized into Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies
- Roughly 39 plays, 154 sonnets, and a few narrative poems — the play count itself is genuinely debated
- The popular "authorship question" is a fringe theory, not a genuine scholarly debate, unlike Homer's, the Mahabharata's, or Journey to the West's real authorship puzzles
- The "Shakespeare invented 1,700+ words" claim is overstated — many are simply the earliest surviving written record, not necessarily his own invention
- Richard III reflects genuine, documented Tudor political propaganda, reinforcing Henry VII's own claim to the throne

What's Next

Chapter 7: **Cervantes' Don Quixote.**

CHAPTER 7: CERVANTES' DON QUIXOTE

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern

Course 2 · Chapter 7 · Cervantes' Don Quixote

Chapter 1 of this course examined the popular but genuinely contested claim that Genji was "the world's first novel." Roughly six centuries later, in a different country and a different language entirely, a very similar claim gets made about a very different book — and it's worth handling with the same honesty.

Miguel de Cervantes: A Life Before Writing

SOLDIER BEFORE NOVELIST

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547–1616) was born in Alcalá de Henares, Spain, and enlisted as a soldier in 1570. At the **Battle of Lepanto** in 1571, he was wounded three times — twice in the chest, and once in the left hand, which was left permanently maimed. In 1575, while traveling from Italy back to Spain, he was captured by Barbary corsairs and enslaved in Algiers. His captors overestimated his social importance and set an unusually high ransom, keeping him captive for roughly **five years**, until Trinitarian friars secured his release in 1580.

A Death Date "Shared" With Shakespeare? Not Quite

A famous coincidence that doesn't quite hold up — Cervantes and Shakespeare are both conventionally dated to 23 April 1616, and the coincidence is even the basis for UNESCO's World Book Day. It's not actually the same real calendar day. Spain had already adopted the Gregorian calendar in 1582; England was still using the Julian calendar, roughly ten days behind at that point. Shakespeare's Julian 23 April corresponds to Gregorian 3 May — eleven days after Cervantes. And Spanish burial records of the era typically recorded the date of burial rather than death —

Cervantes was buried on 23 April, meaning he most likely actually died the day before, on 22 April 1616.

Don Quixote: Published a Decade Apart

Don Quixote was published in two parts a full decade apart: **Part 1 in 1605**, and **Part 2 in 1615**.

"The First Modern Novel"? A Familiar Claim

A Second "First Novel" Claim

Don Quixote is widely called "the first modern novel" — and, thanks to its own sophisticated self-awareness, sometimes even "the first postmodern novel." As with *Genji* in Chapter 1, this is best understood as a genuine, widely repeated critical framing rather than one single settled fact. The real grounds are solid — sustained fictional prose, deep psychological and narrative complexity, genuine self-awareness about its own status as a book. But the very existence of multiple "first novel" claims, made about genuinely different books from different traditions and centuries, is itself the tell: "first" is doing more rhetorical work in these claims than literal chronological work.

A Real Literary Feud: The False Sequel

AVELLANEDA'S 1614 IMPOSTOR

In 1614, before Cervantes had published his own real Part 2, an unauthorized sequel appeared under the pseudonym "**Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda**" — a name whose real identity has never been definitively established. Cervantes' genuine 1615 Part 2 directly addresses the impostor within its own story: Don Quixote learns of the false book and is outraged by it, and later meets a character borrowed directly from Avellaneda's own version, having him sign a sworn statement that they had never met

before — a real, documented act of metafiction responding to an actual literary controversy.

Parody of a Genre: Knight-Errantry Gone Mad

Don Quixote is fundamentally a parody of chivalric romance — extravagant tales of knight-errantry, wildly popular in Spain at the time, epitomized by works like *Amadís de Gaula* (1508). Its premise: a middle-aged minor nobleman, driven mad by reading too many such romances, renames himself Don Quixote and sets out as a self-declared knight-errant, accompanied by his practical, proverb-quoting squire, Sancho Panza.

Tilting at Windmills

The novel's most famous scene — Don Quixote charging what he believes are giants, but are actually windmills — is the real, acknowledged origin of the English idiom for pointless, delusional struggle.

"Quixotic"

A genuine English word derived directly from the character's own name, in use since roughly the late 18th century, describing idealistic behavior detached from practical reality.

A Novel That Knows It's a Novel

Don Quixote employs a genuinely sophisticated metafictional device: the narrative is framed as a translation of a manuscript by a fictional Arab historian, **Cide Hamete Benengeli** — an unreliable, layered authorship structure widely recognized as significant to the book's own lasting influence on the modern novel as a literary form.

Two "First Novel" Claims, Side by Side

	THE TALE OF GENJI	DON QUIXOTE
Date	c. 1008 CE	1605 / 1615 CE

	THE TALE OF GENJI	DON QUIXOTE
Popular claim	"The world's first novel"	"The first modern novel"
Real grounds	Sustained fictional prose, psychological depth	Narrative complexity, genuine metafictional self-awareness
Honest status	Popular framing, genuinely contested by scholars	Popular framing, genuinely contested by scholars

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Two "first novel" claims, six centuries apart, made about two very different books. What do you think actually drives cultures and critics to reach for this specific kind of superlative, even when it doesn't hold up to close scrutiny?

REFLECTION 2

Cervantes wrote a real literary rival directly into his own novel's plot, mocking him by name. Compare this to Dante placing real enemies in Hell (Chapter 2) — is fictionalizing a real rival within your own work a fair form of literary combat, or something else entirely?

REFLECTION 3

The Cervantes/Shakespeare "same day" myth persists despite being demonstrably inaccurate. Why do you think a neat, symbolic coincidence like this survives in popular memory even after historians correct it?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 7

- Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616) — wounded at the Battle of Lepanto (1571); enslaved in Algiers for roughly five years (1575–1580)
- The "same death day as Shakespeare" claim doesn't hold up — different calendars (Julian vs. Gregorian) and Spanish burial-date record-keeping mean Cervantes likely died 22 April, not the same real day as Shakespeare
- Don Quixote — Part 1 (1605), Part 2 (1615), ten years apart
- "The first modern novel" is a popular, genuinely contested critical framing — echoing Genji's own "first novel" claim from Chapter 1
- A real 1614 spurious sequel by "Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda" (identity unknown) is directly mocked within Cervantes' own genuine Part 2
- A parody of chivalric romance; the real origin of "tilting at windmills" and the word "quixotic"
- Framed as a translation of a fictional Arab historian's manuscript (Cide Hamete Benengeli) — a genuinely sophisticated, influential metafictional device

What's Next

Chapter 8: **The Rise of the European Novel.**

CHAPTER 8: THE RISE OF THE EUROPEAN NOVEL

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern

Course 2 · Chapter 8 · The Rise of the European Novel

This is the third time this course has run into a "first novel" claim — Genji, then Don Quixote, now 18th-century England. This time the debate has genuinely changed shape: less about which single book deserves the title, more about whose books get counted in the running at all.

Robinson Crusoe: Fiction Presented as Fact

PUBLISHED AS A "TRUE" MEMOIR

Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* was published on 25 April 1719 — anonymously, and presented as a genuine first-person memoir rather than an explicitly marketed work of fiction. Many contemporary readers initially believed it really was a true account.

The real castaway most closely associated with it is **Alexander Selkirk**, a Scottish sailor voluntarily put ashore on Más a Tierra, in the Juan Fernández Islands, in September 1704 after a dispute with his ship's captain — rescued in February 1709 by an expedition led by Woodes Rogers. Rogers' own 1712 account and Richard Steele's December 1713 retelling in *The Englishman* both predate Defoe's novel.

A real connection, often overstated — Defoe almost certainly knew Selkirk's story, but scholars caution against treating him as Crusoe's sole inspiration. Crusoe is shipwrecked, not voluntarily marooned like Selkirk, and Defoe was demonstrably familiar with many other survival narratives of the era. Modern Defoe scholarship pushes back against a simple, direct one-to-one reading of Selkirk as "the real Crusoe."

Gulliver's Travels: Satire Disguised as Adventure

Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, published anonymously in 1726, is a four-part prose satire narrated by Lemuel Gulliver across voyages to Lilliput, Brobdingnag, Laputa, and the land of the Houyhnhnms. Swift himself described it as built on "a great foundation of Misanthropy," intended "to vex the world" — a genuinely sharp satire of British politics, scientific pretension, and colonial rule, including Ireland's own treatment, not merely a fantastical adventure story.

Pamela and Clarissa: Richardson's Epistolary Revolution

TOLD ENTIRELY THROUGH LETTERS

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (November 1740) is written in epistolary form — told through a series of letters. It became the era's first genuine best-seller, and is widely credited as foundational to the sentimental, domestic novel of real psychological interiority.

Richardson's later novel, *Clarissa* (1748), is commonly cited as the **longest novel in the English language** — roughly 984,000 words, growing to over a million words across roughly 1,534 pages in Richardson's own revised third edition.

"The First English Novel"? The Debate Has Changed Shape

🧠 A Different Kind of Contested Claim

Genji (Chapter 1) and Don Quixote (Chapter 7) each carried a single, contested "first novel" label. The English debate is genuinely more layered: real competing candidates include Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) — predating Crusoe by 31 years — John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), and even Defoe's own later *Moll Flanders* (1722). The disagreement hinges less on undisputed dates

and more on genuinely differing definitions of what actually counts as a "novel" — realism, length, psychological depth, prose versus verse, and whether a fictional-but-nonfiction-framed narrative like Crusoe even qualifies at all.

A canon being actively corrected — women writers from the same period, including Behn, Eliza Haywood, Margaret Cavendish, and Charlotte Lennox, are increasingly foregrounded in this debate as a genuine, ongoing corrective to an older, male-centric telling of the English novel's own origin story.

Building an Audience: Coffeehouses and Periodicals

The novel's rise didn't happen in isolation. Richard Steele founded *The Tatler* in 1709, publishing three times a week; Joseph Addison joined him, and together they launched *The Spectator* in 1711, publishing six days a week at roughly 2,500 words an issue. Both periodicals were closely tied to London's coffeehouse culture, and became genuinely aspirational household items for a rising middle class — building exactly the kind of reading audience and print infrastructure the novel itself needed to flourish.

Real Candidates for "First English Novel"

WORK	DATE	AUTHOR
The Pilgrim's Progress	1678	John Bunyan
Oroonoko	1688	Aphra Behn
Robinson Crusoe	1719	Daniel Defoe
Moll Flanders	1722	Daniel Defoe
Pamela	1740	Samuel Richardson

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Robinson Crusoe was originally read as a true story. Does knowing it was actually fiction change how you'd read it today, or does a compelling narrative work the same way regardless of its factual status?

REFLECTION 2

Aphra Behn's Oroonoko predates Robinson Crusoe by over three decades, yet Crusoe is still far more commonly cited as "the first English novel." What do you think explains that gap between the historical record and popular memory?

REFLECTION 3

This course has now hit three separate "first novel" debates, in three unrelated traditions. Having seen the pattern repeat itself this many times, what do you think "the first novel" actually tells us — about the book being described, or about the culture doing the describing?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 8

- Robinson Crusoe (1719) — published anonymously, presented as a true memoir; connected to, but not simply based on, Alexander Selkirk's real 1704–1709 marooning
- Gulliver's Travels (1726) — a genuine political and social satire framed as a fantastical travel narrative
- Pamela (1740) — Richardson's epistolary novel, foundational to psychological/domestic realism; Clarissa (1748) is among the longest novels in English
- The "first English novel" debate is genuinely contested and includes real, often-overlooked candidates like Aphra Behn's Oroonoko (1688), predating Crusoe by 31 years
- The Tatler (1709) and The Spectator (1711) helped build the reading audience and print culture the novel needed to flourish

What's Next

Chapter 9: **Enlightenment Literature and Satire.**

CHAPTER 9: ENLIGHTENMENT LITERATURE AND SATIRE

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern

Course 2 · Chapter 9 · Enlightenment Literature and Satire

This site's own World History III course opens with the Enlightenment ideas of Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau feeding directly into the American and French Revolutions. This chapter covers the same intellectual moment from inside literature itself — one writer using satire, not political philosophy, to attack the era's own comfortable assumptions.

Voltaire: A Life of Exile and Imprisonment

FRANÇOIS-MARIE AROUET, 1694–1778

Voltaire was born François-Marie Arouet. He was imprisoned in the Bastille twice: first in May 1717, for eleven months, for writings mocking the regent; then again on 17 April 1726, after a real conflict with the nobleman Chevalier de Rohan-Chabot, who had Voltaire beaten by hired thugs and then had him arrested rather than accept a duel challenge in response. Voltaire negotiated his release on condition of exile, spending roughly **1726 to 1729 in England**.

That English exile shaped him profoundly — exposure to John Locke's empiricism and Isaac Newton's science fed directly into his *Letters on the English* (*Lettres philosophiques*, English edition 1733, French edition 1734), praising English religious tolerance and political institutions. French censors banned it, jailed the printer, and had copies **publicly burned** by the royal hangman before the Palais de Justice.

The Lisbon Earthquake: A Real Catastrophe That Shook Philosophy

On 1 November 1755 — All Saints' Day, with churches full — an earthquake, tsunami, and fires devastated Lisbon.

A death toll that's genuinely contested — estimates range widely across sources, from roughly 10,000 to over 60,000, with most modern estimates clustering somewhere between 12,000 and 50,000. Treat this as "tens of thousands, with real uncertainty about the exact figure," not a single settled number.

The disaster genuinely shook European philosophical optimism and religious providence narratives of the time. Voltaire composed his *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* ("Poem on the Lisbon Disaster") in December 1755, published in March 1756 — a direct, documented precursor to the themes he'd develop fully in *Candide*.

Candide: A Satire of Optimism

PUBLISHED 1759

Candide, ou l'Optimisme satirizes the philosophical optimism associated with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz — the claim, from his 1710 *Théodicée*, that we live in "the best of all possible worlds" — personified in the novel by the relentlessly, absurdly optimistic Dr. Pangloss. The story unfolds in a picaresque, episodic structure, dragging its characters through catastrophe after catastrophe.

"We must cultivate our garden" — Candide's famous closing line, "il faut cultiver notre jardin," is genuinely given to a minor character, "the Turk," rather than to Pangloss himself. It's generally read as a deliberate turn away from grand, abstract philosophical systems toward modest, practical, local engagement with the world — a quiet answer to everything Pangloss's own optimism has failed to explain.

A Quote Voltaire Never Actually Wrote

"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it" — this famous line was never written by Voltaire himself. It's a paraphrase of his attitude, coined by his biographer **Evelyn Beatrice Hall**, writing under the pseudonym **S. G. Tallentyre**, in her 1906 book *The Friends of Voltaire* — specifically summarizing his reaction to the censorship of Helvétius's *De l'esprit* (1758), not a direct quotation from Voltaire's own writing.

A Familiar Kind of Correction

This course has caught this exact shape of error before: the Divine Comedy's own title, added by Boccaccio, not Dante (Chapter 2); Cary's "Abandon all hope" translation, not Dante's own word order (Chapter 2); many of Shakespeare's supposedly "invented" words being merely his earliest surviving written use (Chapter 6). A famous quotation attached to a famous name is worth the same scrutiny every other kind of claim in this course has received.

Frederick the Great and a Falling Out

Voltaire arrived at the Prussian court of Frederick the Great in 1750. The relationship soured over the "Maupertuis affair" — Voltaire's own mocking satire, *Diatribes du docteur Akakia* (1752), targeting the president of Frederick's own Berlin Academy — and Voltaire left Prussia on 26 March 1753, only to be controversially detained by Prussian authorities in Frankfurt that June, before finally reaching Geneva.

Banned Almost Everywhere, Read by Everyone

Candide was published pseudonymously in February 1759, released simultaneously in Geneva, Amsterdam, and Paris — partly a deliberate strategy to outrun the censors. It didn't work for long: both the Paris parliament and Geneva's Grand Council banned and seized copies within the month, and the Vatican added it to its Index of Forbidden Books. None of that stopped it — roughly seventeen editions and around 30,000 copies sold within its first year alone.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Voltaire wrote *Candide* in direct response to a real natural disaster reshaping how people thought about providence and philosophical optimism. Can you think of a modern equivalent — a real event that genuinely shifted a widely-held philosophical or cultural assumption?

REFLECTION 2

A misattributed quote has stuck to Voltaire's name for over a century, arguably better known than most of his own actual writing. What do you think makes a paraphrase like this "stick" so much more firmly than the real, more complicated original?

REFLECTION 3

"We must cultivate our garden" is deliberately modest advice, coming at the end of a story about the failure of grand philosophical systems. Do you find that ending satisfying, or does it feel like an anticlimax after everything the characters have been through?

QUICK REFERENCE — CHAPTER 9

- Voltaire (François-Marie Arouet, 1694–1778) — imprisoned in the Bastille twice; exiled to England 1726–1729, where Locke and Newton shaped his own thinking
- *Letters on the English* (1733/1734) banned and publicly burned in France
- The 1755 Lisbon earthquake (death toll genuinely contested, tens of thousands) directly shaped Voltaire's 1756 Lisbon poem and, later, *Candide*'s own themes
- *Candide* (1759) satirizes Leibnizian optimism through Dr. Pangloss; closes with "we must cultivate our garden," given to a minor character, not Pangloss
- "I disapprove of what you say..." was never written by Voltaire — coined by biographer Evelyn Beatrice Hall (as S. G. Tallentyre) in 1906
- Voltaire's relationship with Frederick the Great collapsed over the 1752 Maupertuis affair, leading to his 1753 departure from Prussia
- *Candide* was banned in Geneva and Paris and added to the Vatican's Index within a month of publication, yet sold roughly 30,000 copies in its first year

What's Next

Chapter 10: **Capstone — The Novel's Global Origins.**

CHAPTER 10: CAPSTONE — THE NOVEL'S GLOBAL ORIGINS

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern

Course 2 · Chapter 10 · Capstone: The Novel's Global Origins

Course 1 closed by comparing seven epic traditions side by side. Course 2 closes the same way — but this time, the object under comparison is the novel itself, invented (or claimed to be invented) more than once, in cultures that had no contact with one another at all.

Ten Chapters, One Recurring Question

CHAPTER	TRADITION / CULTURE	CENTRAL WORK(S)
1	Heian Japan	The Tale of Genji
2	Medieval Italy	Dante's Divine Comedy
3	Medieval England	Chaucer's Canterbury Tales
4	West Africa (Mali)	The Sundiata Epic and griot tradition
5	Ming China	Journey to the West
6	Elizabethan England	Shakespeare's plays
7	Golden Age Spain	Cervantes' Don Quixote
8	18th-century England	Defoe, Swift, Richardson
9	Enlightenment France	Voltaire's Candide

Three "First Novel" Claims, One Course

Across ten chapters, this course ran into the "first novel" claim three separate times — for three genuinely independent traditions with no meaningful contact between them.

A STRIKING, ZERO-CONTACT COINCIDENCE

Genji (Chapter 1) stands apart by date — completed around 1008 CE, nearly six centuries before either of the other two. But **Journey to the West** (1592, Chapter 5) and **Don Quixote Part 1** (1605, Chapter 7) are separated by only thirteen years — published in Ming China and Habsburg Spain respectively, two civilizations with essentially no direct literary contact at the time. Two genuinely unconnected cultures each produced a landmark of long-form prose fiction within little more than a decade of one another.

WORK	DATE	TRADITION
The Tale of Genji	c. 1008 CE	Heian Japan
Journey to the West	1592 CE	Ming China
Don Quixote, Part 1	1605 CE	Habsburg Spain

The Vernacular Thread

🌟 Four Vernacular Choices, Four Cultures

Genji's kana over kanbun (Ch.1), Dante's Tuscan over Latin (Ch.2), Chaucer's Middle English over French and Latin (Ch.3), and Journey to the West's vernacular-leaning baihua over classical wenyan (Ch.5) — four separate cultures, each choosing its own "lesser" language over its own prestige standard, and each shaping that vernacular's own literary future for centuries afterward. No single chapter claimed this was a documented chain of influence between the writers themselves — it's a genuine pattern this course noticed by comparison, repeating across cultures that, in most cases, had no way of knowing about each other's choice at all.

Living Tradition vs. Fixed Text

Chapter 4's Sundiata epic broke this course's own pattern deliberately. Every other chapter centered on a text eventually fixed in writing; the Sundiata epic remains a living oral performance tradition, carried by griots who are still actively performing it today — never needing to be written down at all to survive over seven centuries.

Authorship, Again — But Not Always the Same Kind

WORK	AUTHORSHIP STATUS
The Tale of Genji	Author's real name genuinely unknown
The Divine Comedy	Genuinely, solidly known — Dante himself
The Canterbury Tales	Known author; genuinely unfinished work
The Sundiata Epic	No single author at all — a living, multiform oral tradition
Journey to the West	Traditionally attributed to Wu Cheng'en, genuinely still contested
Shakespeare's plays	Genuinely, solidly known; popular "doubt" is fringe, not scholarly
Don Quixote	Genuinely known; a real spurious-sequel controversy, not an authorship one
Candide	Genuinely known; a famous quote misattributed to Voltaire, not the novel itself

Real History Correcting Popular Memory

A second thread ran just as consistently through this course: catching a popular claim that doesn't survive close scrutiny, and correcting it with real evidence rather than repeating it uncritically.

Titles and Translations

"Divine" was Boccaccio's addition, not Dante's own title (Ch.2); "Abandon all hope" is Cary's own 1814 phrasing, not a literal rendering of Dante's line (Ch.2).

Overstated Coinage

Shakespeare's supposedly "invented" words are often just the earliest surviving written record of an existing word, not proof of personal invention (Ch.6).

Neat Coincidences That Don't Hold Up

Cervantes and Shakespeare did not actually die on the same real calendar day, despite the popular legend (Ch.7); Voltaire never wrote his own most famous "quotation" (Ch.9).

Coming Full Circle

Course 1's own capstone traced its throughline back to Chapter 1's *American Gothic* methodology demonstration. Course 2 never had an equivalent single outside example — it opened directly with Genji instead. But the same underlying discipline carried through unbroken across both courses: verify a claimed date, question a convenient legend, name a genuine scholarly disagreement honestly instead of picking a side. Twenty chapters in, that discipline — not any shared century, setting, or language — remains the real throughline of this entire project.

Questions to Sit With

REFLECTION 1

Journey to the West and Don Quixote appeared just thirteen years apart, in civilizations with no meaningful contact. Do you think this kind of near-simultaneous invention reflects something universal about how societies eventually reach for long-form prose fiction — or is it simply coincidence?

REFLECTION 2

Of the nine chapters in this course, which single correction — a misattributed quote, an invented legend, an overstated coincidence — surprised you the most, and why do you think that particular myth had staying power in the first place?

REFLECTION 3

This course spans Heian Japan to Enlightenment France without ever treating one tradition as the "main line" the others detour from. Having finished all ten chapters, did that framing change how you'd now describe the history of world literature to someone else?

QUICK REFERENCE — THE FULL COURSE

- Ch. 1 — The Tale of Genji (Murasaki Shikibu; the honestly contested "first novel" claim; kana over kanbun)
- Ch. 2 — Dante's Divine Comedy (political exile; the real terza rima uncertainty; Virgil's return as a character)
- Ch. 3 — Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (an unfinished frame narrative; the Wife of Bath's contested modern reading)
- Ch. 4 — The Sundiata Epic and West African Oral Tradition (griots; a still-living oral tradition)
- Ch. 5 — Journey to the West (the contested Wu Cheng'en attribution; Ming vernacular fiction)
- Ch. 6 — Shakespeare (a fringe, not scholarly, authorship question; Richard III as Tudor propaganda)
- Ch. 7 — Cervantes' Don Quixote (the corrected Shakespeare "same day" myth; the real Avellaneda feud)
- Ch. 8 — The Rise of the European Novel (Defoe, Swift, Richardson; the reframed "first English novel" debate)
- Ch. 9 — Enlightenment Literature and Satire (Voltaire; the Lisbon earthquake; the misattributed free-speech quote)
- Ch. 10 — Capstone: three independent "first novel" traditions compared, structurally and thematically

Course 2 Complete

Classic Literature II: Medieval & Early Modern is now finished, 10/10 chapters. Course 3, *Classic Literature III: The Modern Era*, picks up next — opening with Romanticism, and Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley's own literary reaction against the Industrial Revolution.